

URI Cooperation Circle Steps in to Address Religiously Motivated Violence In Sri Lanka

The following report is from Ravindra, “Ravi”, Kandage, United Religions Initiative’s Global Trustee from URI’s South India region who has represented URI since its inception. He is the Executive Director of the Sarvodaya Shanthisena Cooperation Circle (an indigenous non-governmental organization committed to raising the living standards of the poorest and marginalized communities in Sri Lanka through a practical model of self-help) and Vice President of the Sarvodaya Movement, a network of organizations that spans Sri Lanka and has been directly involved in the reconciliation process in pre- and postwar Sri Lanka. He is based in Kesbewa, Sri Lanka.

Background: *The people of Sri Lanka are divided into ethnic groups whose conflicts have dominated public life since the nineteenth century. The two main characteristics that mark a person's ethnic heritage are language and religion, which intersect to create four major ethnic groups - the Sinhalese, the Muslims, the Tamils, the Burghers and others. The Sinhalese (Buddhists) are the largest ethnic group in the country. Anti-Muslim resentment has been festering in the Sinhala society, across class lines, for some time now. This is due to the systematic anti-Muslim hate campaign that is in operation.*

*It is important to understand that the **Sarvodaya CC** has spent years building relationships and being in dialogue with religious leaders throughout Sri Lanka. They are then able to respond quickly to religiously motivated violence as described below.*

Here are Ravi’s words;

On the 22nd of February 2018, an incident of violence occurred in Teldeniya, in the Kandy* district by three Muslim youths on a Sinhalese lorry (truck) driver accusing him of blocking the road. The youths assaulted the lorry driver mercilessly. He was admitted to the Kandy hospital in serious condition and succumbed to his injuries after 09 days, and his funeral was held at Teldeniya on the 5th of March. The Sinhalese community, angered by the turn of events, started burning Muslim shops in the Teldeniya town beginning a series of communal attacks on Muslims. Soon the violence spread to other villages, and the government took measures to control the situation by bringing the area under army protection and clamping on a curfew. But responsible groups claim that the police failed to intervene right at the outset to diffuse the situation. It is evident that Sinhalese extremist groups have taken advantage of the situation and offered organized leadership to these disruptive elements. Non-partisan groups believe that Muslim extremists also worked to aggravate the situation.

Due to this incident in the Kandy district;

- *402 families and 2,010 persons have been badly affected.
- *19 have been injured with two people (01 Muslim and 01 Sinhala) dead.
- *19 houses were totally demolished while 213 houses were partly smashed.
- *30 businesses were totally demolished and 218 were partly damaged.
- *01 Muslim mosque was totally demolished and 15 mosques partly damaged.
- *01 Buddhist temple has been partly damaged.
- *36 vehicles have been totally destroyed while 30 have been partly damaged.

From the time of the flaring up of this incident to date, **Sarvodaya**, a URI Cooperation Circle, in conformity with other **URI** Cooperation Circles (There are 13 CCs in Sri Lanka.) have taken action to control and alleviate the situation and provide relief to those in distress. We;

1. Contacted other religious leaders and began discussions on a course of action.
2. A media discussion was held with the participation of the religious and civil society leaders working with **URI**, and an appeal was made to all sectors to unite in order to alleviate the situation and to prevent further violence.
3. 525 bags of dry rations were distributed among 172 Muslim families Kandy rendered helpless by these incidents. **Sarvodaya CC** has spent a sum of Rs 450,000/ on the distribution of dry rations. In addition, it has provided a sum of RS 30,000/ to the Kandy district centre for sanitary products for women and milk powder for children.
4. On the 10th of March, 2018, a meeting was held at **Sarvodaya CC** headquarters attended by 75 persons including members of **URI** to review the present situation and discuss appropriate courses of action to be adopted in future.
5. A number of programmes, such as solidarity marches, workshops, and inter- and intrafaith dialogues were organized by **URI** circles to be held in other districts to prevent a repetition of communal disturbances.
6. **Sarvodaya CC** leaders continue to meet with religious leaders to work for peace.

Galle District

A discussion was held with the police, Galle and religious leaders, and the defence activities were strengthened. Religious leaders in the vulnerable areas in the Galle district were met and a course of action to prevent people from indulging in communal violence implemented.

Attorney-at-law Aruna Weerasinha, a member of **URI**, held 3 workshops in temples and mosques to educate three wheel drivers on emergency laws, punishment and effects of violating the laws.

NuwaraEliya District

The President of **URI** in Nuwara Eliya, Attorney-at-Law Keerthi Rajapakshe, held a discussion with 25 Civil Society leaders on strategies to be adopted to prevent communal conflicts.

Badulla District

Discussions were held at a personal level with Muslim, Buddhist, and Catholic religious leaders of the area on strategies to be adopted to prevent communal conflicts.

In two other districts, **Sarvodaya CC** and **URI** officers are maintaining a close surveillance while being prepared with an appropriate plan of action to be implemented in the event of an eruption of communal violence.

As at today, 29th of March 2018 programmes have been implemented and peace has been restored.

* The Kandy District is in the highlands in central Sri Lanka, and being the last kingdom of the Sinhalese throne, holds a very important place in the Sinhalese Buddhist culture housing the Temple of Tooth Relic which is the most sacred Buddhist icon in the country.