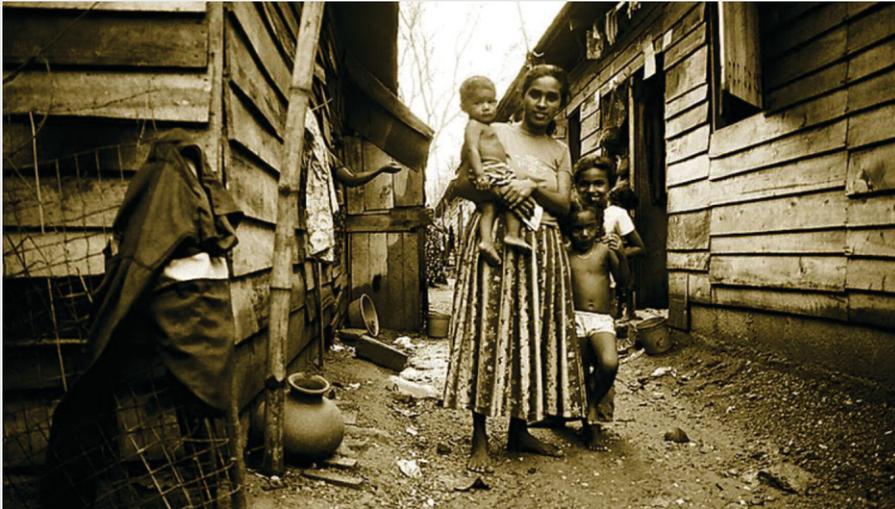




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DIVI NEGUMA: POVERTY AND THE POOR



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Divi Neguma ('Uplifting Lives') is the government's new poverty-alleviation programme and became law on 8 January 2013. The model of poverty reduction proposed, aims to mobilise people into a 'national development process'; by supporting individual, family and group livelihood activities through micro-finance.

However, many issues and questions remain.

Who are the intended beneficiaries of the new programme? Although the bill talks about mobilising people, it is not clear who is going to be mobilised. Since the objective is poverty-reduction, we can assume it will be the poor. But who are the intended beneficiaries, even among poor people? Is it only the 'chronic poor'? Or does it include the 'transient poor' – that hover just above the poverty line, and are vulnerable to poverty when exposed to external shocks such as natural disasters or loss of household income?

One criticism of the previous *Samurdhi* ('Prosperity') poverty-alleviation scheme – now absorbed into the new programme – is that it was poorly

“targeted”; that is, that many of the poor did not benefit from it, while others who were less in need, did. It is important that *Divi Neguma* deals with this issue by setting out clear and transparent targeting criteria.

How is the programme going to benefit the poor? It has a strong focus on raising incomes; but this alone is not enough. Poverty reduction strategies should improve overall wellbeing, by including better health and nutrition and improved living standards. Increased income alone does not always result in wellbeing.

There are regional disparities in poverty and wellbeing levels; and it is likely that these disparities will create further inequalities amongst regions. For instance, it is likely that the Sabaragamuwa province will require more support to move people out of poverty, in comparison to the Western province. So the program needs to be flexible when taking into account these regional disparities.

If unaddressed, existing regional disparities can result in increasing inequality between people and regions through the operation of the

Vikalpani National Women's Federation and the Eastern United Women's Organisation celebrated International Women's day under the theme “Rise-up all forms of Violence Against Women in Sri Lanka” on 9 March 2013. A demonstration with around 300 women participants was held in Kantale Town followed by a public seminar at Wellington Cinema Hall for around 400 participants. Simultaneously Sticker Campaigns were carried out in the Kantale, Colombo, Anuradhapura and Moneragala districts.



programme. This is the case particularly in a post-war context where there are more female-headed households, orphans and disabled people, and also with the ageing of the population in Sri Lanka.

Micro-finance is central to *Divi Neguma*. However, this form of credit is limited in that it only supports livelihoods for those who are economically active. Consequently children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities might not have access to loans.

Is the highly centralised implementation structure suitable for poverty reduction? The rationale for the centralisation is that it will provide better coordination and more effective service delivery. The structure consists of the *Divi Neguma* Department at the top with the National Council, National Federation, Regional Organisations, District Committees, and at the bottom of the structure, the

Community-Based-Organisations (CBOs).

Each level will monitor and supervise the level below it. CBO members can bring proposals about planning and coordination of the Programme to the Federation who will 'consider' the proposals. But it is the Minister for Economic Development, with the 'advice' of the National Council, who will formulate policies. So policies will be made at the ministerial level and implemented by the tiered structure with the Department at the top, assisted by the regional organisations, district committees and the CBOs.

The implementation structure is therefore hierarchical with considerable duplication and overlap of functions, which is likely to be administratively expensive and take a large chunk of the programme budget which would otherwise be of benefit to poor people.

Finally, there does not seem to be a process for monitoring and evaluation of the programme as a whole, so there is no mechanism to flag operational issues, or the effectiveness of the programme as a whole. This is likely to affect the overall impact and success of the programme as a poverty alleviation strategy.

Centre for Poverty Analysis

“PROMISE IS A PROMISE”: TIME FOR ACTION TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN!

One Billion Rising' and 'International Women's Day' on March 8 2013 focused on numerous ways of ending violence against women, especially sexual abuse, rape and murder of women and girl children in Sri Lanka, through a call for converting outrage into concrete action.

An awareness campaign revealed the shocking fact that according to police data on reported crimes alone: *four women or children are raped every day, and of them three are below 18 years of age.*



© OBR SL Facebook Page

Sri Lanka has signed and ratified many international human rights treaties including the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading

according to data analysed by the Women and Media Collective.¹ The numerous drawbacks in the criminal justice system include: absence of rules of procedure; delays in court proceedings; insensitive cross-examination of victims; poor quality of the state prosecution; evidence protection and lapses in forensics; lack of witness protection; lack of sensitisation of legal system to violence against women; manipulation of the gender-neutral Domestic Violence Act by male perpetrators etc.

Other issues include limited financial resourcing by the state; and the obvious reluctance on the part of the government to partner with civil society organisations in service-provision. The majority of the public seems to have a lethargic and indifferent attitude towards violence against women. This situation

Grave crimes	Cases of law	Mistakes of law fact	Complaint designedly false	Total true cases	Plaints Filed	Accused unknown	Otherwise disposed of	Ending in Conviction	Ending in discharge	Total disposed	Investigation pending	Pending with MC	Pending with AG	Pending in DH/HC	Total pending
Rape/incest (2012 first quarter)	460	2	-	458	44	10	-	-	-	10	393	44	11	-	448
Rape/incest 2011	1870	0	06	1864	235	36	5	2	2	45	1344	206	249	20	1819
Rape/incest 2010	1854	02	05	1847	167	43	06	03	01	53	1397	148	240	09	1794

Treatment or Punishment. The state is also bound by the United Nations Declaration of Violence against Women, and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.

At national level, Article 12 of the Constitution stipulates the principle of gender equality and non-discrimination. New offences were added to the Penal Code in 1995, such as incest, marital rape (between judicially separated spouses), sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, trafficking etc. The punishment for rape has been increased; and compensation for the psychological or mental trauma caused to victims also introduced. The Domestic Violence Act was passed in 2005.

Despite this legal framework, violence against women is rapidly on the rise,

is aggravated by mixed messages from state authorities by way of non-prosecution of several high profile cases of rape; and controversial public statements on gender-based violence by the highest ranking officials in the government.

At the base of the rising violence and numerous other discriminations against women, and the casual attitude of public officials and policymakers is the problem of patriarchy in our society. Women are not considered to be equal human beings with men; and therefore acts of violence against women and their physical integrity is not considered as a violation of their human rights.

¹ <http://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/womens-rights-group-on-sri-lankas-700-sexual-abuse-of-girls/>

RESTRICTING REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

The newspapers recently reported a government ban on irreversible methods of contraception, coinciding with protests against 'family planning' by extremist Buddhist factions concerned about the alleged declining numbers of the 'Sinhala race'.

According to reliable sources, the ban targeted non-governmental organisations. Sterilisation services continue to be available in government hospitals. Rather than restricting women's access to contraception, it might be more useful to focus our efforts on addressing some real issues.

General Circular No. 1586 (1988) issued by the Office of the Director General of Health Services sets the eligibility criteria for sterilisation. Generally, individuals over 26 years of age who have at least 2 living children (the younger must be over 2 years of age) may undergo sterilisation.¹

Like most contraceptive programs offered through Ministry of Health, the sterilisation programme targets women. In my experience with the Ministry of Health, sterilisation procedures were easily accessible to women; they were routinely offered the service if they had completed a third pregnancy and had two living children. Vasectomy services, on the other, were scarce.

This is confirmed by data from the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS, 2006/7): 16.9 % of 'currently married women' were sterilised compared with 0.7% of women whose husbands were sterilised. That vasectomy is "simpler, safer, easier, and less expensive", according to the World Health Organisation, than the procedure for women must be considered here.

Importantly, the criteria for sterilisation do not require individuals to obtain their partners' consent to undergo sterilisation. Nevertheless, spousal consent is routinely obtained in government hospitals before providing sterilisation to women.

I witnessed numerous instances when women's pleas for sterilisation were rejected during Caesarean section simply because the spouse was unavailable to sign a consent form. In this way, doctors take on the role of gatekeepers to contraceptives services, restricting women's access based on their own gendered presumptions.

In 1980, a monetary incentive of Rs. 100 per sterilisation procedure was introduced and was subsequently increased to Rs. 500. Surprisingly, this monetary incentive was not omitted in the Circular of 1988 and remains in place today. Furthermore, healthcare providers (including the surgeon, anaesthetist and assisting nurses) can still claim, if they so do wish, a negligible sum for sterilisation. While Rs. 500 may seem a small amount to some of us, continuing to provide incentives for sterilisation is unethical.

Providing incentives is especially problematic because sterilisation is most popular among women in the plantation sector (presumably not Sinhala contradicting the claim of extremist factions in Colombo).

According to the DHS (2006/7), 61% of estate women used a modern method of contraception (including sterilisation, contraceptive pills, intra-uterine devices, Depo-Provera, implants, condoms and complete breastfeeding) and 41% resorted to sterilisation. In contrast, 54% and 44% of rural and urban women used modern methods of contraception, while only 16% and 13% resorted to sterilisation.

This set of data debunks the proclamations of extremist Buddhist groups who seem hell bent on protecting Sinhala women from coercive sterilisation. It also makes it incumbent on us to ensure that plantation workers are not coerced into sterilisation. On the other hand, the large numbers of estate women accessing sterilisation may signify a lack of access to temporary contraceptive options.

Imposing restrictions on sterilisation may have other implications for women's health. For instance, it is likely to increase the incidence of unplanned pregnancies. According to the DHS (2006/7), sterilisation is popular among estate women, women

above 35 years of age, women with lower levels of education and women with 3 or more children.

This profile reflects on who will be most affected by restrictions on sterilisation and, importantly, bears similarity to that of women seeking abortion services. Therefore, restrictions on sterilisation could result in more women resorting to unsafe abortion, a service that moved underground since the government led shut down of abortion clinics in 2007.

Religious extremism is frequently accompanied by restrictions on access to reproductive health services for women. While there is much room for improvement around health policies governing contraceptive services, such as the removal of incentives and the unofficial requirement of spousal consent for sterilisation, imposing restrictions or banning sterilization altogether is hardly the solution.

Such restrictions are not only an extension of policies that assume that women are incapable of making decisions concerning their health, but may well be interpreted as an attempt by the state to regulate women's reproduction in the service of a retrograde agenda of nationalism.

1. See *The Island*, 16 March 2013
http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=74749 for more details.

Ramya Kumar, MBBS

STATEMENT BY MIGRANT FORUM LANKA (MFL) ON SRI LANKAN WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS

Today, on International Women's Day 2013, Migrant Forum Lanka (MFL), a collective of local Sri Lankan civil society organisations, trade unions, researchers, lawyers and activists, takes the opportunity to underscore the importance of Sri Lankan women migrant workers and promote the protection of their human rights before, during and beyond the migration process.

This year's global theme of, "*A promise is a promise: Time for action to end*



© Daily Mirror

violence against women”, is of particular relevance to women migrant workers who are extremely vulnerable to violence, discrimination and deprivation of their fundamental human rights. With a serious lack of protection mechanisms in place, women domestic workers especially face working conditions akin to slavery including physical and sexual abuse, religious and racial discrimination, lack of freedom of movement, association and expression in host countries and social stigma and unequal economic opportunities at home.

Migrant Forum Lanka calls upon the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) to improve existing MOUs into legally binding bilateral agreements with host country governments which address the human and labour rights of women migrant workers, including equal rights, especially personal safety, under host country domestic labour laws, standardised remuneration and access to all amenities.

The wrongful execution of Sri Lankan domestic migrant worker Rizana Nafeek on 09 January 2013 who was sentenced to death by a court in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the age of 17 in 2005 was a tragedy which shocked the world. It clearly demonstrates the dangers faced by women domestic workers who are almost completely unprotected by host country laws. Sri Lanka however continues to send women domestic

workers to Saudi Arabia without any visible efforts to strengthen protection mechanisms.

Migrant Forum Lanka demands that the GoSL amend legislation to regulate sub agents and impose swift punishment on human traffickers under the Penal Code (Amendment) Act No 16 of 2006 and widen the definition of trafficking to include dissemination of false information by recruiting agents especially to women domestic workers regarding conditions of and nature of work, remuneration, unlawfully forcing migrant women to sign multiple employment contracts and the commodification of women by offering them financial assistance to entice them to work abroad in potentially abusive conditions.

We urge better collaborative efforts between Sri Lankan foreign employment, labour, immigration, external affairs, other relevant authorities and consular officials to monitor migration flows to address issues of irregular migration and trafficking especially of underage girls, for purposes of prostitution and slavery and to assist women workers who have fled abusive employment situations. GoSL needs to urgently address the situation of Sri Lankan migrant workers in detention camps and prisons across all host countries to prevent any miscarriages of justice and to protect women migrant worker detainees from being subject to physical and sexual abuse.

As one of the few South Asian countries with heavy female migration of women domestic migrant workers, and an economy which is primarily dependent on their remittances, GoSL has both a duty and obligation to protect its women migrant workers. Although Sri Lanka is the only South Asian country to have ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, implementation within the country remains ineffective and inadequate.

Migrant Forum Lanka calls upon the government of Sri Lanka to effectively implement the National Labour Migration Policy of 2008 which reflects the law, spirit and essence of the Migrant Workers Convention including reintegration of women into society upon return through providing them equal employment opportunities and addressing the many social issues of female labour migration.

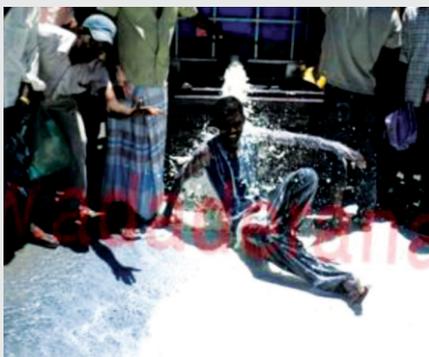
Women domestic workers are one of the most vulnerable groups and face extreme discrimination, violence and violations due to their unique situation. We therefore urge the GoSL to ratify the ILO Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers - C189 - which asserts that countries are required to take adequate measures to respect, promote and realize the fundamental principles and rights at work, such as: freedom of association, right to collective bargaining, minimum wages, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, effective abolition of child labour, issuing of standard written contracts and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. Most if not all domestic workers are women, and the ratification and implementation of C189 would act as a deterrent against violation of rights in the country of origin, whilst setting the standards for 'decent work' to be negotiated with host country governments.

On this International Women's Day, Migrant Forum Lanka urges the government of Sri Lanka, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, Sri

Lankan Civil Society to work collectively and with their counterparts in host countries to ensure that Sri Lankan women who migrate for work do so in conditions of safety, respect, freedom, dignity and equity.

Migrant Forum Lanka

GOVERNMENT MUST DO MORE TO INCREASE DOMESTIC MILK PRODUCTION



© Ada Derana
Dairy Farmers bathe in milk at a protest in Hatton as companies refuse to purchase their milk

Instead of granting tax concessions to multi-national companies engaged in importing milk powder for domestic consumption, the government in its election manifesto *Mahinda Chinthana* (2005) stated that domestic milk production will be increased.

Similarly the 2010 election manifesto *Mahinda Chinthana Future Vision*, declared that the country will be made self-sufficient in liquid milk by 2020. Presently, only about 30% of domestic milk requirement is produced locally. If this is to be increased up to 100% over the next few years then the government will have to do much more.

In order to achieve the set target, along with increasing the production capacity of the dairy farmers, the number of dairy farmers – which at the moment consist of about three and half million – should be doubled.

Due to problems associated with small-scale dairy production industry, the

present generation is choosing to opt-out of traditional dairy farming in search of better prospects, thereby contributing to its further decline.

The government lacks a national policy for dairy production. If the government has taken a decision to make Sri Lanka self-sufficient with milk, then it is necessary to implement a national policy to its effect. The responsibility lies with the government which has to work with the support of the provincial councils in its implementation.

Dairy farmers are not given a reasonable price for their liquid milk. The price is not determined by the independent operation of supply and demand; but rather in accordance with standards decided by the companies purchasing their milk.

At present Rs50 per litre is paid if SNF (Solid Non-Fat) and fat content in liquid milk amounts to 12.5%. Although the government has fixed a price of Rs50 for one litre of liquid milk; in most cases since the milk supplied by the dairy farmer fails to meet the set standard, only about Rs45-48 is paid.

The non-complementary interaction between domestic agricultural development and local small scale dairy production, and also the lack of knowledge of the small scale dairy farmer further contributes to the decline of the industry.

Self-sufficiency in milk can have far reaching advantages in a country like Sri Lanka. Primarily the expenditure incurred on milk imports for domestic consumption can be saved within the country. Increasing the number of dairy farming families and their income levels will result in uplifting their standard of living and consequently create a local consumer community with a high purchasing power. Finally the nutritional value of milk can contribute to produce a nation of healthy people.

Loku Banda Jayasundara
President, Sri Lanka Small Scale Dairy Farmers' Association

LAND GRABS IN NORTH AND EAST CONTRADICT LLRC RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) observed in its final report that the “displacement of persons as well as loss of land and homes were major conflict related outcomes, and affected all communities throughout the period.”

The LLRC concluded that “measures and policies ensuring legitimate land rights, especially among the returning IDPs, would contribute significantly to restoring normalcy and promoting reconciliation”.

However, first-hand information gathered through site-visits and interviews with affected communities by the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) indicates that the Government of Sri Lanka is not honouring even its own *National Plan of Action to Implement the Recommendations of the LLRC* (July 2012).

Valikamam North (Jaffna)

Owing to the High Security Zone established by the military in Valikamam North division (especially around Tellippalai) of the Jaffna peninsula in 1990, some 9,905 Tamil families consisting of 33,353 individuals continue to be displaced according to the government's own statistics. The HSZ encompasses 24 grama niladhari divisions, out of which 16 are completely out-of-bounds to their former residents. The HSZ also includes 18 kilometres of coastline between Naguleswaram and Myliddy. These Tamil families, who were traditionally dependent on farming and fishing for their livelihood, face severe hardship. The Myliddy fisheries harbour is occupied by the navy and not accessible to civilians. The Catholic churches in Kankesanthurai, Myliddy and Urani are inaccessible for worship and pastoral care.

Sampur (Trincomalee)

Sampur was initially declared as a High Security Zone, and later re-gazetted as a

Special Economic Zone for the construction of a coal-power plant and industries owned by Indians. More than 500 houses were destroyed and their Muslim and Tamil owners are prevented from access to their former agricultural lands and fishing areas. The areas proposed for their resettlement are of poor quality for farming and other livelihood activities. Irakkulam is marshy land, which floods and remains inundated for prolonged periods during the rainy season. There is not even 100 acres that is suitable for paddy cultivation. Access to water remains a significant issue in Iththikulam. There are 1262 families (or 4036 individuals) still in four IDP camps: namely Kilivetti, Pattiththidal, Manatchenai and Kattaiparichchan. More than 2,500 acres of productive paddy land are lost to cultivation and more than 2,000 families have lost their livelihoods.

Thiru Murugandi (Killinochchi)

Three hundred and eighty-two of the original 463 Tamil families in Thiru Murugandi grama niladhari division have still not been resettled, since their most recent displacement in 2008. Five hundred acres of land is occupied by an army camp. These lands belong to 120 households among the displaced.

Mullikulam (Mannar)

Three hundred and seven Tamil families from the Mullikulam grama niladhari division within Musali Divisional Secretariat have been displaced due to the establishment of a naval base in that area. Owing to this informal High Security Zone, nearly 1000 acres of land and 5 irrigation tanks are now inaccessible to farmers. Families of Sinhala naval personnel have been settled in that land. Two hundred and six households have temporarily settled in the forested area of Marichchikattu; while 54 families are living in Kayakuli village. These households lack decent shelter, sanitation, potable water and livelihoods in both areas. The people of Mullikulam have been displaced at least four times since 1990.

In view of the above, the Peoples' Alliance for Right to Land (PARL) Sri Lanka recommends:

- Immediate shelter, livelihood and infrastructure assistance to 'old' and 'new' IDPs in the Northern and Eastern provinces, especially women-headed households;
- The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and international standards on long-term housing and property restitution be adhered to by local, provincial and central government authorities;
- All the final recommendations of the Lessons Learned and Reconciliation Commission should be implemented, including on demilitarisation, impartial land dispute resolution mechanisms, and the devolution of power to the provinces.

Peoples Alliance for Right to Land
<http://www.parlsrilanka.org/>

'WAITING TO GO HOME'



© Subajini K Anton
Makeshift shack which functions as a primary school and a meeting room

On 7 September 2007 the army entered Mullikulam in the Northern province to ask the people to leave, just for three days, they were told.

The (Tamil) villagers took with them what they would need for “a few days” – and whatever they could carry on the 20 kilometer walk to Kokkupathayan;

where army buses took them to the villages of their relatives. They left their homes, tools, fish-nets and boats behind.

Five years later they are still “waiting to go home” while the Navy occupies the village and farms the rice field they tilled for generations. The villagers, and their advocates, have negotiated with the Navy to allow them access to the church (granted only on Sundays); and the school inside the camp, while farmers are allowed to work on a few acres of rice paddy. Access to their homes, boats, tools and fish-nets is still denied.

“I burn up, thinking of this injustice, day and night” an old man told me. We own the rice fields we have farmed and the homes we built with our own labour, he said.

The Mullikulam people now live in two locations, Malankadu and Kayakuli in the middle of the jungle, and in sheds that they built for themselves. They moved there in June last year. Wild elephants and bears roam the surrounding area – and raid the village occasionally.

Malankadu is close to their original homes, and because it is near the Puliyankulama tank it is considered the better of the two sites. The people use the water from the tank for bathing and limited agriculture; while drinking water is bowsered in by the navy and stored in the village.

Conditions at Kayakuli, where 107 families live, are worse. There is no water for bathing or drinking, and no toilets – they use the forest. Here too, drinking water is bowsered in by the Navy twice a week, while they have no means of storing water. They bathe in tea-coloured slush collected in a pit created by illegal sand mining. Twenty residents suffer from a skin condition caused by bathing in that water.

Just four families own boats which they use for fishing. The catch is sold to a company which provides them with ice filled boxes for storing the fish until the company truck picks it up. The

Kayakuli people have been promised one and a half acres of land per family and houses by the government. At present they too, like the Malankadu people live on handouts from the Church and others.

Mala Liyanage

ALLOCATE 2 ACRES TO ESTATE POPULATION

The descendants of Indian estate workers, who were brought to Ceylon in the 19th century for coffee and tea cultivation still live in 8 x 10 size line rooms without being given any ownership to the house or land they live in.

This should be considered as an injustice to them because, today, if

other communities live in a piece of land for some times, the reality is that, they are made its owners over a period of time. Regrettably in the case of estate workers, the government practices the opposite.

In the budget speech of 2012, the government informed that there are 37,000 hectares of uncultivated land in the plantation sector.

However, according to a survey carried out by the Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR), uncultivated lands in the plantation sector are as follows: 57,442.66 hectares in the private sector; 5,968.88 hectares in the Janatha Estates Development Board; and 4,775.91 hectares in the State Plantations Corporation – amounting to 68,187.46 hectares altogether.

The government's plan to indirectly distribute these lands to outsiders would adversely affect the estate population whose livelihoods depend solely on this land.

The estate population, who have been contributing for generations to the national income, are still considered as second-class citizens. They have not been given any documentation, never mind the title, for the 7 perches of land promised to them before privatisation of the estates.

The marginalisation of the estate community can only be overcome if the government allocates each family 2 acres of plantation lands for their housing, cultivation and other livelihood use.

S. Murugaiyah

General Secretary,

United Workers Congress (Nawalapitiya)

“XENOPHOBES SHOULD NOT DETERMINE WHO WE ARE”: ANTI-MUSLIM RHETORIC AND ATTACKS CONDEMNED



© BBC Asia

BBS supporters wearing No Halal slogans at a rally held in Maharagama 17.02.2013

In recent months, there has been an increased outpouring of virulent anti-Muslim sentiments by persons claiming to speak for all Sinhala Buddhists. Organized groups led by Buddhist monks have held public meetings, distributed pamphlets and made press statements. Articles in mainstream Sinhala and English newspapers have propagated ethnic and religious hatred. In addition, there

have been hate campaigns via SMS, emails and Facebook.

The consequences of this rhetoric were most apparent in the Dambulla Mosque incident where a group led by a Buddhist monk threatened the mosque with destruction on 20 April 2012. More recently, there have been attacks against Muslim businesses. On 24 January this year, for instance, a

"demonstration" in Kuliyaipitiya was orchestrated, it seemed, for the sole purpose of insulting and inciting a reaction from Muslims.

The attacks on Muslims have been directed at everything: The certification of food products as Halal; wearing the hijab, abhaya and nikab by Muslim women; the beard some Muslim men sport; the azaan or call for prayer from the mosques; the Muslims' practice of closing businesses for Friday prayers; the prevalence of certain sectarian differences among Muslims; and the ongoing debate regarding methods of slaughter for the consumption of meat.

The hate rhetoric invokes violence in certain Muslim identified countries, actions of the Saudi Arabian regime and jihadi terrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The rhetoric is formulated as a concern about "Islamic extremism" and its threat to Sinhala Buddhism. The content of this anti-Muslim rhetoric of hate is informed by globally prevalent stereotypes regarding Muslims that have proliferated as a consequence of the American-led 'War on Terror'.

Muslims' distinctive dress and heightened religious and ethnic identity are the outcome of worldwide Islamic reform. Some of the hate seems to be directed at these changes within Muslim communities. However, the rhetoric also reflects an absence of knowledge regarding the actual (lived) experiences of most Muslims in Sri Lanka. Most of the hate rhetoric calls upon local Muslims to defend the actions of their co-religionists elsewhere in the world. These positions attempt to interpret Sri Lanka's Buddhist heritage in a highly restricted manner with the purpose of denying individuals from other ethnic or religious communities their rights as equal citizens guaranteed by the Constitution of Sri Lanka.

This hate campaign has intensified over the last few months and the Government of Sri Lanka has done nothing substantial to condemn or to make clear that inciting hatred against minority communities will not be tolerated. The press reported recently that the President called on these groups to refrain from inciting hate; and the President's Independence Day address criticized such incitement. This is indeed a good sign, but more is needed. At a minimum, the government should investigate accusations of hate speech/writing and prosecute when necessary.

It is disturbing that this kind of misinformed display of hate has been tolerated for this long in our society. Even a few years ago, such sentiments would have been unacceptable and would have been easily identified as fringe positions that have no support within the larger community. Where are the moderate voices among our social, political and religious leadership? Where is the saner counsel and why has it not prevailed? It is time that those of us who are disturbed at this turn of events make our voices heard. It is time that we rallied and stated our position against these sentiments before it is too late.

Sri Lanka is currently recovering from a brutal war and entering an extremely crucial time in its history. Today we are confronting a host of difficult issues regarding the nature of our State and society: Maintaining the structures to ensure good governance, relations between majority and minority communities, and the challenges of poverty and development.

The fundamental questions that we need to address for the much-needed reconstitution of our fractured polity are being eclipsed by the easier processes of demonizing a readily available ethnic/ religious 'other.' What is of course disturbing about this phenomenon is that it is all too

familiar from another time in our history. The demonizing of Tamils occurred in a similar manner. It should not be forgotten that it is a combination of the fear mongering and violence of July 1983, and the unleashing of state terror that escalated the Tamil struggle into one of the most costly wars in our history. We are still to address the wounds of those years of conflict, let alone recover from them; this preoccupation with yet another form of otherness is a symptom of this neglect.

At a time when we need to foreground our common humanity rather than the differences spawned by a long and difficult war, we must not permit the baser elements of our society to be our only voices. This post-war period presents an opportunity to embrace the richness of our diverse cultural identities. Sri Lanka belongs to all her people—Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim (Moor and Malay), Burgher; minorities and the majority. It is this diverse mix of cultures that has enriched Sri Lankan art and architecture, culture, food, politics and history for many centuries. We, the Sri Lankan people, should not allow a xenophobic minority to define who we are.

Endorsed by 63 organizations and signatories can be found at
<http://www.lawandsocietytrust.org/statements-and-reports.html>



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