

MEDIA CENTRE

ADDRESS TO THE NON-RESIDENT NEPALI ASSOCIATION REGIONAL CONFERENCE

Posted August 30, 2012

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It's my very great pleasure to welcome all of you, from all around the world, to Sydney. It's my home town and the home town of many proud Nepali-Australians.

It is appropriate that this conference is held in Sydney. I know that you meet in different parts of the world every two years - but you saved the best for 2012.

Sydney is one of the world's - of course - great cities. One of the things that makes us great is it's one of the world's most multicultural cities. One of the things that makes Australia special is our multiculturalism.

We have, over the last 60 years, forged a nation which is cosmopolitan, outward looking and proudly multicultural.

We're very proud of the fact that nearly four million of us speak a language other than English at home. We're very proud of the fact that we can identify with more than 300 ancestries amongst our communities.

And that since 1945, some 750 000 people have come here under our humanitarian refugee program. I'm very proud of that, it's one of the things that makes Australia so special.

And all of you, from all around the world - the 30 countries that are represented today, or the 60 countries that will be represented over the course of your conference - are very welcome. Welcome from your Nepalese-Australian colleagues, welcome from the Australian Government, and welcome from the Australian people.

The Nepali community in Australia

Now of course, the Nepali community is not one of our largest communities, but it is one of our fastest growing. At the time of the 2006 Census, 5,305 people claimed Nepali ancestry. Then at our most recent Census, this has grown to 26 000 - a five-fold increase in just five years. Isn't that a wonderful thing ladies and gentlemen?

I am very proud of the fact that in the last six years, Australia has conferred citizenship to some 3000 Nepali, bringing the total number of Nepali-Australian citizens to just over 5300. And over the next five years, another 10 000 Nepali who are already permanent residents will be eligible citizenship and I certainly encourage all of them to apply.

One of the great things about Australian multiculturalism is that it is based on citizenship. We encourage - we invite - people who've made Australia their home to participate in full involvement in the Australian society.

That means taking that beautiful pledge of citizenship; pledging your loyalty to Australia and its people, whose rights and liberties we respect, whose laws we uphold and obey.

We have, with Canada, the highest rate of citizenship take-up in the world amongst our migrant communities; something we're proud of and something I know many of you have joined us in doing.

I'd also like to acknowledge the contribution of the Nepali community in Australia, which was recognised last year, in a small way - in a way that I'm sure she would agree reflects well, not only on her but on the entire Nepali community - with the recognition and award of one of our high honours, the Order of Australia medal, to Mrs Indra Ban.

This is something which is entirely appropriate for her service to the Nepali community in Australia and the contribution of the Nepali community to Australia.

Migration

I'm also very pleased about the fact that it is not just permanent migrants who are choosing Australia from Nepal in such large numbers, but students as well.

Of course, one of the great benefits of having people from around the world studying in Australia is that, if people come to Australia, have a good experience being students of

Australia, that means they'll be lifelong ambassadors - lifelong ambassadors of Australia to Nepal and lifelong friends of Australia in Nepal. And of course, lifelong advocates of

Nepalese-Australian relations

And I'm very pleased that in 2011-12, almost 7000 student visas were granted to Nepali international students to study in Australia.

I'm looking forward to those figures growing even further with the reforms that we are implementing in relation to permanent post-study work rights and to better streamlining of visa processing for students.

We continue to encourage students from around the world, particularly from Asia, to come and study in Australia and take that experience with them for the rest of their lives. This is of course something that can be of the greatest benefit for Nepali-Australian relations for many years to come.

Bilateral cooperation

While Nepali immigration to Australia is the closest of links in terms of people-to-people relations, there are many others.

Australia's official development assistance to Nepal has tripled since 2008 and we will increase our assistance to Nepal by \$5 million this year, bringing it up to a total \$35 million, focusing on education, on health, on rural livelihoods and governance reform to improve the quality of life for Nepalese people, something we could all be proud of, something we could all continue to work on together.

This year, nearly 400 Australian Government scholarships have also been awarded to Nepalese for study in Australia, and there is a thriving alumni association of Australian students in Nepal.

Perhaps the most enduring friendship and partnership, though, comes not from governments, but from people working together: the collaboration of the Tilganga Institute of Ophthalmology in Kathmandu and the Fred Hollows Association in developing safe and cheap procedures for cataract surgery in the region.

The Fred Hollows Foundation celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2012, with a photography exhibition and other events in Nepal and in Australia. This is currently on display in Brisbane and will be on display in Sydney from the 22nd to the 28th of October at the Many Surf Life Saving Club.

Last week, Prime Minister Julia Gillard launched, at Parliament House, *In Fred's Footsteps*, a new book charting the achievements of the Fred Hollows Foundation.

This is work that's being done continually by Australians and Nepali working together to bring the great gift of sight to those who would otherwise miss out on it. This is something I know many people in this room have contributed to and something I know we'll continue to be proud of.

Sub-Continent Ministerial Consultative Committee

But my friends, this conference today is very important, which is why I was so keen to be with you.

As I say, we welcome people from around the globe to the multicultural city of Australia. You'll talk about many issues: the challenges, the opportunities facing Nepali people around the world.

We are here with you in partnership. We are here to work with you to ensure the best possible outcomes.

While it may currently be very fashionable around the world to criticise multiculturalism, while it may be very fashionable around the world to say that multiculturalism does not work, I have a very different message for you.

My message for you today is that in Australia, multiculturalism works and it works well because of the mutual respect of traditional Australian values and the values that are brought to Australia from such rich, vibrant cultures such as yourself.

But of course, there is always a need to continue work together about how this can be improved even further. Which is why I yesterday announced the membership of a new ministerial advisory council on issues relating to Southern Asia and the Sub-Continent. The Sub-Continent Ministerial Consultative Committee will be chaired by Michelle Rowland, the Federal Member for Greenway in Western Sydney, and Senator Lisa Singh of Tasmania.

Now I'm very pleased that the Nepali community in Australia will be represented on the Ministerial Consultative Council by your own Mahendra Lamsal.

Mahendra will be a very important member of this Ministerial Consultative Committee, which will meet regularly with me, with the Minister for Multicultural Affairs, with other Cabinet Ministers and with the Prime Minister direct.

It will be an opportunity to talk about the great opportunities that are open for us to work together, and talk about meeting the challenges we face together.

Conclusion

So, my friends, it's my great pleasure to be with you today.

Thank you so much for your heart-warming welcome. In return, I welcome you all to this vibrant city of ours, which will be, I'm sure, a suitable host for your wonderful conference. Thank you very much.