

Israel And Sri Lanka: Important Ties

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Daniel Carmon, Ambassador of Israel to India and Sri Lanka, speaks about the bilateral relationship between the two countries that he says is very important to Israel. With advanced technology and knowledge that would elevate agriculture in Sri Lanka, Israel reaffirms its commitment to this sector. As visitor numbers from Israel continue to increase annually, there are great opportunities in many sectors for both countries to benefit from. Israel too celebrates 70 years of Independence this year, but that is not the only aspect that the two countries have in common...There is much more.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Photography Mahesh Bandara and Menaka Aravinda

Can you elaborate on the relationship between Israel and Sri Lanka?

The relationship between Israel and Sri Lanka has been growing and developing in strength over the last few years. The history of our relations has seen many ups and downs for various reasons that had to do with the global trends and the importance of the Non Aligned Movement at that time. Many associated us with the developed world, especially in our particular region and the Non Aligned Movement was very clear that we were, so to speak, on the other side, which was never true. Israel has always held the basic policy that we would reach out to any country. I would say, even share what we have developed in what we refer to as the development laboratory.

Israel gained its Independence in the same year as Sri Lanka from the British. We have developed from scratch to a country with very sophisticated technology in health, education, agriculture and water management. We are also sharing our achievements with the world as it is our policy.

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In previous times, politics was the dominating factor but the world has changed. Nowadays, people do not look at things in their totality but at the benefit, interest, values, challenges but also the solutions. Israel can provide, with its technology and development laboratory many solutions in various sectors. In the same manner, we have developed a very vibrant and successful economy. We are members of the OECD and Israel is an innovation hub as well. These are included in the joint agreement that we have. Sri Lanka is definitely a friend of Israel.

What can you tell us about development cooperation in terms of agriculture?

We have formed a partnership with the developing world through an agency that was built 60 years ago, known as Mashav. It is our international development cooperation branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which liaises with other development ministries and agencies in agriculture, health and education. For the past 60 years we have been sharing our knowledge and experience in the field of social and economic development mainly agriculture but not confined to agriculture. I am happy to say that almost 300,000 people from more than 130 countries are benefiting from our technology, learning and sharing experiences, success stories in areas that have to do with improving products as well as productivity by using the good experience that Israelis have in education.

Development diplomacy is one of the main branches of Israel's outreach to the world. 300,000 people have already participated in the activities we provide. Some have been held in Israel whereas others have been held in various other countries. We mainly focus on capacity building and we usually train the trainers and provide technical assistance. We are happy to see Israeli technology being implemented in many countries around the world. It could be drip irrigation, covered agriculture or precision agriculture and dairy farming. We are happy to have achieved significantly in productivity and efficiency. For example, the Israeli cow, if I may say, is the most productive cow in the world. A single cow can produce more than 14 litres of milk per day and 12,000 litres per year, which is unbelievable. We have achieved this by using technology and treating the cows in the most sophisticated way. We monitor the health of every cow through computerised technology. We provide an air conditioned atmosphere so that they feel comfortable in the dairy farm.

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Then, in terms of productivity whether it is flowers, citrus, dates, honey, beekeeping or mangoes, we try to do the best of growing more with less, using water efficiently because we live in a very arid zone. We have been successful and we would love to share our knowledge with the world as part of our diplomacy.

Through our personal experience in Arugambay, we see increased numbers of Israeli visitors coming to Sri Lanka. What can you tell us about this aspect?

This is a growing and very important segment. The number of Israeli visitors to Sri Lanka has grown significantly and it is becoming a very popular destination for surfing and also hiking. Beaches, mountains and friendly Sri Lankan hospitality has made Sri Lanka a favourite place for the Israelis. The Israeli traveller is very adventurous and likes to explore new places and Sri Lanka is really a new destination. We have traditional destinations, but Sri Lanka is becoming a new phenomenon in the Israeli scene. I would like to see more family tourism, while the young backpacking traveller is important, they enjoy themselves, spend and also contribute to the economy of Sri Lanka, a more established tourism would be good. I am happy to hear that Israeli groups are starting to come to Sri Lanka.

Israelis love to travel and they do so all around the world. Our purchasing power has been very strong especially in the last few years. Our economy is very strong and a large number of Israelis travel in general. Sri Lanka is definitely becoming a good and attractive destination. And as the Ambassador to Sri Lanka, I am very happy this is so.

I would like to see more tourists from Sri Lanka visiting Israel as well. Israel is an important tourist destination. It is the Holy Land and Cradle of Civilisation. We have to encourage more Sri Lankans to visit the Holy Land on pilgrimage and also to explore the country and experience our culture. I am happy that many are visiting and I have also met those who have been to Israel. It is a two-way street and I would encourage tourism from Israel to Sri Lanka, where they can see the beautiful country and what it has to offer. And, I would also invite and expect people from Sri Lanka to visit Israel.

For travellers from Israel, the main challenge is in terms of flight connectivity. How can we address this?

The aviation companies and airlines have to decide whether the volume of traffic is sufficient and feasible for them to fly to a particular country, in this case Sri Lanka. We are in conversation with the Government on this but it is not really the decision of the two

Governments. We will continue to encourage airlines and aviation companies so that we have flights between the two countries, where we can utilise the agreements that we have. About two years ago there was an idea by a chartered company to do weekly flights during the season, this did not materialise. However, we will continue to encourage such initiatives.

Are there any projects being implemented by Israel in Sri Lanka?

There are a few projects by the private sector in the fields of water and agriculture. Our main effort is however to have inter-governmental cooperation. Mashav is the branch of the Israeli Government that focuses on this area. We would very much like to have a government to government project. We always welcome ministers of the Sri Lankan Government to come and see our technology. It could be agriculture, medical technology, cyber security, homeland security or water management.

We are looking at the manner in which we can translate the goodwill between the two countries in two projects. One of the projects we would like to do is a repetition of a success story of centres of excellence in agriculture where we build together – it is not an Israeli project nor Sri Lankan project, it will be a joint project to build together centres of excellence, which are dedicated to training the trainers and capacity building. We will demonstrate the Israeli technology and train the people who will do the work. In India, we have 22 of these active centres.

In Sri Lanka we will first have a model centre, which will be expanded to two and thereafter four or more. While Sri Lanka is as important as India, the population in India is significantly more than Sri Lanka, thus the number of centres are more.

This would be a wonderful contribution to capacity building – sharing our knowledge and experience. At the end of the day, it will benefit the farmer. This is something which is said in the interest of all Sri Lanka.

What can you tell us about Sri Lankans working in Israel?

Caregivers and agricultural workers from Sri Lanka who are employed in Israel are a very important segment in our country. We have thousands of caregivers who are working in Israel for many years. They are well received in Israel. I know that they are very satisfied with the work that they do and with the salary and with the treatment that they receive. It is

a known fact in Israel that the Sri Lankans are doing a great job in caregiving. They also contribute to the economy in Sri Lanka because they send their remittances to the country. I would like to continue this as an important pillar in our relationship. During my discussions with the Minister of Telecommunication and Foreign Employment we spoke about how to better the system and widen the scope.

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We have a new programme for agricultural workers who also contribute to the economy of Israel and Sri Lanka. The caregivers and the agricultural workers are very important to our relationship.

Future in terms of bilateral partners?

Israel and Sri Lanka have and will continue to have a very important relationship for many years to come. We have touched upon various sectors of a bilateral relationship, which at one point touched upon defense as well. I would look at Israel as a technological partner and a credible partner that Sri Lanka can rely on. For us, the relations between Sri Lanka and Israel are important. We value those relations and we will make the effort to expand and strengthen the relations. We celebrated our National Day - like Sri Lanka - 70 years of Independence.

What can you tell about your journey in your career?

I am a veteran of Israel Diplomacy. I have been in the service for many years since 1973. After completing my military service in the Israeli Defence Forces and finishing my studies at university, I entered the diplomatic service. I had the honour to be a part of the Israel delegation in the Camp David peace talks in 1978 and 1979. I served in the Embassies in Washington D C and Argentina. I participated in the Geneva peace talks and was also a member of the mission to the UN.

Presently I am the Ambassador to India and Sri Lanka. I have had a very rewarding career. I will be retiring at the end of this month and may start something new thereafter, but I have

not really thought about it.

