

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2025

“Human Rights: Our Everyday Essentials.”

Statement by the Bishops of the Church of Ceylon

As we commemorate Human Rights Day 2025, we reflect on the devastating impact of Cyclone Ditwah, which has brought loss and destruction to our nation. This tragedy underscores the urgent reality of climate change, threatening our fundamental right to a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. It is evident that this tragedy was not merely a natural disaster, but a collective failure of climate policies and governance of successive governments coupled with corruption at every level of governance.

The theme this year "Human Rights, Our Everyday Essentials" reminds us that human rights are essential, attainable, and integral to our daily lives. Our experience over the past two weeks clearly demonstrated that human rights are not just ideals but that they are inextricably linked to our wellbeing. The right to defend human rights must be guaranteed and the safety of human rights defenders must be assured, especially the environmental defenders who are most at risk.

In addition to the climate crisis and more frequent natural disasters which will in turn further weaken our economy, Sri Lanka continues to face significant human rights challenges. Transitional justice is spoken about but little is actually done; the cries of mothers of the disappeared from the North and South remain unheard. The Malayaha Makkal community who were among the worst hit due to Cyclone Ditwah will be further affected due to the loss of lands and livelihoods. On a daily basis women and the LGBTQI community are discriminated against and subject to violence, harassment and intimidation. Sri Lanka's poverty level remains alarming high at 24.5% in 2024 which will be further affected due to the cyclone. The recent incidents in Trincomalee portray the vulnerability of persons seeking to uphold the law and the power of extremism to disturb peace among our communities.

Furthermore, we are concerned that the institutions set up for accountability remain ineffective in addressing the host of issues before them. The Office on Missing Persons have barely made any progress while the Office of Reparations lacks independence and decision making powers. While we welcome the establishment of a National Women's Commission we are concerned that the Commission is still not fully operational and lacks resources. Draconian laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act and the Online Safety Act remain operational, despite promises by the government to abolish these laws.

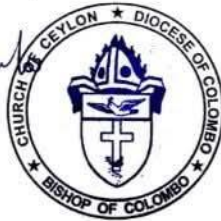
We are disappointed that the Government has not initiated the process for the drafting of a new Constitution. A government in power acting alone cannot draft a Constitution. It has to be a collective effort by the sovereign People involving all stakeholders- the Opposition, civil society and all the communities of the country. The new Constitution is necessary to promote national unity and

reconciliation, accountable governance, abolish the executive presidency with excessive powers concentrated in a single individual, restore an independent public service, reform the electoral system to promote inclusion in our Parliament, and introduce a comprehensive Bill of Rights which will also include economic, social and cultural rights.

As the Church of Ceylon, we reaffirm our commitment to promoting and protecting the rights and freedoms of all Sri Lankans, especially during this critical time. As we rebuild Sri Lanka yet again we must ensure that the country is prepared for the reality of climate change, equipped with early warning systems and strengthened disaster relief management. Therefore, we call upon the Government of Sri Lanka to act swiftly to address policy mismanagement and reinforce governance mechanisms including an efficient and empowered Public Service and robust independent institutions.

Today is an opportune moment to recommit to the fundamental principles of human rights that are connected to our everyday existence and to responsive and accountable governance, by uniting to ensure that these are enshrined and advanced in a new constitution.

+Dushy Rodrigo

The seal is circular with a purple border. Inside the border, the text "CHURCH OF CEYLON" is at the top and "DIOCESE OF COLOMBO" is at the bottom, separated by two small stars. In the center is a shield featuring a cross, a flame, and a book.

The Right Reverend Dushantha Rodrigo
Bishop of Colombo &
Presiding Bishop of the Church of Ceylon

+Nishantha Kurunegala

The seal is circular with a purple border. Inside the border, the text "CHURCH OF CEYLON - DIOCESE OF KURUNAGALA" is at the top and "BISHOP OF KURUNAGALA" is at the bottom, separated by two small stars. In the center is a shield featuring a cross, a flame, and a book.

The Right Reverend Nishantha Fernando
Bishop of Kurunagala