

Sri Lankan premier seeks bishops' support in reconciliation mission

COLOMBO: The Sri Lankan government has sought suggestions from Catholic bishops of Asia in its plan to set up a ministry for family affairs.

Such a ministry is necessary to carry forward the government's plans to foster peace and reconciliation in a nation recovering from decades of civil war.

This was announced by Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe while addressing the opening session of the plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in Colombo on November 29.

More than 140 bishops, FABC officials and observers from other regions are attending the November 28-December 4 assembly at Negombo, a Catholic stronghold near the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo. They have chosen the theme "The Asian Catholic Family: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy."

The Sri Lankan premier applauded the bishops for choosing family as the topic for their deliberations.

The outcome of the assembly would chart a clear roadmap for the family in the Asian Church, Wickremesinghe said and added the prelates' recommendations and suggestions would certainly help guide Sri Lanka's proposed Ministry of Family Affairs as it strives to revive and foster age-old traditional, ethnic and religious values in the country.

Wickremesinghe said the government has already conducted several consultations with leaders of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, four major religions in the island nation.

In this direction, Catholic bishops are going to be major stock holders of the government plan, he added.

"We turn to Catholic bishops' for their support and collaboration in our effort to inculcate family values systematically and reciprocally among its citizens cutting across religious lines in a concerted manner, along with heads other religions in the country before we formally start the Ministry of Family Affairs," he said the opening session held in the ballroom of Jetwing Blue hotel.

The prime minister came to the program accompanied by ministers of finance and Christian affairs.

"We wish to incorporate the learning, expertise and experiences of various religious traditions in the country in a harmonious and integrated manner that would serve as a basis to promote peace and reconciliation in the aftermath of civil war," the prime minister said.

Sri Lanka suffered 25 years of violence that has caused enormous damage and has taken toll of loss of millions of precious human life. The conflict ended in May 2009, when government forces

seized the last area controlled by Tamil Tiger rebels (or Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam founded in 1976) to fight for Tamil rights.

Wickremesinghe said the Ministry of Family Affairs is being set up in the backdrop of government's commitment to foster peace and reconciliation among Sinhalese and Tamil minority communities.

He noted that Christianity has contributed immensely in bringing education, healthcare and social development in various parts of the world, including Sri Lanka. Therefore the Asian Church leaders have much to contribute to the reconciliatory process among all people in Sri Lanka, Wickremesinghe reiterated.

“Therefore, the new ministry of family affairs would closely work and collaborate with Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists in order to percolate the family values based on all religions among all in a spirit of co-existence in the country,” he added.

Sri Lanka has 21.2 million people. Nearly 70 percent of them are Buddhists. Christians form just 6. Hindus and Muslims are other minority religions.

Cardinal Telesphore Placidus Toppo, special envoy of Pope Francis to plenary assembly, said the pontiff was “deeply impressed” by the deep religiosity of Sri Lankan people.

“Pope Francis had the joy of visiting Sri Lanka in January 2015 on the occasion of the canonization of St. Joseph Vaz. On this visit the pontiff was able to personally witness the deep religiosity of the people here which deeply impressed him. In his several discussions, the Holy Father learnt of the strongly family ties that bind people here.”

“Although we will be discussing about the Asian Catholic family we are aware that the result of these deliberations will impact the entire society in Asia and not just Catholic families,” Cardinal Toppo said.

Cardinal Toppo, Archbishop of Ranchi, India, urged FABC plenary participants to “inspire families to undertake a mission of mercy” in the light of Pope Francis' year-long celebration of the “Year of Mercy” that ended last Nov 20.

In his address, Cardinal Oswald Gracias, FABC president, spoke on the goals of FABC tracing back its origin and gradual development of vibrant Episcopal conferences in Asia. He also highlighted the importance of discussing the FABC plenary theme in a multicultural context in the largest continent.

In his address Archbishop Pierre Nguyen Van Tot, Apostolic Nuncio to Sri Lanka, said that Catholic families in Asia needs to draw Biblical inspirations to be instruments of God's mercy to all and channels of messengers of Christ in the present world facing manifold challenges and concerns.

Earlier Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, Archbishop of Colombo, welcomed all on behalf of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, the host of the FABC event.

Among others notable guests for the opening function were Sri Lankan Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake, and John Amaratunga, Minister of Religious Affairs and Lands.

The opening program also witnessed the sharing of a Catholic family from Sri Lanka. Shehan Gurusinghe, 47, and his wife Sandhaya ,46, came with their children, five girls and five boys.

The 47-year-old man and 46-year-old wife and 22-year-old eldest daughter Harshini shared how they live their family life on a daily basis with God's blessings. They said they face failures and misunderstandings, but try to lead their Christian faith with unflinching trust in God.

Gurusinghe works as general manager of a consulting firm based in Colombo.

The program included cultural programs and a short film on ancient culture of Sri Lanka and the roots of Christianity in the nation.

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The report was prepared by Santosh Digal of Matters India (www.matterindia.com) for FABC Office of Social Communication.