

## **The Caritas Internationalis Secretary-General's message on 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Caritas Sri Lanka**

By Lesley-Anne Knight

Centuries ago, Arab traders referred to Sri Lanka as *Serendib*. A loose translation is to find something good through chance when you're looking for something else. Although the founding of Caritas Sri Lanka in 1968 by one visionary priest, Fr Joe Fernando, was no accident, the creation today of the vibrant, professional organisation has been through the dedicated response of staff and volunteers to factors often outside its control. Caritas Sri Lanka knew how to rise to extraordinary challenges.

The 26 December 2004 tsunami devastated many coastal communities and left 35,000 Sri Lankans dead. Caritas Sri Lanka responded to this unprecedented disaster with the support of Caritas Internationalis by providing temporary shelter, food, medicine, counselling, and later new homes, livelihoods and fresh opportunities for the survivors. We were looking to save lives, but in the end we've also improved lives by building back better.

Meeting the challenges required the highest levels of professionalism in emergency response, communications, coordination and, now, in disaster preparedness. The Caritas Sri Lanka we have today is more confident and more forward thinking, but retains the compassion that singles it out.

It will need all these strengths as staff respond to the conflict which creates misery among the people. Caritas Sri Lanka has worked across the frontlines. Its experience informed the wider reconciliation efforts of Caritas Internationalis, especially with regard to the Peace Forum that many members attended here in 2006.

It will need those strengths as it responds to unacceptable levels of poverty, made worse by the worldwide food crisis. Our world of such uneven levels of wealth has forced Sri Lankans to look for work outside their country, and they have often suffered as a result. Again, Caritas Sri Lanka has led the way, linking hands for example with Caritas Lebanon to coordinate support to Sri Lankan female workers being abused in the Middle Eastern country.

Severe weather caused by climate change will make the next 40 years more challenging. But it is a test I'm positive Caritas Sri Lanka is prepared for. We offer our prayers for all the staff in their efforts to fulfil the vision of justice of their founder.

**The Caritas Internationalis President's message on 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Caritas Sri Lanka**  
By Oscar Andrés Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga

In choosing the theme “Journey together for a Just Society” for its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Caritas Sri Lanka is speaking from the heart of what Caritas Internationalis stands for. We're on a journey together moving towards justice.

We're on that journey with the poorest and most marginalised, the people we support in changing their lives for the better.

We're on that journey with all Caritas Internationalis members from around the world, joining hands across the globe because we believe we can achieve more by coordinating our efforts and pooling our resources.

We're on that journey as part of the wider Catholic Church, putting our Gospel values into action.

And we're on that journey with people of goodwill from other faiths and from none, across boundaries of politics, caste or nationality, as we seek to create a society based on dignity, equality, solidarity, and stewardship.

Working at the grassroots level, trying to change communities from within, is the most effective way of delivering development and ending conflict.

However, this approach can come at a tragic price. One that is reflected here in a sad, long and growing list of Church workers who have been killed trying to fulfil their mission to build peace. That innocent civilians are being harmed is a tragedy, that the people trying to end the conflict are being killed is a scandal. All sides of the conflict must do everything in their power to protect civilians and aid workers. The most effective way of doing that is to use peaceful negotiations to end their disputes.

I congratulate Caritas Sri Lanka which is today one of the most respected humanitarian and development agencies on the island and is receiving growing international recognition for its work.

Sri Lanka is the jewel of the Indian Ocean and Caritas Sri Lanka is a jewel in our Confederation.