

**Statement by
Foreign Secretary Mr. Prasad Kariyawasam
at the
Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom
Washington DC., 24-26 July 2018**

I am honored to represent Sri Lanka at this first-ever Ministerial to advance religious freedom, convened by Honorable Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State of the United States.

This important convening of minds coincides with the 70th anniversary of the historic Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which the United States gave leadership, and the 20th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act. Reflecting US leadership, much of the language in the Universal Declaration adopted in 1948, following the end of the devastation caused by a world torn apart by war, echo the language contained in the founding documents of the United States, including the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights.

The world is constantly faced with challenges, and particularly so at this time. It is deeply distressing to witness religion which is meant to bring out the best in humanity, being used to justify or advocate violence and oppression; incite political conflict; demean and marginalize communities and individuals; or persecute persons of certain religions, faiths or ethnicities.

Hatred, discrimination, oppression, injustice, and marginalization act as drivers of conflict. It is vital therefore to foster understanding among faiths and for religious leaders as well as all peace-loving people to be active in fostering the development of peaceful societies, where diversity is respected and celebrated, and human dignity and equality for all are upheld. It is necessary to encourage empathy and solidarity, based on care for all human beings – and an understanding of our common humanity.

All religions have a responsibility for promoting peaceful coexistence, social justice, respect and tolerance. We in Sri Lanka believe in the ability of religions to foster peace and contribute to building peace and stability, not only in my country, but around the world. We are committed therefore, to uphold and advance religious freedom in cooperation with the international community, work against religious persecution, and take steps to advance religious tolerance and freedom of religion or belief.

Located right in the middle of the Indian Ocean, between the sea lanes of east and west, and located just 32 kilometres away from the southernmost tip of India, Sri Lanka has a recorded history of over 2500 years. Sri Lanka was known in the ancient world as a trading hub. My country neither existed nor evolved in isolation in the ancient world. It is recorded that our kings sent envoys to the Royal court of Roman Emperor Augustus. The people of Sri Lanka were influenced by several waves of external interactions, that led to the exchange, not only of goods, but ideas and knowledge, with travellers and traders passing through, and visitors from lands, near and far. Some traders and visitors settled in our country, making our country their home. As a result, Sri Lanka is today, a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious nation that we are committed to preserve.

Buddhism has thrived in Sri Lanka since the arrival in the 3rd Century, of the Indian Emperor Ashoka's children as emissaries carrying the teachings of Gautama Buddha. Arab traders enriched our land with the teachings of Prophet Mohammed. The symbol of the Nestorian Cross found in the ancient city of Anuradhapura, dated to within 500 years of the birth of Christ, points to the existence of Christians in my country even before the arrival of colonial powers. Hindu beliefs and customs have contributed to Sri Lankan culture significantly and are engrained in the everyday lives of all. Almost all Buddhist temples have images of Hindu Gods and Goddesses installed; and the bronze statues of Gods and Goddesses discovered in the ancient city of Polonnaruwa, crafted by local artisans and bronze casters, are considered to be some of the best in the world.

Sri Lanka's **Constitution** provides for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change ones religion, and we are committed to uphold and advance these freedoms that are guaranteed by law to all. We recognize, respect and are guided by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as well as Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

In a total population of 22.4 million, the religious affiliations of the people of Sri Lanka could be disaggregated as 70.2% Buddhists, 12.6% Hindus, 9.7% Muslims, and 7.4% Christians.

Following a period of almost three decades of conflict in my country, with two youth insurrections in the 1970s and 1980s, and separatism which manifested in terrorism that ended in May 2009, the Government of Sri Lanka that was formed following the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections held in 2015, prioritized **formulation of policy based on the three pillars of strengthening democracy, fostering reconciliation, and achieving equitable economic development**, and has accordingly taken determined steps to ensure the non-recurrence of conflict.

In April 2015, under a Gazette issued by the Prime Minister, an **Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR)** was established, chaired by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, with the mandate of facilitating aspects of non-recurrence and promoting reconciliation.

ONUR was instrumental in drafting Sri Lanka's **National Policy on Reconciliation and Coexistence** adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers in 2017. The National Policy emphasizes the importance of fostering "Cross Cultural Awareness" by "accepting and creating an environment which allows each culture to contribute to values, perspectives and behaviour in constructive ways to all reconciliation initiatives." The Policy stresses the value of taking "measures to build a society where everyone is equal before the law", and underscores the responsibility of the State to "make every endeavour to guarantee quality education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels in accordance with the compulsory education policy towards promoting coexistence, integration, national unity and reconciliation in Sri Lanka."

ONUR works within these broad parameters to promote Non-Recurrence in partnership with several relevant Ministries such as Education, Planning, Health, Women and Child Affairs, National Integration and Reconciliation, the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM), the Home Affairs Ministry, the Attorney General's Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to mention the principal official

interlocutors; and foreign donors, Sri Lankan communities and groups overseas, non-governmental organisations and civil society.

The projects and programmes undertaken by ONUR cover several areas such as Livelihoods, Integrated Village Development Schemes, Psychosocial Support, Media and Communications, Drama, and Radio programmes to help foster peace and reconciliation.

Promoting Cultural Awareness through Education:

Education is a devolved subject under our Constitution and consequently, ONUR works with the Ministry of Education at the centre and also at the Provincial level. In association with the Ministry of Education at the centre, a Peace and Reconciliation Unit (PERU) has been set up to ensure that **school curricula** emphasise the need for harmony and coexistence in the basic texts.

An important initiative ONUR has been working on since 2015 is that of bringing together school children of different faiths, languages and ethnicity from education zones across the country at 5-day residential workshops. Student leaders, sports captains, student activists and influential students are encouraged to learn about concepts of conflict transformation and peace building, and establish bonds of friendship with their counterparts at these workshops. Facilitators with bilingual and trilingual skills are assigned to enable students from diverse backgrounds to interact with each other at group aesthetic performances, movie screenings, sports events, cultural festivals, spiritual activities and are given time for reflection. At the end of 5 days, the student participants absorb a better understanding of the cultural ethos, values and norms of their counterparts across the religious, linguistic and ethnic spectrum. Lasting personal bonds are known to have been made between children who did not speak each other's languages nor met a child from a different faith. In 2018, 3 such workshops were held with each having approximately 167 students, 15-20 resource persons and 30 teachers besides ONUR staff. 500 students have participated so far and 9 more workshops are planned to be held between now and October 2018. 4000 students have participated meaningfully in these workshops in 2017.

ONUR has selected 5 **annual festivals from each of the four major religions** to be celebrated by school children with the assistance of teachers, resource persons and adult facilitation. They are: Thai Pongal - a Hindu Harvest Festival, where 556 schools and 54,506 students participated in 8 Provinces; Sinhala & Tamil New Year, where 1282 schools were covered and 55,180 students from all 9 Provinces participated; Poson – the full moon day of June during which the advent of Buddhism to Sri Lanka occurred, where 310 schools constituting 36,426 children from 6 Provinces participated; Ramadan – a Muslim Festival, where 490 schools and 41,490 students participated from 9 Provinces; and Christmas - 6 Provinces were covered and 16 Programmes were conducted. The programme was implemented in national-level and provincial-level schools with the aim of promoting understanding and brotherhood among children of different cultures and religions. In order to sustain this programme a **Handbook on Religious & Cultural Festivals** to support students, teachers, principals, education officials to organize these festivals in a creative and effective manner was prepared in all three languages. 50,000 books in Sinhala, 5050 books in English and 2000 books in Tamil are being distributed.

A 90 minute **feature film** titled “Her, Him, the Other – Thundenek (three persons)” was produced and screened this year, with funding by ONUR with three leading film

directors in the country who have won international acclaim (Prasanna Vithanage, Asoka Handagama and Vimukthi Jayasundara), collaborating to direct three segments of one single film. The film is being screened to select audiences of invitees and there will be discussions on the significance of the story with facilitators encouraging audiences to reflect on the impact of the conflict in Sri Lanka, upon civilian survivors, their loved ones, and persons of different faiths and ethnicity. It will be screened before university student audiences and eventually be shown on television as well.

Reconciliation through Cartoons:

An All Island Cartoon Competition on “Appreciating Ethnic & Religious Diversity -Build One Country, One Nation was completed under two categories, a School Competition and an Open Competition. The winning entries were exhibited at the BMICH in September 2017.

National Unity & Reconciliation through Higher Education:

ONUR, with the University Grants Commission which is the regulatory body for university education, are introducing a programme in 6 Universities to have a course for first year undergraduates on the theme of “Agents for Positive Change”. The compulsory course will carry credits and help build young leaders imbued with the spirit of harmony and coexistence. Pilot Programmes have been conducted before introducing the course at the following institutions: University of Ruhuna; University of Jaffna; Swami Vipulananda Institute; Jamiah Naleemiah Institute; South Eastern University; Sri Lanka Bhikkhu University.

Heal the Past, Build the Future:

The objective of this programme is to expand the pool of resource persons and reach grass roots in different districts through awareness programmes. The overall output is expected to strengthen the divisional level Reconciliation Committees already set up by the Ministry of National Integration & Reconciliation intended to resolve problems amicably, and where necessary, submit recommendations on unresolved matters to the National Reconciliation Committee through the Ministry of National Integration & Reconciliation. ONUR will be the coordinating body between the grassroots/regional civil society organizations and the regional Government bodies to strengthen the District level reconciliation committees. In 2017 ONUR with the NGO the Centre for Peace Building & Reconciliation (CPBR) held 226 Workshops in hotspots in Jaffna, Anuradhapura and Ratnapura with the participation of 6511 selected opinion and religious leaders. Each group had one and two-day sessions, and with 40 persons engaging in a discussion with the specialist course leader to reorient the participants towards appreciating the different cultures and beliefs of their fellow citizens. In 2018, ONUR will be working with 23 partner organizations, NGO, such as the National Peace Council, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Rural Development Foundation, Environment & Community Development Centre, Human Development Centre (HUDEC/CARITAS), and the National Ethnic Unity Foundation, to advance this programme.

Sri Lanka too, as many other countries, face the challenge of dealing with hate speech, especially through social media. The legal system prohibits the use of certain types of speech that either harm religious feelings or incite communal disharmony. The Penal Code includes a range of offences (Injuring or defiling a place of worship with intent to insult the religion of any class; Acts in relation to places of worship with intent to insult the religion of any class; Disturbing a religious assembly; Uttering words with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings; Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage

religious feelings of any class, by insulting its religion or religious beliefs); and relevant sections of the Police Ordinance, the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure provide legislative provisions that relate directly to certain types of attacks on religious groups, including breach of peace, physical attacks, threats and intimidation. **Section 3(1) of the ICCPR (International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights) Act (2007)** provides: 'No person shall propagate war or advocate national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.' The offence falls within the jurisdiction of the High Court, and trials involving the offence are given the highest priority of the Court.

As a nation, we were deeply pained by incidents in March this year (2018) in a few areas of Sri Lanka targeting members of the Muslim community who represent an integral part of the pluralistic society of Sri Lanka. Such acts which go against our shared vision of a Sri Lanka where equal rights and rule of law are guaranteed for all, have no place in a democratic, pluralistic society. The Government took swift action against perpetrators of the incidents and investigations are ongoing. It was discovered during investigations that social media and messaging platforms were being used not only to incite and spread hate and false messages but also to organise attacks. The Government as a result of this experience has entered into active engagement with social media operators, to work with them on the prevention of hate speech. As recently as this week (18 July 2018), Facebook, in response to criticism that the flow of rumours on its platform has led to physical harm to people in countries around the world, including Sri Lanka, announced that it will start removing misinformation that could spark violence, in collaboration with local organizations. While there are still questions that need to be addressed in this respect, including who Facebook's partners would be, and what the criteria would be to become a partner, Sri Lanka, as a country that was affected, is heartened by this decision.

The Ministry in-charge of Muslim Religious Affairs in Sri Lanka has recently launched a programme titled 'National Masjid Awards' to motivate mosques in the country to enhance their involvement in co-existence initiatives, and upliftment in education and community service. An 'Open Mosque Project' has been launched to open one mosque per district for visitors of other faiths with the objective of enhancing understanding between Muslims and other communities in the country.

We remain committed to advance and uphold the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; including freedom to change ones religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest ones religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. We look forward to this important Meeting to listen and learn from the experiences of others, and to join hands with all to foster what the world needs most today to progress – peace, compassion, mindfulness, and justice, and **recognition of our common humanity**.