

Speech: Christmas and New Year Message from British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka James Dauris

The relationship that Sri Lanka and the UK enjoy is long-standing, broad and enduring. We can see this reflected in what we've been doing in 2017. Take business for example. British Companies have been winning new business, investing in Sri Lanka and creating new jobs for Sri Lankans.

Our long-established links through education have continued to grow. Around 30 British universities now offer degrees in collaboration with local universities, making their internationally recognised qualifications affordable and accessible for more students. Each year I enjoy meeting the winners of our Chevening scholarships before they head off for their post-graduate studies in the UK. The British Council established a new teaching centre in Matara earlier this year and its digital programme now reaches a million people across Sri Lanka. That's a lot of people.

I'm proud of the work my team has been doing in so many different areas with the Sri Lankan government and authorities. We have been contributing in lots of ways to the work that is going on around the country to promote reconciliation. To give you two examples, we've been funding work in the east to bring leaders of different faiths together, and we have been continuing to fund important humanitarian demining work in the north. We've been continuing our work with the Sri Lanka Police force on community policing and police reform. Our armed forces have been working together – earlier this month I met Sri Lanka Navy participants in a Royal Navy run course on marine resource management.

We share the welcome given by people in every community in Sri Lanka to all the steps taken over the year to help achieve and advance reconciliation between communities. It's to the government's credit that the Right to Information Act came into force in February, that Sri Lanka again committed itself to advancing reconciliation and accountability at the United Nations in Geneva in March, that President Sirisena approved the Act establishing the Office of Missing Persons in July, that it deposited its accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture at the UN in New York earlier this month, and that it has signed up to the Ottawa Convention that prohibits the use of anti-personnel mines.

I'm mentioning these things because I believe, and my government believes, that reconciliation really matters. With it will come the confidence and trust that will help to bring sustained and enduring peace and prosperity to all Sri Lanka and to Sri Lankans of every faith and identity.

Looking towards the coming year, I'm encouraged that there will be local elections in February. Lots more women than before are going to be standing – something for us all to welcome. It's going to be important for the

government to push forward with steps that will move on its Geneva commitments quickly. I'm also looking forward to seeing the government take more of the sorts of steps that we saw in last month's budget that will make Sri Lanka an easier place for everyone to do business and help to attract investors and win their confidence.

Meanwhile, in the UK we are looking forward to hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit in London in the spring. Sri Lanka hosted the summit in 2013, and the London meeting will allow us to commit with the Commonwealth's other fifty members to a shared ambition for a vibrant grouping that serves the needs of future generations. Whatever our faith, whether we are Christian or Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim, each year Christmas brings us a message based on values that most of us share: a message of peace, joy and new beginnings, of tolerance, community and forgiveness. I'm sure you will share my hope that we will see these values prosper in the year ahead, and our communities grow stronger and happier for it.

I wish you a joyful Christmas, and success in the coming year.