

Appeal to protect the Madhu Shrine from military and political activities

Madhu Shrine has been a sacred place of worship for Catholics, as well as Non-Catholics, all over Sri Lanka, representing all communities. In the last three decades, the Madhu Shrine, in the true Christian tradition had offered refuge to thousands of displaced people irrespective of their religious affiliations and came to be recognized locally and internationally as a “safe haven” for the displaced.

We understand that the Catholic Diocese of Mannar which administers the shrine had always attempted to keep it strictly away from any military or political activities and purely as a place of religious worship and humanitarian refuge for displaced people.

Despite this, in several instances, the Shrine has come under attack, resulting in death of several people, including some incidents few months ago. Almost all people in the Shrine area had fled in fear as Sri Lankan Armed forces intensified operations around the Madhu area. On 31st March 2008, shells had again fallen in the Shrine area, and forced the priests and others who had remained in the church with the sacred statue of Our Lady of Madhu, to hide in bunkers. On 3rd April, priests and others had also fled the Madhu Shrine for safety, taking the sacred statue with them.

Considering the number of attacks on Churches in the North, such as Pesalai, Allaipiddy and as well as the killing and disappearances of priests, where Sri Lankan armed forces are clearly implicated, we fully understand the fact that the statue had been moved deeper into Vanni, away from the battlefronts.

It is our firm conviction that the Our Lady of Madhu does not need liberation or protection from those who bear arms, and who have political interests, such as the LTTE and Sri Lankan armed forces. What Our Lady of Madhu would want is to be left totally alone by the LTTE and Sri Lankan armed forces, to allow it to bring to her fold and care the thousands who seek her protection from war and destruction and to welcome to her home the thousands who come to her in prayer in devotion, from all over the country.

In this regard, we fully support the urgent appeal made by the Bishop of Mannar on 1st April 2008 calling for the protection of the Madhu Shrine from all military and political operations. We also stand in solidarity with people of Mannar, who took part in a peaceful prayer service and silent march in Mannar on 2nd April 2008 towards this cause.

We call on the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to respect the Madhu Shrine as a sacred place of worship and humanitarian refuge, as per internationally recognized humanitarian norms.

Specifically, we call on both parties to:

- keep its cadres away from the Shrine area;
- refrain from using it for military, political and propaganda purposes;
- ensure that the Shrine be solely and completely under the control and administration of the Church; and
- accept the Madhu Shrine area as a Zone of Peace and for the President to formally declare it as such through a special gazette notification.

When and if this call is heeded, Our Lady of Madhu will cease to be a refugee in her own land, and will be again able to offer refuge to those seeking her protection. And people from all parts of the country, can continue to visit her abode, in prayer and devotion, devoid of political and military interests.

We also call on all Catholics and Church leaders, especially those in the south who have taken part in devotions at the Madhu Shrine, Catholic parliamentarians representing all political parties, leaders of other religious faith, the international community, and all people of goodwill, not to accept myths of liberation and other political propaganda by both the government and the LTTE and instead, lend their whole hearted support to the Bishop and people of Mannar in their efforts to preserve Madhu Shrine as a place of worship and humanitarian refuge to future generations.

8th April 2008

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Please send signatures to rukiii@gmail.com or fax to +94-11-2686843 or post to 3, Kynsey Terrace, Colombo 8, SRI LANKA (Attn: Ruki)

(Kindly cc a copy to hotline@acpp.org or fax to 852-27120152 or post to 1/F, 52 Princess Margaret Road, Kowloon, HONG KONG.)