

OPENING ADDRESS

BY

DR. THE HONOURABLE NAVINCHANDRA RAMGOOLAM

PRIME MINISTER OF MAURITIUS

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

FIRST MINISTERIAL MEETING

OF THE

INDIAN OCEAN RIM ASSOCIATION FOR

REGIONAL COOPERATION (IOR-ARC)

5 MARCH 1997

Honourable Deputy Prime Minister,
Distinguished Heads of Delegations,
Honourable Ministers,
Leader of Opposition,
Distinguished Delegates,
Excellencies, Member of the Diplomatic Corps,
Honourable Members of the National Assembly
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you all to the first Ministerial session of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation.

Mauritius is proud to be the host on such an auspicious occasion. For your presence here represents the culmination of two years of hard work and marks a new beginning in the history of our region.

When Mauritius took the initiative to launch the process after consultations with some countries, the concept of cooperation between countries of the region was still nebulous. Very little had been done to promote cooperation at the level of the region in spite of the call for South-South Cooperation over the last few decades. Indeed, the few attempts made in the past to stimulate region-wide cooperation did not have the desired success mainly for lack of resources and the inability of the participating countries to leverage on international relations. To-day the situation is totally different. Countries in the region have become independent and sovereign nations and are thus in a position to play a more meaningful part in regional and international affairs.

The idea of cooperation among the countries and peoples bordering upon the Indian Ocean is one which has gathered an irresistible momentum.

The ushering in of a new world economic order poses serious challenges for many of us. At the same time, however, it opens up significant opportunities for economic growth if the right policies are put in place in a timely manner. Regional Cooperation is seen as an effective response to the challenges posed by the globalisation of world trade in the wake of the establishment of the WTO. In fact, the world is living through a paradox characterised by globalisation, on the one hand, and the setting up of mega trade blocs, on the other. This dichotomy may be explained by the fact that countries in various parts of the world have realised that individually they are not big or strong enough to withstand the onslaught of unbridled liberalisation, especially fierce competition through the setting up of strategic economic alliances. There is a genuine

fear that if developing countries do not adapt to this new situation they may be marginalised. In spite of our varying levels of development, size, population and other specificities, the IOR, although not a panacea or a substitute for efforts at national level, may contribute towards a better integration of our region into the world economic system.

The Indian Ocean region, a major trading and shipping route with several existing and emerging powerhouses, is one of the last regions to have been left out of this regional integration process. Our region, with its rich resource endowment on land, its vast untapped marine resources, and above all, the political will of countries to drive their economies on the path of prosperity, has the capacity and potential to take a more active part in orienting the new world economic order.

Many countries have recognised the importance of the competitive advantages of regions rather than that of nation states which are themselves being challenged by the unprecedented change and progress in science and technology, especially in the areas of telecommunications and finance. It is against this background that we must consider the importance of the setting up of the IOR-ARC.

It has been taken up, not only by governments of the countries which have contributed to the consultations and studies of the Working Group; but by the business and academic communities of our nations. And this is one of its great strengths.

For, what this occasion now permits me to call with pride, our *Association*, will not be driven by the forces of fear or insularity, or by a strategic desire to merge the individual identity or political sovereignty of its members into some greater whole, but by the voluntary and enthusiastic spirit of their disparate governments *and peoples* for mutual support in the great struggle for material progress.

We recognise the enormous *diversity* of our countries, in economic development, in culture, religion, language and in political outlook. We believe that the kind of cooperation, which can be successfully envisaged among us, must take fundamental account of that diversity and those differences.

We must make it a principle of our concerted action to respect and preserve the distinctive hallmarks of our separate identities and our freedom of action. We must make it our objective, in the words of the draft Charter, “to create common ground”, and avoiding areas of controversy, to build upon those points of precious agreement, a lasting peace and prosperity for all the inhabitants of the region.

That is why the proposed Charter is a modest and *flexible* framework for cooperation. It is not meant to be a grand prescription for a closed and protective club of nations, seeking the economic power to entrench themselves against the currents and trends which are sweeping the world. It is a free and open association of sovereign nations. It requires a commitment to progressive cooperation and collaboration.

We, in Mauritius are convinced that, by *these* means, the Association shall more readily harness the enthusiastic involvement and commitment of its members. We are convinced that we are united by a powerful motive force of goodwill and that the spirit which we have somehow managed to nurse into existing has struck a chord among the nations of our region.

There is a friendship here, among us, and a genuine cordiality, which has characterized all our preliminary discussions, and is based upon that spirit of cooperation. For our Association will offer a hand without discrimination, to all IOR nations.

It is, to our mind, *inclusive* in its spirit not exclusive. For it was, in some part, precisely to combat the sense of exclusion which some members have felt from the formation of huge trading blocs and clubs throughout the world, that the Initiative was taken. This is one of the very important functions which it serves to bring some who have hitherto felt isolated into the current of regional and world economic development.

This meeting and the extraordinary growth of interest in membership, are vivid testimony to the accuracy of our belief in the value of such an Association.

All over the world people are experiencing the power of economic freedom. They are reducing barriers to trade. They are removing controls upon investment and the exchange of money. And they are recognising the value of concerted action, in the trading sphere, to build up the trust and confidence to take what are often, for all of us, painful and difficult steps.

By taking them we are opening vast new opportunities. *In* taking them we are driven by one overriding imperative - the vital need to improve the material welfare of our peoples. We cannot - we have no right to - avoid their demand for progress. We are, as a European philosopher has truly observed, "not only the creatures, but the captives of progress". We have to move forward.

Yet, in all societies, there can be a tension between the progress which we are all fervently desire, and the cultural, moral and social allegiances which seem inextricably part of our identity and which progress can seem to threaten. It is imperative that we get the balance right - that we should have, as the draft Charter describes it - a "*balanced development*".

Regional cooperation through the Indian Ocean Rim Association is an important tool of adjustment to this new economic climate. It will help us to strengthen our institutions and our financial and commercial expertise. It will enable us to facilitate investment and in time to create the larger markets which will attract more of that investment.

Your Excellencies,

In 1993, the Indian Ocean region accounted for 31 % of the world's population, but 6.3% of its GDP and 10.7% of its trade. In 1994, intra-IOR trade was only 22% of the total. There is huge scope for us to do better. The opportunities are immense and our Association is long overdue.

We must of course, give close attention to the mechanisms by which we are to achieve these goals and capitalize upon the work which has already been done. We cannot afford *not* to be creative in the way in which we approach this task.

I am delighted that the Indian Ocean Business Forum and the Indian Ocean Academic Group have become, under the Charter, as they have been from the outset of our Initiative, an important and integral part of the development of the Association. This is just the kind of imaginative approach, which will help us make a distinctive contribution to cooperation in the region.

I welcome the development of the work programme at the Inter-government meetings. Its early concentration on the removal of obstacles to trade, and the creation of a wider exchange of knowledge and opportunities for business within the Association, are the things, which will deliver real improvements in the material standards of our peoples.

And parallel to the inter-governmental work which has gone on, I am aware that the last two years have witnessed the formation of business and research networks, including a site on the World Wide Web, in which much useful work of high quality is being done to advance the cause of awakening the potential of the Indian Ocean region.

It is essential that this work should continue and that the process, which we believe to be irreversible, is rendered effective and able to produce practical and concrete benefits for our citizens.

To this end our experience over the past two years has suggested the requirement for an eventual small secretariat to inform, coordinate and maintain an official monitor of the progress of agreed projects.

Although we must avoid the massive and inflated bureaucracies which appear to bedevil other regional organisations, and the coercive spirit which they can engender, which would be inconsistent with the aims and character of our Association, still it is necessary that there be some administration and oversight of the intergovernmental work in progress. We are proud to furnish the base for such an Administration.

Mauritius is proud of this unique Initiative which, began here and has led us to this moment. It has our undying commitment.

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If the seed which is sown here is allowed to germinate, it will, I am convinced, produce a tree in flower which will have been worth all our endeavours and efforts.

And when we think of what those efforts are of the thousands of individuals whose creative and intellectual energies are already concentrated upon its construction, we ought to have great hope for the potential of the thing that we are today about to launch into life.

If it is the thing we all hope and believe it to be, it has the capacity to deliver great benefits, not only to our region, but to the world.

It cannot, of course, aspire to solve all of the vast problems of the countries, in three continents who adhere to it. It is, of necessity, a modest and practical step which must be accompanied by other platforms of cooperation. But an enduring prosperity and peace must be built of many such small and practical measures, and it is, without doubt, a creative and positive step in the right direction.

Therefore, I warmly congratulate all those who have participated in bringing about, and I thank you for allowing my country, Mauritius, the privilege of officiating at its birth.

Today we have a great opportunity – an opportunity to *do* something of lasting value for our peoples and to create the firm roots and solid foundations of our new Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation. It is an opportunity which we must not miss! For as we have been reminded by Shakespeare centuries ago.

“There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries,
On such a full sea we are now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures”.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

May I conclude by wishing you all success in your deliberations and especially for a good outcome of the meeting in order to put the IOR-ARC on solid foundation. Time permitting I will hug and encourage you to visit the island. I wish you all a happy and pleasant stay in Mauritius.

I have much pleasure in declaring open this first Ministerial meeting of the Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation.

Thank you