

If we don't learn to love, our country will explode - Editorial

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With the spirit of the National New Year, the goodwill and the harmony still in the air and traditional festivities still taking place despite some party political and moral pollution, we have a duty to reflect on the urgent need to restore religious unity in diversity.

Religious tension in recent years has been escalating to dangerous levels and in the aftermath of a devastating 30-year ethnic war, the religious disturbances could pose a grave threat to Sri Lanka's image as a multi-racial and multi-religious country. The crisis is so severe that a new police unit to prevent or defuse religious disturbances began work yesterday.



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The religious police unit, operating from the Buddha Sasana Ministry, will probe complaints on religious issues, including the unauthorised construction of religious places, land grabs to construct places of worship and religious clashes. Senior Deputy Inspector General (SDIG) Anura Senanayaka told the media that complaints against unethical conversions, religion-related disturbances and threats to religious persons would also be probed by the new unit.

He said it would not be necessary for any other organisation to resolve religion-related violence because all complaints would be investigated by the new unit. Assistant Superintendent, Bandula Perera will be the Director of the Unit. In addition to taking legal action against offending parties, there would also be provision to amicably settle matters where the parties concerned would be summoned for discussions, the DIG said.

In such a grave situation the South Asian Policy Research Institute (SAPRI) issued a statement yesterday clarifying its wide-ranging and practical recommendations to re-build religious harmony in Sri Lanka. SAPRI, in which former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga is playing a key role, said it embarked on the mission for religious harmony because it was concerned over the recent incidents of religious intolerance in South Asia and the imminent threat to peaceful co-existence between communities, challenges to economic progress, social cohesion and political stability and also the negative image it would bring to South Asian countries globally.

With this vision in mind, SAPRI formed the Forum for Inter-Faith Dialogue (FIFAD) which includes prelates from the four major Buddhist chapters, leaders of the Hindu, Christian and Islamic faiths, professionals, academics, civil society and youth representatives.

The forum has recommended that the law should be implemented strictly and fully to prevent attacks by a few organised groups on diverse places of religious worship and to stop hate speech, malicious propaganda and the internet reports which are being used to incite people. It has called for the

setting up of committees to report early warning signs to the new religious police unit and to promote early preventive action.

The SAPRI forum has also recommended a review of the existing laws applicable to religious practices and to propose changes where required. With education being an important factor to build religious and ethnic harmony, the forum has recommended that school curricula should teach the importance of religious harmony in a pluralistic society. Students should be taught that while they sincerely practise their own religious beliefs, they must also respect the faith and beliefs of others.

SAPRI has also recommended that some sensitive issues which might cause offence to other religious communities need to be reviewed. These include cattle or other animal slaughter, interreligious marriages, the use of religious symbols and unethical conversions.

Religious leaders, Government and Opposition party leaders and civil society leaders have been called upon to take on the responsibility in their relevant fields to reduce or eliminate tension and promote harmony.

Love and compassion are the core and heart of all religions. If the people of our country do not learn to love and sacrificially serve others with sincerity there is the danger that society will explode.



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