

Still groggy after worst nightmare: A need to preserve social peace in Sri Lanka

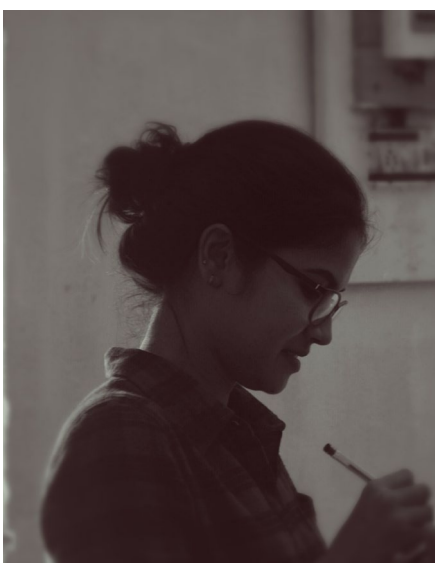
By Piyumi Fonseka



Photo credit: Pradeep Dilrukshana

In this month's "Voices from the South", we hear from Sri Lankan journalist **Piyumi Fonseka** about the tragic, violent events that unfolded in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday. Piyumi describes in particular the initial impact of the attacks in the Sri Lankan town of Negombo, before looking at the need to preserve inter-religious coexistence and social peace in the country. Piyumi argues that the Sri Lankan state must not only both care for the victims and bring the perpetrators to justice, but it must also demonstrate that Sri Lanka will take the necessary political steps to uphold human rights, equity and justice for all groups. Political actors must not attempt to utilize the events for their own political agendas.

Piyumi is one of trainers in the Karibu supported journalist-training program, "Speaking Truth to Power," initiated by the Sri Lankan organization "Born to Win Relationships".



Piyumi Fonseka

It was minutes after the Rev. Father delivered a speech about the importance of helping people during difficult times that the suicide bomber triggered the bomb at the St. Sebastian's Church in Katuwapitiya, Negombo (Sri Lanka), killing scores and injuring many.

The inhumane attack at the Katuwapitiya Sebastian's Church has scattered the wooden pews inside the building and blasted window glass panels, hurling debris across the courtyard. Most of those who died were regulars at the Sunday 8 am Mass.

As with any religion, worshipping together brings so much peace. People in Negombo now feel that they would find themselves hesitating before they step across the threshold of the church. "My hands tremble as I take a deep breath to calm myself before I enter the church," a witness of the attack, one of the regulars at the church's 8 am Sunday Mass told the Sri Lanka newspaper, the Daily Mirror.

No words can describe the sorrow and pain that the people, who have lost their loved ones, in Negombo, Sri Lanka feel these days. People are shocked. It's the worst nightmare of their lives. After hearing the devastating news, scores of people have visited the church from across the country extending support to the affected.

“These are cowardly attacks on families gathered in peace and prayer to celebrate a day which symbolises harmony and goodwill towards others. Our thoughts are with those victims who we now know have died, the people who have been injured and their loved ones. We continue to do all we can to support them,” a person from Moratuwa said.

Political violence and terrorist attacks are not new to Sri Lanka though this is undoubtedly the most coordinated single attack to take place in the country to date.

Speaking to the Daily Mirror, renowned Sociologist Prof. Siri Hettige, who has spoken much on communal issues in Sri Lanka, said that the nature of this attack should open the eyes of everybody as this sort of violence cannot be repeated without totally disrupting the normal functioning of Sri Lankan society.

He was of the view that the continuation of such violence can be disastrous for a country that is beset with too many not so easily resolvable issues such as unprecedented political instability and uncertainty, massive indebtedness and challenges emanating from climate change.

Although the country is experiencing the need during this hour to restore law and order and establish national security, people cannot consider this simply as a national security issue alone. “The leaders should not ignore the fact that this incident is connected to what has happened over a long period of time. Persisting or even deteriorating inter-community relations have been a prominent fact that only the most ignorant and the most opportunistic people could ignore,” he said.

He emphasised that leaders of all communities need to reach an agreement on the urgent need to work together to come up with a national policy framework to bring about national unity in a highly divided society.

Airing his perspective about the attacks and the current situation of the country, National Peace Council’s (NPC) Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera said that apart from caring for the victims and their families, there is a need to preserve social peace and inter-religious coexistence that prevails within the country.

He said that there could also be attempts by political actors to utilise the disaffection of the general population with the government for their own benefit.

“The challenge of governance, and to the security

forces, is to act within the framework of the laws and human rights norms and also prevent acts of terrorism. It is necessary for the Government to take all steps to identify the perpetrators and bring them to book,” Perera said.

In the longer-run there would also remain the long unfulfilled task of identifying and implementing the necessary political reforms that make every individual and community have faith in the fact that the Sri Lankan State would be equitable and just to them. This is the message that the Government needs to take to the people.

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Piyumi Fonseka is a professional storyteller and journalist in the Sri Lankan «Daily Mirror» newspaper. Her goal is to give those without a voice a chance to be heard. She has received awards and praise from among others the Thomson Foundation UK, Foreign Press Association UK, Manorama School of Communication India and Sri Lanka Press Institute. You can read more of her work at <https://storiesbypiyumifonseka.wordpress.com>.