‘Uma Diya Janani’: Joint Inauguration of the Uma-Oya Multipurpose Development Project by the Presidents of Iran and Sri Lanka

Posted on

President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Iranian President Dr. Ebrahim Raisi.

The ‘Uma Diya Janani’ multipurpose development project, marked as a significant

irrigation initiative following the Mahaweli movement, was officially handed over to the public by the Presidents of Iran and Sri Lanka.

Iranian President Dr. Ebrahim Raisi, attending the event at President Ranil Wickremesinghe's invitation, received a warm welcome. During the ceremony, both leaders unveiled a commemorative plaque and inaugurated the project, initiating the operation of electricity generators through digital technology.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe thanked Iran for their indispensable support, highlighting that without it, Sri Lanka couldn't have diverted water from Uma Oya to Kirindi Oya. He emphasized Sri Lanka's commitment to strengthening ties with Iran.

Reflecting on the shared aspirations of the Global South for their unique identity and independence, President Wickremesinghe stressed the importance of solidarity among these nations.

President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi underscored that the project symbolizes the friendship between Iran and Sri Lanka and signifies enhanced cooperation, integration, harmony, and unity among Asian nations.

The President of Iran also affirmed Iran's readiness to foster a strong partnership with Sri Lanka and expressed Iran's willingness to contribute to Sri Lanka's progress and development through the provision of technical and engineering services for large-scale projects. Iran's President, Dr. Ebrahim Raisi, accompanied by Iran's First Lady Jamile Sadat Alamolhoda, arrived in Sri Lanka to attend the inauguration of the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project.

The Iranian delegation were warmly welcomed by Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena and other ministers. President Raisi's one-day official visit to Sri Lanka, at the special invitation of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, marks the first visit by an Iranian President since Former Iranian President Mohammad Ahmadinejad's visit in April 2008.

The Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project (UOMDP) is a flagship initiative of national significance in Sri Lanka. Its primary aim is to divert approximately 145 million cubic meters (MCM) of excess water annually from the Uma Oya basin to the Kirindi Oya basin, addressing the issue of water scarcity in the south-eastern dry zone without adverse effects on the environment or water sources. This initiative will facilitate irrigation for around 4,500 hectares of new land and 1,500 hectares of

existing agricultural land in the Monaragala district. Additionally, it will fulfill the drinking and industrial water requirements of the Badulla, Monaragala, and Hambantota areas, providing approximately 39 million cubic meters (MCM) of water annually. Furthermore, the project will contribute to the national electricity supply by generating 290 gigawatt hours (290 GWh) of electrical capacity each year. Key components of the project include the construction of two reservoirs, Puhulpola and Dyaraba, a 3.98km connector tunnel linking the reservoirs, a 15.2km main tunnel, an underground power plant, transmission lines, and associated infrastructure. The project was undertaken by Iran's FARAB Engineering Company, with a total contract value of USD 514 million, and it commenced on March 15, 2010.

The Export Development Bank of Iran (EDBI) initially contributed USD 50 million in funding until 2013. However, due to international sanctions imposed on Iran, the EDBI could not continue its financial support for the project.

Accordingly, the government of Sri Lanka opted to advance the project using state funds in collaboration with the contractor, FARAB Company. When the project commenced on March 15, 2010, it was originally slated for completion by March 15, 2015. However, various challenges arose, including technical issues such as unexpected water ingress into the Headrace tunnel, social impacts, financial obstacles, and global crises like the Covid-19 pandemic during construction. Consequently, the project's completion date was been extended to March 31, 2024, along with an extension of the warranty period until March 31, 2025. The basic operations phase concluded in February and March 2024 while linking the units 1 and 2 to the national grid successfully.

Trial operations were commenced on April 1, 2024. Upon generating electricity, the water is directed through a tunnel to the Alikota ara Reservoir across the Kirindi Oya. Subsequently, it will be routed to the Handapanagala Reservoir, which has tripled its capacity due to this project, positioned on the left bank of the Uma Oya Reservoir.

Additionally, it will flow to the new Kuda Oya Reservoir under construction on the right bank of the Uma Oya, supplying water to areas in the Monaragala district such as Wellawaya, Maharagama, and Thanamalwila. Furthermore, an irrigation system spanning over 60 meters is currently being developed. These irrigation networks are anticipated to irrigate 1500 hectares of existing cultivated land and an additional 4500 hectares of newly developed land in both the Yala and Maha seasons.

The Uma Oya Lower Reservoir Development Project, led by the Irrigation Department, aims to eradicate the longstanding water scarcity issue in the Kirindi Oya River basin. The government has directed officials to implement an integrated agricultural development program, leveraging new technologies to maximize the benefits of the water. The Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project addresses the challenge of providing water for drinking and industrial purposes in Bandarawela and Wellawaya areas.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe, speaking further, added: I express gratitude to the Iranian President for accepting our invitation and handing this project over to the people. It brings our nations closer. This was started by our two predecessors. It's worth noting that this project was launched by the previous leaders who were in power before I assumed office. Additionally, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa expressed particular enthusiasm for this initiative to supply water to this dry zone. Former Speaker Chamal Rajapaksa took on the task of overseeing the completion of this project. We have to face many challenges when implementing the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project. Both our countries have had good experiences in facing challenges. So we faced them successfully. Moreover, the Uma Oya project is an excellent combination of both countries. It has ancient irrigation practices of both Persia in Iran and Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. It's important to note that the transfer of water from Uma Oya to Kirindi Oya is not feasible due to Iran's lack of technical expertise. Iran's technological prowess has spread across all fields. It should also be said that Iran is a country that maintains its technological development. Therefore, we should strengthen the common points of both countries. We are all countries of the Global South. Such projects are significant at a time when the countries of the Global South are establishing their identity and independence.

The Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project, spearheaded by Iran, has played a vital role in providing water to the inhabitants of our country's dry zones. This initiative has instilled a sense of hope among the people for a better future. Ensuring access to water in dry zones like Giruwapaththu and Magampaththu is essential for the survival and well-being of the communities living in those areas.

Today, our efforts are directed towards extending the multipurpose system from Udawalawe to Kirindi, addressing this critical need.

Additionally, we are embarking on establishing a new investment zone in the Hambanthota district, a venture that includes the approval of a fuel refinery by

China’s Sinopec. This strategic move promises to invigorate the economy of the Hambanthota district. This multipurpose development project aims to empower farmers to cultivate 6,000 hectares of land in both Yala and Maha seasons. Notably, the Udawalawa area is Sri Lanka’s prime rice producing area. With our sights set on extending similar endeavors to the Hambanthota area, we anticipate launching an agricultural modernization program in the southern province. Moreover, this endeavor promises substantial contributions to the energy sector. Furthermore, the project will generate 120 megawatts of hydroelectric power. As developing countries in the Global South, Iran and Sri Lanka have jointly implemented this program. Accordingly, I affirm our commitment to fostering stronger ties between Iran and Sri Lanka, moving forward purposefully.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said, “I extend my gratitude to Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe for inviting me to participate in this event. It is a tremendous honor to be involved in such a symbol of unity that deepens the bond between our nations. It is worth noting that this project stands as a testimony to the friendship shared between Iran and Sri Lanka. Today marks the official inauguration of this remarkable multipurpose development program.

However, I believe that the main point of this is fostering the utmost cooperation, integration, harmony, and unity between our two countries and nations across the Asian region. It’s important to emphasize that the resolve and commitment of the people in both our nations outweigh the completion of this project. President Ranil Wickremesinghe, I would like to express that the Islamic Republic of Iran stands prepared to share its contemporary technological expertise with Sri Lanka. Furthermore, we affirm our readiness to impart the knowledge acquired by Iran over the past 45 years to foster the advancement and development of Sri Lanka. I assure you that Iran is eager to forge a strong partnership with Sri Lanka, poised to contribute to its growth and development. Iran stands prepared to offer technical and engineering services for significant development initiatives in Sri Lanka.”

Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Minister of Irrigation, Wildlife and Forest Resources Conservation said, “Today marks a significant occasion for the Uva province and Hambanthota district. I view today as the dawn of a new era in this area, where 1,500 hectares of fresh farmland are ripe for cultivation. Additionally, a new chapter commences wherein the existing 4,500 hectares of agricultural land can yield harvests in both spring and summer. It also heralds the resolution of the drinking water crisis for the people of Bandarawela and Wellawaya. This project will contribute 120 megawatts of electricity capacity to the national grid. In addition to

the ‘Alikota ara’ Reservoir, the Handapanagala Reservoir, ‘Kuda Oya’ Reservoir, and ‘Kirindi Oya’ tributaries, a vast irrigation system will be established through this initiative. It will be replenished with ample water, moistening the dry lands of Wellasse. Today marks the end of the water scarcity in the Kirindi Oya river basin. As Sri Lankans, we proudly uphold a rich heritage of irrigation civilization. It is worth noting that the Uma Oya Multipurpose Development Project will introduce new engineering technologies to further enrich this civilization.”

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Shasheendra Rajapaksa, Minister of State for Irrigation said, “I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to President Ranil Wickremesinghe, along with other ministers, government officials, and engineers who entrusted us with the responsibility to bring this project to fruition and played pivotal roles in its execution. Monaragala and Badulla district residents endured huge hardship due to water scarcity. Farmer organizations persistently uttered their concerns about the lack of water. While it required considerable time and effort to realize the success of this project, we are immensely thankful to everyone who supported us along the way.”

Energy Minister Ali Akbar Mehrabian said, “It is crucial to highlight the significance of this meeting between the Presidents of Iran and Sri Lanka, marking a pivotal moment for both countries. This presents an opportune occasion to formally review the multipurpose development project, which is paramount in bolstering bilateral relations.”

This project is a platform to enhance bilateral ties between our two nations. Iran stands as a frontrunner in constructing high-stakes dams, ranking fifth globally in irrigation network infrastructure, as per ICID. Leveraging Iran’s technical and engineering expertise, we’ve successfully executed 50 large-scale projects across 20 countries worldwide. Fostering a stronger bond between Iran and Sri Lanka facilitates technical and economic collaboration and lays the groundwork for continued advancement in the future.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi inaugurating the operations digitally. Also present were Pavithra Wanniarachchi, Minister of Irrigation, Wildlife and Forest Resources Conservation; Kanchana Wijesekera, Minister of Power and Energy of Sri Lanka and Shasheendra Rajapaksa, Minister of State for Irrigation.

Unveiling of the commemorative plaque by President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. Also present were Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, Kanchana Wijesekera, Minister of Power and Energy of Sri Lanka, A.J.M. Muzammil, Uva Provincial Governor and Mahinda Amaraweera, Minister of Agriculture and Plantation Industries of Sri Lanka.