



# PRESS STATEMENT

Justice and Peace Workers Asia Pacific Forum



## 9<sup>th</sup> Networking meeting of Asia-Pacific JPWs expresses concern about the human rights situation in Sri Lanka

35 Justice and Peace workers (JPWs) from 16 countries across Asia and the Pacific, including 4 from regional organizations, gathered in Kandy, Sri Lanka from 3-9 September 2013 for the 9<sup>th</sup> networking meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum of Justice and Peace Workers.

Getting together around the theme, *“The Church and Human Rights: Building Solidarity with the ‘Joys and Hopes, the Grief and Anguish’ of Asian Peoples”*, the JPWs spent a significant amount of time to learn about the situation of the peoples in Sri Lanka, four years after the civil war. It was not enough to understand the complexities but **what they saw and heard and reflected on underscores a human rights situation that is urgent and burning.**

Presentations on the human rights situation by Sinhalese and Tamil activists in Colombo and North were validated with face-to-face encounters with families of those tortured and/or disappeared, with the families of those who continue to be arbitrarily detained, with the community who continues to be displaced as the military have taken over their village. Some of the participants had their encounter in Mullativu district, where the last phase of the war was fought, where there is little improvement, little livelihood opportunities and much fear, mourning and grieving for loved ones killed. Healing is more difficult as the killings are not officially acknowledged and no memorials and monuments are allowed by the government. **The encounters give a face to the oft-reported alleged militarization, Sinhalization and the blatant disregard of the government for basic human rights in Sri Lanka, especially in the North.**

The exposure in Mannar, Vavuniya, and Mullativu districts in the North of Sri Lanka served as springboard for the second part of the program, when JPW's asked themselves and each other how they are building and can continue to build solidarity with this kind of situations. They were greatly aided by inputs on Vatican II and the Church and Human Rights by Fr. Sheldon Reid Fernando. **The participants were challenged on how to more concretely commit themselves to human rights work in the Church and to strengthen the role of the Church in situations of injustice and human rights violations such as what is happening in Sri Lanka today.**

At the end of the networking meeting, the participants committed to focus on two major issues as regional priorities: Militarization and Migration & Human Trafficking. They also promised to extend solidarity and support for each other's struggles. For Sri Lanka, they committed to communicate and share their findings and reflections with the Churches and peoples in their countries, promote more media coverage about the situation in Sri Lanka, organize events related to human rights in Sri Lanka, and raise funds for victims, their families and those working to support them.

As a collective action, **the JPWs agreed to send a letter to Cardinal Ranjith, the President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Sri Lanka, to share their experiences and reflections with the bishops after the meeting.**

*The Asia Pacific Forum of Justice and Peace Workers* is a pro-active network of solidarity among women and men working with Catholic justice and peace organizations, and affiliated groups and organizations, meeting periodically to encounter and interact with each other on issues and challenges to justice and peace work in the Asia Pacific region. The 9<sup>th</sup> networking meeting had a co-organizing team led by the Asian Center for the Progress of Peoples (ACPP) as regional convenor and the Human Rights Office – Kandy as local host. ###