Ayubowan!

On behalf of the people and the Government of Sri Lanka, we would like to extend a warm welcome to all the delegates of the 32nd Joint Meeting of the UNWTO Commission for East Asia and the Pacific and the UNWTO Commission for South Asia.

Sri Lanka has been a member of the UNWTO since 1975 and we were delighted when Sri Lanka was unanimously selected to host the 32nd Joint Meeting from 29th June to 1st July 2020 during the 31st joint meeting of the UNWTO Commission for East Asia and the Pacific and the UNWTO Commission for South Asia which was held in Thimpu, Bhutan in order to support Sri Lanka in the aftermath of Easter Sunday Incident.

Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on international travel, it was decided to hold this meeting virtually utilizing the technological advancement of this age.

Tourism is one of Sri Lanka’s major industries to get hit due to the pandemic situation. After the first case was reported in February 2020, the Government of Sri Lanka took various measures to safeguard its citizens and tourists.

Awareness of the outbreak was created among tourism industry stakeholders as the first step. A 24/7 Tourism emergency hotline was launched for tourist inquiries and Sri Lanka Tourism facilitated safe departures for international tourists who were in the country during the lockdown to fly out to their home countries in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, the validity period of all types of visas has been extended till 11th July 2020 and overstay visa penalty fee has been waived off from March to July as a relief measure to International Tourists who are stranded in Sri Lanka due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To support the economy, the Government has instructed banks to suspend loan recoveries from businesses for 6 months and to provide working capital loans to businesses at 4% p.a. interest. The
annual registration fee of all tourist establishments and individuals listed under Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority is waived off for one year as a part of relief and support to revive the tourism sector impacted by COVID-19 pandemic.

In line with the guidance obtained from the Ministry of Health and the UN World Health Organisation, Sri Lanka Tourism drafted specific operational guidelines for industry stakeholders to follow in order to minimize the chances of COVID-19 re-entry and/or community spread within the country.

The Government of Sri Lanka is aiming to open our international airports on the 1st of August 2020 with strict health precautions as no community transmission of COVID-19 has been reported since late April 2020.

Although the tourism and hospitality industry of Sri Lanka has faced unprecedented incidents in its recent history, it has always shown strong resilience to adapt, innovate and recuperate from adversity. We are hopeful that the industry will continue to generate foreign exchange, offer employment opportunities, develop rural areas, increase cross-cultural understanding and will deliver many more opportunities. Therefore, we believe that we could revive and stand strong once again.

We are also delighted to hear that Sri Lanka has been given the opportunity to host the 33rd Joint meeting of the two commissions in 2021 once again. We thank UNWTO and the member states for giving us this valuable opportunity.

Sri Lanka Tourism awaits to warmly welcome you in our pristine Island.

Wishing you good health.

Hon. Prasanna Ranatunga
Minister of Tourism and Aviation, Sri Lanka