

# Chandrika champions religious harmony

■ Former President's think-tank spearheads forum for interfaith dialogue

■ Attempts to bring moderates together; to banish fear of speaking out

■ Recommendations to build religious harmony to be taken to the people

■ SAPRI recommendations to be taken to the Govt.

■ Could remain silent no longer: CBK

By DHARISHA BASTIANS

FILLING a major vacuum of moderate political leadership in the wake of ongoing attacks against religious minorities, former President Chandrika Kumaratunga said yesterday that it was

impossible to remain silent any longer as extremism and intolerance ruled the day.

Spearheading efforts to create religious harmony, President Kumaratunga said she and others around her were truly shocked by the burning of churches and the vandalism of mosques and Muslim places of business over the past year.

"At first I did not want to get involved, but then I realised that most moderates were frightened to talk. There were a lot of Sinhalese Buddhists who were shocked by what was going on, but they did not dare speak because of the atmosphere of intimidation," she told the Daily FT.

The former President said although she was not afraid, it seemed inappropriate for a former Head of State to be speaking out all the time.

"But this was a time when we could not remain silent any longer," Kumaratunga said.

The South Asia Policy and Research Institute (SAPRI), chaired by President Kumaratunga unveiled a set of recommendations to promote religious harmony and alleviate tensions between communities that could lead to conflict, following six months of discussions by the think-tank's Forum for Inter-Faith Dialogue.

"Someone said that as the only living former President and Prime Minister they felt I had a responsibility to do something," President Kumaratunga told the Daily FT.

SAPRI decided to take action and keep it as non-political as possible, she added. "I think we have succeeded in that, that's why I stay in the background and

SAPRI does all the work," the former President, who did not speak before the larger gathering, explained.

The SAPRI recommendations call for the law to be implemented strictly against unlawful activities that impinge on religious communities, a 24-hour hotline for preventive action, creating awareness at school level and the role of the media in promoting religious tolerance.

The Forum for interfaith dialogue is comprised of leaders of the four major religions in Sri Lanka, former senior Government officials, leaders from the private sector, civil society organisations, academia, women and youth, SAPRI Executive Director Ambassador Dhanesh Casie Chetty said, during the launch of the recommenda-

tions.

"We want to take this further, to the people," Kumaratunga said at the conclusion of the launch. "The only discourse they hear at the moment is the extremist discourse," she added.

President Kumaratunga said the recommendations of the interfaith Forum would be put before the Government, despite the obvious difficulties with the prospect.

"When you make a set of recommendations that are serious, you have to talk to the Government, whoever it is, because they have a responsibility to maintain law and order. So we will take it to the Government, whoever will see us. We hope they will listen. But we will take it to the people too," she explained.