



INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2019

The International Human Rights Day 2019 was celebrated at the Kandyan Arts Residency on the 14th December 2019, organized by the Human Rights Office Kandy, Sri Lanka with more than 250 participants. Focusing on the involvement of the community in protecting & promoting Human Rights, the theme for 2019 was "As a community, let us protect the Rights and respect the Dignity of our brothers & sisters".



The members of the Support Group of the Human Rights Office which came in to existence in 2005, were appreciated and saluted for their commitment and untiring efforts in working in solidarity with the Human Rights Office, journeying with the victims to seek Justice & Redress. The chief guest of the International Human Rights Day 2019 Dr. Shirley Wijesighe, Professor at Faculty of Humanities, University of the Kelaniya commended the members of the Support Group & congratulated them and gave away the souvenirs to 47 Support Group members. In his speech Dr. Shirley highlighted the value of the participation of the civil society, such as the Support Group in protecting and promoting the Rights of each other. Further Dr. Shirley called upon the Religious leaders to come together to safe guard the Rights of the people.



The formation of the support group was a premonition of Fr. Nandana Manatunga while he was the Director of the Human Rights Media Resource Center and continued thereafter, involving the civil society members in protecting the victims and providing them with security.

The Support Group discerned the specific needs and conditions of each of the victims, whether they have been tortured or sexually abused, began walking with them in their search to regain their dignity an identity. Most of the victims had to be moved from their homes and relocated elsewhere. There were the occasions when the members of the Support Group volunteered to host them and shelter them in their own houses, in addition to being sheltered in suitable Churches and Convents. We gratefully remember all the priests and religious who came forward to provide protection & security to the victims during the most critical times.

Another dimension of their commitment entailed the initiation of campaigns to address the major issue of Court delays. Court delays in Sri Lanka are a plague and no effective action has been taken to address this malaise. Media conferences, Street Movements, Signature campaigns and Post Card campaigns were organized to draw the urgent attention of the State so as to have the trials expedited.



The counseling component was added to the "Victim centered activity", providing the victims with trauma counseling. As most of the family members had experienced trauma, the counseling component had to be extended to them as well. Rev Sr. Mabel Rodrigo used different forms of counseling to the victims and their families, including "Testimonial Therapy".



Apart from assisting the victims, the members of the Support Group assumed the role of evaluating and planning programmes of the Human Rights Office along with the director and the staff. Since education in Human Rights was deemed essential in the country, the Support Group focused on producing short documentaries based on the

stories and the experience of victims that can serve as the basis for discussion and community action.



As the membership of the Support Group grew in numbers and their desire to share their convictions increased, they volunteered to provide accommodation not only to the victims but also to the interns who came from different organizations or countries. By the end of year 2005, Fr. Nandana began to work in the Bogambara Prison, for the welfare of the prisoners with the assistance of the members of the Support Group. Apart from the official members of the Support Group, several others such as Priests and Religious, Medical Personal, Teachers and Law students too assisted the HRO whenever their services were requested. Their contribution was also appreciated during the Human Rights Day.





Rt. Rev. Dr. Vinney Fernando, the Bishop of the Central Province (Kandy Diocese) was occasionally invited to support group meetings to listen to the stories of victims. The bishop not only showed an interest but also emphasized on the need for such an apostolate in the diocese.

In spite of the threats and challenges, the members of the Support Group volunteered to accompany the victims to police stations and other institutions as the occasion arose. Besides, the members of the Support Group accompanied the victims for the inquiries conducted by the Human Rights Commission in addition to accompanying them to safe-houses in different parts of the country.



They also made enormous efforts in the victims integrated into the society both by finding suitable places for employment and or the alternative economic activities. Besides, the members identified safe and suitable institutions that would provide the victims with vocational training in carpentry, sewing, driving, agriculture and beauty culture.

Recognizing the need for on-going education in the process of empowering the members of the Support Group, programs were conducted on Human Rights, psychological counseling, on emerging issues, legal frame works and national & International mechanisms. The members of the Support Group were often invited to meet with diplomatic missions and other UN rapporteurs who visited the HRO.



The members of the Support Group were also involved with the staff of the Human Rights office in organizing Human Rights Exhibitions, Legal Clinics and Programs on the Right to Information to empower the civil society and mobilize them. Further they willingly joined the staff of the Human Rights Office in organizing events that coincided with special days such as the International Women's Day, Human Rights Day, Disappearance Day, Mental Health Day and special programs for the victims on Sinhala-Tamil New Year and Christmas. The Support Group members came into forefront in 2019 for presidential election monitoring as HRO coordinated the Kandy district election monitoring for Paffrel.

While being committed to assisting the victims of various Human Right Violations with love and care, the members of the Support Group have played a major role in campaigning for the reform of the Police and the Judiciary.

The defense and the promotion of Human Rights work of the HRO would have been impossible without the commitment of the Support Group. The HRO expressed its gratitude to the members of the Support Group for their commitment and saluted them for their courage in the face of various challenges. HRO count on their continued support and commitment in the years to come.

The 52 members of the Support Group, many of them professionals and persons who are ready to commit themselves and sacrifice their valuable time for the noble cause of protecting the Rights of all individuals, continue to meet once a month at the Human Rights Office and are involved in campaigns and activities organized by the Human Rights Office throughout the year.

Human Rights day programme was made colorful with cultural items and on behalf of the HRO Dr. Shirley Wijesinghe, the chief guest was presented a souvenir by Bishop by Bishop Kumara Illangasinghe, the former Anglican Bishop of Kurunegala.

