

## Message

### Mr. Ruki Fernando

Recipient of the 1st Niwano Peace Prize Visionary Award

I'm greatly honored to receive the 1<sup>st</sup> Niwano Peace Prize Visionary Award and thank those who nominated me and selected me, from amongst many deserving persons. The Niwano Peace Prize Visionary Award has a particular focus in looking at "religious principles" that inspire and lead to work towards "creation of activities for building peaceful and harmonious societies". Different people are inspired and motivated by different factors in their activism for peace, and mine was rooted in religious principles, more specifically my Christian faith. It is my faith that convinces me that there can be no peace without justice and that human rights, dignity and care for nature and all living beings is integral to real peace.

I became involved in peace activism through the Young Christian Students (YCS) Movement, and I continue to work closely with Christian groups to date. My faith has helped strengthen my respect for other people's faiths, and those who don't belong to any religious groups, with closely with them, and to fight for, and protect their rights. The Holy Bible tells us that God will judge us not by our religious rituals, but on how we treat others in distress. That our "neighbor" is the one who is in distress and needs our help, and that we should love our "neighbor" as much as we love ourselves and God. And importantly, the Bible makes these criteria all encompassing, without any reference to religion, ethnicity, caste or sexuality.

Religious principles are liberative, promote peace, rights and dignity of all persons. But religious institutions, practices and traditions have often been and still are oppressive. My involvement as a Christian student leader and later as a full timer in Asian YCS, being a lay member of the Asia Pacific Chaplaincy team of the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS) and various other Christian groups had also made me reflect on oppressive practices and traditions amongst Christians, historically and even today, and work to challenge them from liberative perspective.

Religious principles must lead to personal and social – political conversion, of both individual and collective conscience & spirit. A conversion from benefitting, justifying and being silent in the face of injustice, to actively defying, resisting, and working to transform unjust situations. A conversion where we refuse to let our spirits be captured or restricted, even if our bodies are captured. Where we would rather let our body die, rather than our soul. This is what many religious and not religious persons in Sri Lanka have done when becoming involved in protests in recent months, and for many years.

#### **Today's challenges in Sri Lanka**

Today is a significant moment for peace, human rights and democracy in Sri Lanka. An unprecedented economic crisis fueled the largest and most widespread people's protest movements that I can recall in Sri Lankan history and led to downfall of an authoritarian, corrupt and racist ruling family, who were popular in the not-too-distant past. But we are struggling to capitalize on this achievement and move forward, towards a society that is more equal and just, democratic and based on rule of law and respects dignity and rights of all persons and communities, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, caste, gender, sexuality etc. So it's a time of uncertainty and time of hope. A time to commit to fiercely advance and protect gains we made amidst most trying times. A time where solidarity is crucial.

Much needs to be done if we are to truly be a democratic society that respects the human rights of all, individually and collectively. Among these are a political solution to the ethnic conflict, truth seeking, accountability reparations for terrible violations abuses that have been committed by successive governments and other parties, co-existence amongst different communities based on mutual respect everyone's rights and dignity, as well as institutional and legal reforms. Economic Justice and Environmental Justice are also crucial challenges we must address. The development of a collective conscience on rights, dignity and the well-being of all persons, communities and our environment would be the key to our future.

## **To Japan**

There have been close relations between governments and peoples of Sri Lanka and Japan for many decades. Japan has offered considerable development assistance to Sri Lanka, and around 2002-2003, Japan supported ceasefire agreement, including through the appointment of a high-profile peace envoy, by hosting peace talks between the government of Sri Lanka and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and hosting an international donor conference.

This award from Japan comes at a time when Sri Lankans are barely able to breath due to massive foreign debts, including from Japan. I appeal to Japanese people to support us in our campaigns for debt cancellation and for the Japanese government to take the lead in convincing other countries to do the same.

The award also makes me reflect more on universality of human rights. The international human rights system is about agreements of governments with one another about their responsibilities to people, what they should and should not do. And about monitoring the implementation of those agreements by mechanisms and persons appointed by the governments themselves, to remind, assist and sometimes persuade governments to abide by their agreements. Last October, Japan abstained from voting at the UN Human Rights Council resolution on Sri Lanka that advances accountability for serious crimes of the past, especially through evidence gathering, in a context there has been very little progress in Sri Lanka to address impunity. Abstaining on international actions at the UN Human Rights Council to advance reconciliation, accountability and human rights has been Japanese's government's position for some years. In the future, I hope Japanese governments can more proactively support struggles of survivors of rights violations, victim's families such as families of disappeared and affected communities for truth, criminal accountability, and reparations, in Sri Lanka, and also internationally, such as at the UN Human Rights Council.

I look forward to dialogue with Japanese people about matters of mutual interest and concern, such as peace, human rights and democracy.

Ruki Fernando

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