

Sri Lanka's Ambassador to Iran:

Tehran, Colombo support each other during difficult times

Iran's president will visit Sri Lanka soon



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INTERVIEW

Despite what most expect, relations between Iran and Sri Lanka have a long history, dating back to ancient times and the construction of the historical Silk Road. Situated on opposite sides of the Indian subcontinent, the two countries have always enjoyed beneficial, friendly political and economic ties. Evidence of Iranian influence can still be found in ancient inscriptions discovered in Sri Lanka, indicating the Iranian heritage of

some of its people. However, in recent years, the friendly relations between the two countries have become particularly entangled in the issue of oil more than any other matter in commercial and political spheres. In an exclusive interview with Iran Daily, the Sri Lankan Ambassador to Iran G.M.V. Wishwanath Aponu noted that following conflicts between the Sri Lankan army and Tamil separatists and the subsequent economic crisis in Sri Lanka, Iran continued to export oil to the country without receiving any payment. Recently, Sri Lanka has undertaken a policy of tea-for-oil exchange to repay its \$250 million debt to

Iran. Although the initial basis of the bilateral agreement was the oil-for-tea exchange, Iranian traders faced significant difficulties in making monetary transactions with Sri Lanka due to sanctions imposed on Iran, effectively leading to the suspension of their involvement in trade with Sri Lanka. However, the economic relations and cooperation between the two countries are not limited to oil and tea. For several years, Iran has been involved in one of the largest water supply and power projects in Sri Lanka, known as the "Uma Oya" project. This multi-purpose development project encompasses the construction of two dams, a power plant, and a water transmission line. The project has had several technical and engineering phases, all of which have been carried out by Iranian companies that utilized the expertise of Iranian specialists. The Uma Oya project is soon to reach its operational phase in the near future, and that would be when, according to the Sri Lankan ambassador, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is expected to visit Sri Lanka to meet with Sri Lankan authorities and possibly participate in the inauguration ceremony of the project. Following is a summary of Iran Daily's exclusive interview with G.M.V. Wishwanath Aponu.

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Sri Lankan Ambassador to Iran
G.M.V. Wishwanath Aponu
● IRAN DAILY

IRAN DAILY: Could you please elaborate on the history and quality of relations between the two countries?

Wishwanath Aponu: I am pleased to say that the relations between Iran and Sri Lanka are not recent. Fortunately, we have very old and even ancient relations with Iran. Commercial relations between the two nations were established before Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. Sri Lankan archaeologists have discovered inscriptions in one of the southern ports of the country that depict religious rituals written in three languages: Chinese, Persian, and Tamil, indicating the depth of our relations. Thousands of years ago, many Iranians, who were Aryans, traveled from Persia to Sri Lanka and settled there. There is a large household called "Choksy" in Sri Lanka, whose origin dates back to Iran. The Choksies in Sri Lanka have always held very important positions. For example, Sri Lanka's former minister of Finance was a member of this family. As you know, part of the historical Silk Road passed through Iran when it was known as "Persia". Sri Lankan archaeologists have found ancient artifacts such as coins and other items, indicating that Iranians had commercial interactions in Sri Lanka since ancient times, and trade groups and delegations have been exchanged between the two countries. These interactions have certainly expanded significantly after Sri Lanka gained independence, and the two countries have always had very good amicable, official relations with each other. Overall, the two countries are closely tied in all political, economic, and cultural fields.

What are some fields wherein the two countries have manifested these friendly relations in the form of cooperation in recent years?

Currently, Iran provides very good services, especially in the technical and engineering services sector, to the people of Sri Lanka and has taken steps to-

wards the development of our country. Iran is the only country that has built an oil refinery in Sri Lanka. Moreover, Iranian companies have been actively involved in the Uma Oya project, a large and multi-purpose devel-

well. Colombo has always been supportive of Tehran during sensitive situations when strategic policies were adopted. Whenever a vote was called in the United Nations and international organizations on various political

cooperation of my team and officials of both countries, we finally managed to settle these debts. A tea-for-oil exchange agreement was reached and signed by both parties some months ago, and the issue of debts was resolved.

the field of tourism?

As I have noted, numerous meetings have been held between the two countries in the tourism sector, leading to an increase in the number of tourists and the enhancement of bilateral tour-

not have a direct flight from Iran to Sri Lanka. However, the Sri Lankan government granted a license and permission to Mahan Airlines to launch a direct flight from Tehran to Sri Lanka. The license was granted to Mahan Air several months ago, but so far, this direct route has not been launched. Mahan Air has the necessary permits. So, whenever an initiative is taken, direct flights between the two countries will become available to passengers.

When will the Uma Oya project become operational, and what plans do you have for its inauguration?

The Uma Oya project has been completed with the cooperation of Iran and will be inaugurated soon. However, the economic relations between the two countries will not end with that project. Sri Lankan officials are currently negotiating with Iranian companies involved in this project to take on the responsibility of another water supply project



Sri Lankan Ambassador to Iran G.M.V. Wishwanath Aponu (2nd-L) accompanies Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (2nd-R) to Tehran's Mehrabad Airport before the top diplomat leaves for Colombo on February 19, 2024.
● mfa.gov.ir

opment project in Sri Lanka. Iran has always been supportive of Sri Lanka during difficult times and provided considerable assistance to our country. As an example, when Sri Lanka was facing an economic crisis last year, Iran donated a large shipment of medicines to Sri Lanka. Furthermore, when Sri Lanka was engaged in an internal conflict with Tamil Tigers, Iran continued to export its oil to Sri Lanka without receiving any payment.

However, the friendly and supportive relations between the two countries were mutual, and Sri Lanka has provided assistance to Iran in various ways as

issues, Sri Lanka always voted in favor of Iran, and its positions have been aligned with Iran. In other areas, Sri Lanka has shown its friendship, too. For example, our country donated a pair of elephants to Iran a few years ago, which now have a calf are kept in Eram Park.

What actions have you taken during your tenure in Tehran to address Sri Lanka's oil debts to Iran?

Regarding the settlement of oil debts, the two countries have been negotiating for years. Since I came to Iran as ambassador, I have made efforts to resolve the issue. With my efforts and the

Furthermore, after I arrived in Iran in August 2021, many meetings on tourism development and economic relations were held at the embassy with Iranian parties. These meetings were aimed at enhancing cooperation and relations in various sectors because both countries are facing economic challenges and need to stand together and help each other. In the academic and university sectors, too, both countries have been laying the groundwork for scientific and cultural cooperation for several years by providing scholarships.

What have been the results of your efforts and meetings in

ism relations. As a result of these efforts, the number of Iranian tourists who traveled to Sri Lanka in March 2023 saw a 140% increase compared to March 2022. In 2023, more Iranian tourists traveled to Sri Lanka than any other nation in the Middle East. Iranians have also been reportedly very interested in traveling to Sri Lanka during the upcoming Nowruz holiday, as many Iranians have already booked hotels, leaving no vacancies in our hotels.

What flight routes have been designated for Iranians looking to travel to Sri Lanka?

There was a time when we did

in Sri Lanka. For the inauguration of the Uma Oya project, it is likely that either Iran's president or its minister of foreign affairs will travel to Sri Lanka. The visit of the Iranian president to Sri Lanka has been scheduled to take place soon, but the exact date has not yet been finalized. Earlier, the presidents of both countries had invited each other to visit their respective countries, but since the Sri Lankan president visited Iran in 2017, according to diplomatic protocol, it is now the Iranian president's turn to visit Sri Lanka. However, before that visit takes place, the Iranian foreign minister has just taken a trip to our country.