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The Friday Forum is an informal and self-financed group dedicated to democracy, good governance, human rights and the rule of law. It has for over five years sought to alert the public on issues concerning the rights of the citizen. We work on a non-partisan basis and have been critical of both the Government and Opposition.

25th April 2019

Media Release

Easter Sunday's Suffering: Seeking and Finding Answers

The Friday Forum expresses solidarity with everyone who has condemned the brutal attacks on churches where people had gathered for worship on Easter Sunday, and on three hotels serving Easter Sunday breakfast that day. We stand together with our fellow citizens and offer our condolences to families, friends and visitors to our country for the loss of lives and injuries suffered in this cruel violence. We also express our condolences to the families of the police officers who lost their lives in responding courageously and immediately to this situation.

The churches destroyed were Catholic/Christian places of worship which were also venerated by people of different faiths. Their desecration and destruction are a loss to our country. The collective concern and response of government and the people at this time to the violence demonstrate that they share the grief of the Catholic/Christian community. The Friday Forum recognizes with admiration all those members of the Police and armed forces, professionals, support staff, and members of the public, who responded courageously and swiftly in preventing further violence and suffering. We appreciate all the religious and community leaders, including those from the Muslim community, who have publicly rejected extremism and called for interfaith solidarity. This response exemplifies the admirable capacity of our people, despite the fact that we come from diverse communities, to come together in a time of national crisis.

Nevertheless we owe it to all those who suffered this violence to ask the hard questions regarding the appalling lapses in national security that failed to prevent this carnage. Yet again it seems that our political leadership and senior public officials have failed the nation. We must hold them accountable and demand explanations if situations like these are to be prevented. Commissions of Inquiry have become an easy strategy to avoid effective responses.

The President, the Prime Minister, the Secretary of Defence and the Inspector General of Police must explain to the nation why the State intelligence agencies did not pass on the specific and detailed prior warnings and information on the impending violence so as to take preventive action. Why did the senior officers not bring this critically important information to the attention of the President (Commander in Chief and Minister of Defence), the Prime Minister of the country, and the National Security Council (NSC)? Why did the Prime Minister not attend the meetings of the NSC for several months? And why did the members of the NSC ignore the summons of the Prime Minister to a meeting even in this crisis? Why did the President leave the country without appointing an Acting Minister of Defence or communicating with the Prime Minister on vital issues of national security at this time? Why did public officials not share this important information of a possible terrorist attack with religious leaders and the public so that they could have taken measures to protect themselves? Public confidence in both these leaders of government and these officials has been seriously undermined by the events of Easter

Sunday. The arrogant response of the Secretary of Defence in the media in trivializing critical issues of national security must be condemned.

We cannot assume that there will be no repetition of these terrorist attacks. The President and government have the power, the duty and the responsibility to co-operate with each other, identify perpetrators and introduce a strong, effective system of national security. They must do so while respecting the core values of democratic governance and fundamental rights in our constitution.

We ourselves must resolve that this experience should not justify harassment of any community, or erosion of peoples' rights on grounds of national security. We must, for the peace and stability of our country, reject ethnic and religious extremism in all our diverse communities.

We must also understand the lessons of history, especially Hitler's rise to power, and reject absolutely the idea that the need of the hour is a strong, authoritarian and dictatorial leader. Leaders of the former government are arguing that they handed over to the new government a secure and peaceful country so that there would be no threats to national security. They must be reminded that they created the nightmare of disappearances, abductions and killings that left people in fear of their personal security. No political party should be permitted to exploit this horrific experience to promote a divisive and authoritarian political agenda. Our nation's commitment to parliamentary democracy must be strengthened and not undermined, recognizing that some important and positive changes have been made in the last few years.

This is also an occasion to reflect on the political environment of our times. Have we not experienced yet again the entrenched weaknesses of the Presidential system of government? We have created two centres of power, the President and the Prime Minister, that function without accountability to each other or the people. We have now seen how this system creates a grave threat to public security and can contribute to this kind of carnage and loss of lives and property, and the devastating impact on livelihoods and the economy. Is it not time for us to demand the dismantling of the Presidential system of governance that practically every political party has promised for decades?

We can already see how the Presidential ambitions of those who seek this office can cripple governance. The Presidential system, has always encouraged personal ambition rather than commitments to the wellbeing of the nation. What hope is there for a country that is trapped in the personal ambitions of its leader? Should we not in solidarity call with one voice for widespread support for a constitutional amendment to abolish the Presidency before the next election?

Prof. Savitri Goonesekere

Bishop Duleep de Chickera

On behalf of the Friday Forum:

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