



Interfaith Peacemaker Teams: A Strategy to Counter Religious Extremism in Sri Lanka



Written and published by

OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership
Rev. Dr. Shanta Premawardhana, President

155 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 519
Chicago, Illinois 60601, USA

Phone: +1-312-972-2246
Email: shantap@omnialeadership.org

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‘I am convinced that the creation of open, equitable,
inclusive and pluralist societies, based on the full
respect of human rights and with economic
opportunities for all,
represents the most tangible and meaningful
alternative to violent extremism.’

António Guterres United Nations Secretary-General

Executive Summary

This is a strategy proposal to address the problem of violent religious extremism in the Indian Ocean island nation of Sri Lanka. It provides historical background, contextual analysis and details the solution OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership offers. It will outline why OMNIA, a global leadership training institute specializing in training clergy and lay religious leaders and people of all faiths, is uniquely suited for this task.

OMNIA's uniqueness is its method of contextual leadership. It trains religious leaders and people of faith to deconstruct top-down or "received" traditions and teaches them to build innovative and fresh, bottom-up or "contextual" ways of expressing their faith. It provides them skills for peacemaking and building power. OMNIA leaders will form Interfaith Peacemaker Teams (IPTs) in their communities that are skilled to build deep relationships and powerful coalitions across racial and religious lines that can work together to address injustices in their communities. IPTs are powerful citizen groups skilled in methods of non-violent social change, able to work together to de-escalate violence when it occurs.

In 2018, OMNIA has so far trained almost 150 religious leaders and people of faith from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim traditions. In Kandy, the 35 participants were Sinhalese and Tamil, while in Colombo, the 39 participants were mostly Tamil coming from war-ravaged areas of the North and the East. OMNIA also held a women's training in the predominantly Muslim town of Puttalam where 50 women participated and for another 25 women in Vavuniya, in the North Central province, in close proximity to the war-ravaged areas.

This document is intended for current and prospective donors, partner organizations, policy makers and friends of OMNIA both in Sri Lanka and elsewhere around the world. It is our hope that this will encourage you, the reader, to engage with OMNIA in bringing a peaceful resolution to a nation of kind and generous people devastated by violent religious extremism.

OMNIA Engages Buddhist Violent Extremism

It is hard to believe, but Buddhist violent extremism is real. In Sri Lanka, incited by some Buddhist monks, mobs rampage against those who are "the other;" first it was against ethnic minority Tamils, then Christians, and now Muslims. In the recent past, Sri Lanka has seen sporadic incidents of violence against Muslims in many parts of the island.

In 2017, three separate groups in Sri Lanka invited OMNIA to conduct its leadership training: a group of Christian clergy who gathered to explore the status of contextual learning in Sri Lanka; an interfaith organization, Sarva Dharmata Kendraya (Center for All Religions) based in Kandy; and the People's Upliftment Mission, a network of interfaith organizations operating in the war-ravaged areas of the island. In accordance with its mission to "equip people of faith to counter religious extremism," OMNIA sent a team that included Soraya Deen, Abare Kallah and Shanta Premawardhana.



OMNIA President Shanta Premawardhana and Bishop Emeritus Kumara Illangasinghe (organizer for Sarva Dharmata Kendraya) talk over tea during the break in the OMNIA training.

In February 2018, OMNIA held three training events in Sri Lanka. In Kandy, 35 grassroots religious leaders – Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim – came together for a three-day training. The purpose of the training was to provide these grassroots faith leaders with skills to build power by collaborating across religious differences for effective action. Such skills enable them to build trusting relationship *before* such incidents occur, and to mobilize others to de-escalate violence when they do. In Colombo, 39 grassroots religious leaders primarily from the North and East of the island, where the wounds of the brutal 26-year long war are still fresh, gathered for training. These leaders learned to work across religious divisions to bring relief to internally displaced persons, war-widows, and families of missing persons who still struggle 8 years after the war ended.

Despite on-going violent episodes against Muslims, in the predominantly Muslim town of Puttalam, more than 50 Muslim women gathered for a day-long training event offered by OMNIA leader Soraya Deen. In June, she also conducted a two day-long training event for 25 women leaders in Vavuniya, in the North Central Province.

Mr. Mano Ganesan, M.P. and Cabinet Minister for National Integration, Reconciliation and Official Languages suggested the possibility that OMNIA might train government workers responsible for peaceful coexistence in cities and villages across Sri Lanka. The need for OMNIA's program was echoed by Mr. Prasad Kariyawasam, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, former Sri Lankan Ambassador to the United States.

Recent Violence Against Muslims

Just one week after the training ended in February 2018, incidents of violent ethno-religious extremism erupted in predominantly Muslim villages around the city of Kandy as mobs went on rampage against Muslims. The violence included beating and killing Muslim people, robbing and looting Muslim homes, businesses, mosques and setting fire to many of them. Several primarily Muslim towns and villages were attacked, causing billions of rupees worth of destruction, depriving the livelihood of thousands of families forced into homelessness.

The perpetrators are alleged to be mobs associated with Sinhala-Buddhist extremist



OMNIA Team visited with Minister Mano Ganesan (center). Others L to R: Rev. Sathian Kadirgamar (organizer for People's Upliftment Mission), Shanta Premawardhana, Soraya Deen and Abare Kallah.

organizations. The conflation of the religious-ethnic identity laced with a strong dose of nationalism is the hallmark of extremist Buddhists of Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force). This extremist group led by the monk Ven. Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara, who has built a name for himself instigating extremist terror on minority communities, is alleged to be responsible for this violence.

Villages around Kandy, such as Digana, Teledeniya, Pallekelle, Akurana and Ambatenne were the most affected in this round of violence. However, over the past few years, violent incidents against Muslims have taken place within a wide geographical area. Primarily Muslim towns and villages elsewhere in the island such as Beruwala, Aluthgama, Gintota and Ampara were also attacked.

OMNIA Leaders Respond



Muslim students were among those attending OMNIA training in Kandy, shown here with Rev. Abare Kallah

“As soon as we heard about the escalation of violence, some of us who have been involved in civil society activities in Kandy got ourselves organized,” said Anglican Bishop Emeritus Rt. Rev. Kumara Illangasinghe, OMNIA Institute’s lead organizer in Kandy. Three important steps ensued:

1. A press conference in Kandy featuring religious leaders from Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities. Broadcast over many TV and radio channels and newspapers, the appeal called all communities to be calm, not to be misguided by rumors and misinformation and to refrain from supporting any racial and extremist individuals and groups.
2. A group from the recently-trained OMNIA leaders went to these villages. At first, they distributed small quantities of food and dry rations to affected families. Donors of much larger quantities of provisions, unsure whether the provisions would reach affected families, were hesitant. OMNIA’s leaders helped store the larger stocks for equitable distribution.
3. A civil society consultation in Kandy convened to explore long term action to prevent such incidents. Muslim clergy from Kandy, and some visiting from the Eastern province (where violence also occurred) participated in the discussion. A similar consultation specifically for religious leaders is now being planned. Trust building, particularly since some of the perpetrators of the violence are Buddhist monks, is an urgent need.



Sri Lankan theologian Dr. Wesley Ariarajah, a member of OMNIA’s President’s Council.

OMNIA has a direct relationship to Sri Lanka, not only because Shanta Premawardhana and Soraya Deen grew up there and have significant relationships in the religious and political community, but also because Sri Lanka was one of the foremost laboratories for researching and deepening the theological grounding for contextual learning that is

rooted in interreligious realities. Theological luminaries such as Wesley Ariarajah, Tissa Balasuriya, Lynn de Silva, D.T Niles, Aloysius Pieris among others, were the pioneers of the global discourse on theological method that arises out of Asia's grinding poverty, and its rich religious diversity. OMNIA's motto, "Listening to, Learning from and Living in deep solidarity with those in the Margins," can be eminently fulfilled in the context of Sri Lanka.

Historical Background

Sri Lanka has one of the longest occupations of the colonial movement – 453 years. Under the Portuguese, Dutch and the British, Sri Lanka's ancient culture (with a 2500 year long written history) and Buddhist religion was severely suppressed, its people oppressed and often brutalized, and its natural resources exploited.



Women Soldiers: Liberation Tiaers of Tamil Eelam

The dawn of the independence era (February 4, 1948) saw the rise of nationalistic movements. In 1956 Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike won a landslide victory primarily because he conflated Sinhala nationalism with Buddhist religious fervor. The conflation of ethnic and religious identity played into the deep anxieties of Sinhala Buddhists, whose extremist factions rose up in violence against Tamil communities from time to time since 1958, reaching the climax of its crescendo in July 1983. A Tamil militancy, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which conducted a terrorist war from 1983 until it was militarily defeated in May 2009, was among the world's most brutal terrorist

organizations, being the first among terrorist groups around the world to use women and children as soldiers and as suicide bombers.

Sri Lanka's constitution guarantees religious freedom including the right to propagate one's faith. In the 1980s and 90s, well-organized Christian evangelistic activity particularly through US, European and South Korean evangelical organizations spread a fundamentalist version of Christianity carrying with them the primary attributes of extremism: exclusivity and superiority. Charges of unethical or fraudulent conversions have resulted in anti-Christian violence where churches were burned and pastors killed. In more recent times, in response to the expansion of Saudi-inspired Wahhabism in Sri Lanka, Sinhala-Buddhist extremists have begun to attack Muslim communities as well. Sri Lanka's Hindu community is also not without its own extremist ties. They are influenced by the growing Hindutva movement in India.

The violence is well organized and politically orchestrated. In the past fifteen years an ethno-nationalistic political party, JHU (National Sinhala Heritage) broke with long standing Buddhist tradition by running Buddhist monks for political office. A violent faction of this ultra-nationalist party broke away in 2012 to create BBS (Buddhist Power Force), and today, is led by a virulently violent monk whose disciples instigate much of the violence against minority Christian and Muslim communities.

The International Religious Freedom Report of 2017 issued by the United States Department of State describes a previous incident.

In September a mob led by Buddhist monks from the nationalist Sinhale Jathika Balamuluwa (Sinhalese National Force) attacked a shelter outside of Colombo housing 31 Rohingya refugees from Burma. The monks accused the Rohingya of being members of ISIS and demanded their immediate deportation. The mob outnumbered local police at the scene, who did not make any arrests at the time, reportedly out of fear of inciting violence; however, police facilitated the evacuation of the Rohingya from the site. [...]

On September 27, a second group of Buddhist monks led an impromptu protest at the UN High Commissioner for Refugees office in Colombo objecting to the Rohingya group's presence in the country. The government condemned the demonstration. In September police arrested six suspects in connection with the attack. In October they arrested two Buddhist monks who allegedly led the attack.¹

The government seems powerless to prosecute these miscreants, despite their blatant violent activities, leading to speculation that politicians may abet these activities or at a minimum turn a blind eye, because a certain degree of ethno-religious unrest provides short-term benefits to the politicians.

Contextual Analysis

1. Power imbalance perpetuates violence



Buddhist worshippers at flower altar in the Temple of the Tooth, Kandy

Sri Lanka's population is estimated to be 21 million and has experienced a steady 1.1% growth in the past 3 decades. Its majority ethnic population is Sinhala with about 75% of the population, mostly living in the southern two-thirds of the island. Sri Lankan Tamils, the largest minority group, form 11% of the population with Indian Tamils (who primarily comprise the labor force in the tea estates) making up 4% of the population. Moors (descendants of Arab traders) are 9.3%. Burghers, Malays and other ethnicities together comprise less than 1% of the population.

Most Buddhists are Sinhalese and comprise 70% of the population, while most Hindus are Tamil,

comprising 12.5% of the population. Christians are both Sinhalese and Tamil comprising 7.6% while Muslims who are Moors and Malays comprise 9.6%.

Sri Lanka had universal suffrage since 1931 when the first Ceylon State Council was elected, and since then has had a robust parliamentary democracy. The difficulty is that such massively lop-sided demographics will never yield a majority to the ethnic and religious minorities, which leaves

¹ International Religious Freedom Report for 2017 United States Department of State • Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281278.pdf>, 10

minorities perpetually powerless. For this reason, Tamil politicians since independence have advocated for a federal system of government, which would have given a greater share of power to the



A Dutch Reformed Church in Galle, from 1755, is an ever-present reminder of Sri Lanka's colonial past.

Tamil population, a proposal that was never acceptable to the Sinhalese politicians.

The Sinhalese are in a large majority within Sri Lanka. Yet, they are very aware that it is only in the southern two-thirds of this small island that Sinhala language is spoken and its ancient culture preserved. Sinhala Buddhists also believe that they are custodians of Buddhism, believing that the Buddha himself gave them that privilege.

On the other hand, across a narrow 22 mile stretch of the ocean to the Northwest of the island is Tamil Nadu, the Indian state of almost 50 million ethnic Tamils. In addition, the painful historic memories of the severe oppression of the people and the utter denigration of Buddhism by Christian Europeans remain fresh. The Sinhalese Buddhists therefore feel a deep anxiety, and are burdened with a desire to protect a noble culture and religion. Ironically, in a move completely

contrary to the values of culture and religion they seek to protect, and goaded by none other than extremist monks, rioters among Sinhalese Buddhists vent their misplaced rage in violence and destruction.

2. 26 year-long war ends without peace

In 2009, the government of President Mahinda Rajapaksa engaged in an all-out war against the LTTE, killing its leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, and decimating much of the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island. The offensive very likely resulted in war crimes and human rights abuses that are being litigated even today in forums such as the UN Human Rights Council. What is not in dispute is that it caused a massive number of deaths, landed thousands of people in IDP camps which lasted for many years, created a significant demographic of war-widows, and a long list of missing persons. Yet, even its fiercest critics admit that in the global context of terrorism, this was a rare and convincing win. Military check points were removed, roads to the North and East were repaired and the areas formerly controlled by the LTTE were reopened and began to develop.



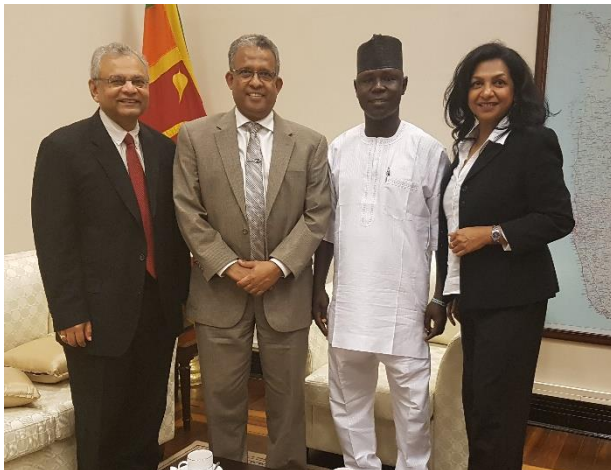
Some in the OMNIA training in Colombo included advocates & organizers for justice for war-widows & missing persons.

Yet, the absence of war does not bring peace, for peace requires justice. Many hoped that the Rajapaksa government will create the political and economic structures that would bring justice for

Tamil people. But Rajapaksa's own racial prejudice and his conviction that feeding Sinhalese chauvinism will help consolidate his own power for the foreseeable future kept him from pursuing justice. This was his own undoing. He was voted out of office in 2015. Sadly, the new government has also proven inept and unable to deliver on the hope for justice and reconciliation.

3. Domestic and international politics affect the situation on the ground

While Muslims and Tamils are the worst affected, these criminal mobs have targeted all other minorities in Sri Lanka. In addition to attacks on mosques, there have been numerous attacks on Christian places of worship, and on Buddhists who spoke out against growing religious intolerance in the country.



The OMNIA team met with the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and former Ambassador of Sri Lanka to the United States, Mr. Prasad Kariyawasam.

Both the coalitional government of President Maithripala Sirisena, and the oppositional forces of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (Common People's Front) led by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, court the Sinhala-Buddhist vote. Some religious leaders believe that opposition forces are behind instigating instability in the country. They see an opportunity in creating chaos so that their leaders, especially Mahinda Rajapaksa and his family can be seen as the saviors of both Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and the nation. They also seek to create instability to demonstrate government ineptitude especially at a time when the UN Human Rights Council was meeting in Geneva and Sri Lanka is high up in their list of priorities.

Since the primary instigators of this violence are the Buddhist monks, the government is wary of being seen acting against them. Inaction or delayed action on the part of the police, both when Muslim leaders have requested enhanced protection when they anticipated violent action, and when violence was actually taking place, are clear signs of government complicity.

In addition, Sri Lanka today is an active playground for super power politics in view of its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lankan governments over the years have depended on backing of both regional and global super powers for their survival. Sri Lanka has been walking a tight rope as it tries to please all parties competing for a piece of the pie. China, for example, has invested heavily in the southern port of Hambantota, a development that includes highways, a seaport, and an airport that are mostly sitting idle at this time.

OMNIA’s Strategy: Building Interfaith Peacemaker Teams

Religious communities and leaders can be effective catalysts of change. OMNIA’s change theory includes building Interfaith Peacemaker Teams with two specific constituencies:

1. Grassroots religious leaders and people of faith in local towns and villages,
2. National civil society and religious leaders to influence public opinion and policy.

Each constituency will engage specific strategies.

- **Building Interfaith Peacemaker Teams with Grassroots Leaders**

OMNIA will equip Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim leaders and people of faith to build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams in their local towns and villages. They will learn to build powerful relationships and coalitions, to de-escalate conflictual situations, and to build cultures of peaceful co-existence. OMNIA will create these teams before the incidents of violence occur and train them to de-escalate the violence when it does take place. Recognizing that women have often had a disproportionately effective role in peacemaking around the world, OMNIA will have a specific focus on training women.



Soraya Deen (center) in discussion with a Buddhist monk, a Tamil Christian (her left) & a Buddhist politician (her right).

- **Leadership Training Goals and Process**

OMNIA’s training has two goals. The first is to shift the leaders’ religious orientation from top-down theologies that validate exclusivity and legitimize extremism to bottom-up learnings that compel them return to the core of their faith: to love their neighbors. The second is to build their skills to build collaborative power. They learn to gain a clear awareness of their own self-interest, learn the self-interest of others through one-on-one interviews, and finding mutuality. They also learn to engage in dialogue with those who are religiously different and to act effectively and powerfully, together.

OMNIA’s training has three stages. Its basic training teaches leaders the alternative paradigm of OMNIA’s contextual method, and skills to build power. It equips them to build Interfaith Peacemaker Teams in their communities for collaborative and effective action. The advanced training is focuses on participants who will give leadership in the IPTs. It also equips them to teach and preach in their congregations, and lead their organizations using the contextual method. The Training of Trainers is for those who are willing and able to become trainers themselves who will form a small but formidable teaching team able to take this training to numerous towns and villages in Sri Lanka.

- **Track Two Diplomacy with Religious and Civil Society Leaders**

Sri Lanka's religious leaders have significant moral authority, a powerful public voice, and the ability to convene and convince large numbers of people. When combined with civic leaders, their influence is significantly amplified. When political leaders seem unable and unwilling to act, religious and civic leaders must step up. Track Two Diplomacy, a method tested in many parts of the world, engages religious and civic leaders who are able to influence public opinion, and thereby, legislative action, is known to produce effective results.²

Next Steps

OMNIA will continue its training program in Kandy and Colombo and will expand to other areas as opportunities open. In the next year, OMNIA will have trained over 250 interfaith leaders and offered advanced training to over 75. It expects these leaders to form Interfaith Peacemaker Teams in local towns and villages.

OMNIA's proposal to Mr. Mano Ganesan, Minister of National Integration, Reconciliation and Official Languages, includes, in addition to training events, the convening of religious and civil society actors to create a Track 2 diplomacy process to address religious extremism and violence. Agencies of the US and other foreign governments and the United Nations, as well as the NGO community can play a supportive role by influencing the government of Sri Lanka to support such a process, and to implement its findings. OMNIA Institute can function as the convener and facilitator of such a process. It will be a long-term process that requires thoughtful and deliberate action.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once observed that the "greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people." OMNIA will engage in Sri Lanka using the above stated strategies. It seeks the participation of all "good people" with these processes to bring about peace.

Please contact OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership to learn about specific ways in which you can participate in such a critical peacemaking venture. Please contact OMNIA Institute for Contextual Leadership to learn about specific ways in which you can participate in such a critical peacemaking venture.

² For a helpful analysis of the multiple tracks of diplomacy used by the Carter Center in Atlanta in the United States, please see: Jeffrey Mapendere, "Track One and a Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks" in Culture of Peace Online Journal, 2(1), 66-81.
https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/TrackOneandaHalfDiplomacy_Mapendere.pdf (accessed June 2018)