

PM's opening remarks at the National Press Conference

**May 24, 2010
New Delhi**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Media,

Let me begin by welcoming you all to this Press Conference, on the occasion of the completion of the first year of our second term in office. At the outset I express my deep condolences at the grievous loss of life that resulted from the tragic air crash in Mangalore on Saturday.

I believe that the mandate of the 2009 elections was a vote for the inclusive agenda of the UPA government that sought to give voice to all sections of the Indian people and to empower them.

The agenda for our second term seeks to strengthen the pro-people policies and programmes initiated by our government since 2004. The social and economic uplift of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, other backward classes, minorities and women will continue to receive priority attention in our plans.

We need a rapidly growing economy to generate productive employment and also resources to finance our ambitious social and economic agenda.

Our medium term target is to achieve a growth rate of 10 percent per annum. I am convinced that given our savings and investment rates, this is an achievable target. However, its achievement will require determined efforts to increase investment in social and economic infrastructure, enhance productivity in agriculture and give a fresh impetus to the manufacturing sector.

The past couple of years have been exceptionally difficult years for the Indian economy. The year 2008 saw a global financial crisis, which threatened to push the world into a recession. We also faced a severe drought in 2009.

Inevitably, our first priority was to protect the economy from the global slowdown and ensure that the momentum of inclusive growth did not get interrupted. I leave it to you to judge how well we have done on this count. Our annual growth rate had averaged 9% for four years before the crisis. It reduced to 6.5% in 2008-09 but recovered to 7.2% in 2009-10. We expect 8.5% growth in this financial year. This is widely regarded as one of the best performances among the larger economies of the world. This outcome is in large part due to our workers, farmers and youth, who have shown great enterprise and worked hard to keep the engine of economic growth running. I will briefly highlight some of the important steps we have taken over the past year and also the pressing challenges that confront the nation.

Our flagship programmes such as the Bharat Nirman, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the National Rural Health Mission and the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission are progressing well. We are on a learning curve and we can and will do more to strengthen these programmes and improve delivery.

The Right to Education Act enacted last year is a historic step forward in making every Indian a literate and empowered citizen.

We are undertaking a comprehensive review of our system of higher education, including medical education. A draft National Council for Higher Education and Research Bill has already been put in the public domain.

To strengthen political inclusion, we have introduced bills to provide 50% reservation for women in all panchayats and urban local bodies.

Nearly one crore scholarships have been granted last year to students belonging to the SCs, STs, other backward classes and minorities. A large proportion of these scholarships have gone to girls.

We launched the Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission in January this year. It aims to create a capacity of 20,000 MW grid solar power by 2022.

We have signed free trade agreements with ASEAN and South Korea in the last year.

We have decided to set up a National Social Security Fund for workers in the unorganized sector with an initial corpus of Rs. 1,000 crores.

A draft National Food Security Bill is under preparation.

Prices continue to be a matter of deep concern. The government attaches the highest priority to containing inflation so that there is no distress to the common man. As a result of the steps we have taken, there are signs of prices showing a moderating trend. We will closely monitor the situation and, together with state governments, take all corrective steps to bring down prices and protect the vulnerable sections of our society from the impact of high prices.

We are determined to squarely tackle the threat of terrorism and ideological extremism of various kinds. I have on earlier occasions outlined our approach to tackling Naxalism.

We are working on systemic changes in our national security system, paying due attention to the modernization and professional development of the police and security forces, investigating agencies and the law and order machinery. Judicial reform and transparency in the functioning of government will also receive priority in our agenda.

Addressing key constraints in the modernization of agriculture and in the expansion of infrastructure need long term strategies backed by stepped up investment. We have taken important steps in these areas, which will continue to receive the focused attention of the government.

In foreign policy, it is a matter of satisfaction that we have been able to improve relations with all major powers. As a member of the Group of Twenty (G-20), our views are increasingly sought and heard. The world looks at India with confidence.

The recent SAARC Summit once again underlined the fact that it is not just our shared past but also our shared future that binds this sub-continent together. Improving relations with neighbours continues to be of great importance to us. I have often said that our real challenges are at home and in our neighbourhood.

I would be the first person to admit that we could have done more. We should not be satisfied with what we have achieved. There is always room for improvement and for better outcomes. But I do believe that the record of our first year is a record of reasonable achievement.

The promise of more than a billion people, who are better educated, better fed and better equipped to be creative and enterprising members of the global community is our hope and our inspiration.

The UPA Government and all its constituents are united in their commitment to provide the country with a strong and purposeful government that can deliver on its agenda of growth, reform and empowerment.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I will be happy to answer your questions.

Thank you.
