



The first Human Rights workshop for Priests and Religious for year 2026 was held from 10 to 13 March 2026 at the Fatima Retreat House in Lewella, Kandy, Sri Lanka organized by the Human Rights Office (HRO) Kandy, under the theme “Walking with the Wounded: Post-Cyclone Challenges and Community Recovery.”

The workshop brought together religious sisters, priests and human rights defenders to reflect on the situation of communities affected

by Cyclone Ditwah and to explore ways of accompanying them in their journey towards recovery, healing and justice. It was designed as a space for learning, reflection and dialogue as the aftermath of the cyclone, many communities continue to struggle with displacement, loss of livelihoods, trauma and inadequate access to support. The workshop therefore aimed to deepen participants’ understanding of these challenges while encouraging them to stand in solidarity with affected communities and explore practical ways of supporting their recovery.

The workshop was attended by 51 participants, representing a wide range of religious congregations and dioceses. Participants included religious sisters from congregations such as the Good Shepherd Sisters, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Apostolic Carmel Sisters, Holy Family Sisters, Salvatorian Sisters, Sisters of the Cross, Dominican Sisters of Malta, Comboni Missionary Sisters, Holy Angels Sisters, Claretian Sisters, Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, as well as members of the Secular Franciscan Order. Priests from several dioceses, including Mannar, Jaffna, Badulla and Kandy, were also present, together with members of the Jesuit congregation, the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament and other clergy. The workshop was further enriched by the presence of the Emeritus Bishop of the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Kurunegala, who participated as a key participant and speaker.





The program commenced on the evening of **10th March** with a formal inauguration led by **Rev. Fr. Nandana Manatunga, Director of HRO Kandy**. Fr. Nandana highlighted the vital role of religious leaders in responding to human suffering and encouraged the participants to reflect on their own ministries in the context of disaster response.



The opening evening also included a **scriptural reflection by Bishop Kumara Illangasinghe**, who invited the participants to reflect on the call of faith communities to walk alongside those who suffer and to respond with **compassion, solidarity and commitment**. The day concluded with an introduction to the **exposure visits** scheduled for the following day, preparing participants to engage directly with communities affected by the cyclone.

A key component of the workshop was the **exposure visits conducted on 11th March 2026**. These visits were designed to help participants understand the **ground realities** of communities affected by Cyclone Ditwah, listen to affected families and observe the challenges faced in the recovery process.

Group 01 : Tawalantenne (Kotmale)

This group visited **Wevandan Estate**, where a landslide on **27 November 2025** displaced **179 people from 63 families** which the disaster destroyed homes, the only access road to the community, a school and a Hindu Kovil, leaving many families struggling to rebuild their lives.

Group 02 : Gampola (Pupuressa)

Participants visited **Beaumont Estate**, where intense rainfall triggered landslides that destroyed houses, infrastructure and tea plantations. The disaster created widespread fear and uncertainty among estate communities living in the mountainous area.

Group 03 : Mahakanda (Sarasavigama)

This group visited **Hadabima Janapadaya**, the site of a massive landslide that resulted in **24 deaths** and the destruction of several houses. Participants listened to the stories of affected families and witnessed the long-term challenges of recovery, particularly regarding **government relief assistance and the National Building Research Organisation (NBRO) reports on land safety**.

Group 04 : Kurusa Handiya (Nillambe)

The fourth group visited the **Kurusa Hadndiya**, in Nillambe area which served as a focal point for community support after a landslide that claimed **11 lives** and destroyed multiple houses and a line room. Participants observed that many members of the community were still experiencing **deep trauma** and **faced delays in receiving government relief allocations and NBRO land safety reports**.





During the visits, participants assisted community members in **filling out Right to Information applications (RTI) and relief assistance forms**. In some groups **trauma counselling sessions** were also conducted, and plans were made to continue such support both rights-based and psychological as an ongoing process. These moving experiences concluded with a debriefing session after returning back to the retreat house and where they shared their observations, reflections and concerns arising from the visits. The day concluded with a Eucharistic celebration.

The **third day of the workshop** consisted of several thematic sessions that explored the **psychological, legal and social dimensions of post-disaster recovery and human rights**.



The session facilitated by **Dr. Yoga Anthony**, on “Drawing Resilience after Trauma Caused by Natural Disaster,” explored the **psychological, social and spiritual trauma** experienced by individuals and communities affected by disasters. The presentation emphasized the importance of recognizing trauma and supporting **healing processes** that enable individuals and communities to regain strength and resilience. Participants were introduced to **healthy coping mechanisms, emotional regulation and ways of supporting people experiencing grief and loss**.



This was followed by a legal briefing from **Mr. Madawa Eriyagama**, the Legal Officer of the Human Rights Office - Kandy, who explained **legal dimensions of disaster response and the mechanisms available for communities to claim their rights**. The presentation highlighted the scale of the cyclone’s impact and explained key government relief measures outlined in Government Budget Circular No. 08/2025. The session encouraged participants to assist communities in accessing these entitlements and to advocate for justice when support mechanisms fail.



Another session on “Post-Cyclone Challenges in Walking with the Wounded and Recovery: Learning from the Ground - Practical Experiences and Realities in Disaster Response” was facilitated by the Human Rights Activist **Mr. Ruki Fernando**. This highlighted that **human rights can sometimes be restricted during disasters**, particularly affecting vulnerable communities such as the **Malaiyaha community**. It emphasized that even during emergencies, affected individuals remain **“rights holders,”** and that relief and recovery efforts must respect **human dignity, transparency and accountability**.

Following this session, participants were given the opportunity to **share their experiences of working with communities affected by the cyclone**.

Moving toward the issues of the North a session on “Development vs Survival: Protecting the Future of Mannar,” facilitated by **Rev. Fr. Jeyabalan Croos**, explored the tensions between **large-scale development projects and the survival of local communities**, particularly in **Mannar Island**. Participants reflected on the importance of ensuring that development initiatives respect the **environment, livelihoods and dignity of local populations**. Participants also shared the concerns and challenges faced by communities in the **Northern region**.



The final session analyzed the **Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)** and the proposed **Protection of State from Terrorism Act (PSTA)**. This session was facilitated by **Mr. Suren D. Perera (AAL)** and **Mr. Ruki Fernando**. The discussion examined how such special laws may **expand executive powers while limiting judicial oversight**, potentially leading to **violations of civil liberties and human rights**.



Rt. Rev. Dr. Valence Mendis, Bishop of Kandy, addressed the gathering and highlighted major concerns facing Sri Lanka and the Catholic Church, particularly focusing on the challenges faced by **tea plantation workers**. The Bishop further explained the actions and discussions held with national authorities, including the **President of Sri Lanka**, regarding several pressing issues.



The **Human Rights Workshop for Religious and Priests** provided a meaningful space for **reflection, learning and solidarity**. By combining **exposure visits, theological reflection and discussions on human rights and policy issues**, the workshop enabled participants to deepen their understanding of the challenges faced by communities affected by disasters.

More importantly, the workshop reaffirmed the commitment of religious leaders as **human rights advocates** to walk alongside the wounded, supporting communities in their struggle for **healing, dignity, justice and sustainable recovery**. The experience also strengthened the network of individuals and organizations dedicated to promoting human rights and accompanying vulnerable communities in Sri Lanka.

The participants agreed to **meet again in July 2026** to continue their collaboration and commitment to this mission.



