

CHDM URGES GOVERNMENT OF SRI LANKA TO REVIEW PROPOSED MONUMENT AND CONSIDER A MORE PARTICIPATORY, DECENTRALISED APPROACH

June 20th, 2023, Colombo, Sri Lanka:

On May 22, 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers approved a proposal put forward by President Ranil Wickremesinghe to “build a monument as a symbol of harmony and reconciliation...to commemorate all the people...civilians...armed forces or police...ex-combatants...who died as a result of armed conflicts, political unrest or civil disturbances in Sri Lanka” (Cabinet Decisions, 22/05/23). The Collective for Historical Dialogue & Memory (CHDM) welcomes the Government’s move to commemorate those affected by multiple conflicts, whilst noting with concern the form and representation of the proposed monument.

The announcement marks an important step in terms of the official acknowledgement by the state of the impact of violence on all its citizens. This move on the part of the state could signal greater space for memorialisation, especially in a country where there has been a demolition of monuments to the victims of multiple conflicts and of internecine violence, and the continued intimidation as well as harassment of those attempting to commemorate their loved ones.

Despite monuments existing to acknowledge and remind, traditional forms of monumentalisation tend to be products of hierarchical decision-making, unrepresentative processes, and are often static in their interaction with the public. CHDM recommends that the current proposal be reviewed—both in terms of the process and the proposed model. Furthermore, CHDM suggests that there needs to be a process of learning from past efforts by the state at memorialisation and from efforts elsewhere to problematise different forms of memorialisation.

CHDM stresses the need for a more participatory process that would also incorporate prior suggestions on memorialisation. The latter could be supported, in part, by the establishment of a committee, comprising civil society representatives and experts on the subject, that can review previous recommendations and advise the Government on issues of approach, form and representation. For example, the Final Report of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms (CTF), which collated public views on reconciliation, outlined a wide array of perspectives on the issue, including “the need for memorialization to be a process including citizens at all stages” and that monuments “...needed to be sensitively designed respecting the multiple narratives of grief, be non-partisan, not be considered the only symbols of memory or risk the re-victimisation of certain groups.”

As noted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, “The voices of victims of human rights violations must play a key role in the construction of memory” (July 2020). As such, any process of designing a monument needs to

actively incorporate affected persons, which would better ensure public legitimacy and a sense of ownership of the monument/s.

Besides a monolithic stand-alone structure, members of the public have made a range of suggestions on different types of spaces for memorialisation, such as community libraries, museums, archives and “living memorial spaces” like parks. In addition, there have been calls for a more decentralized approach to memorialisation. Therefore, rather than a singular monument located in Colombo, CHDM strongly affirms that it would be far more meaningful to consider a multiplicity of monuments, located in different parts of the country and where communities can play an active role both in design and in sustaining them.

CHDM further calls on the Government of Sri Lanka to:

1. Recognize and protect existing monuments related to different conflicts in the country;
2. Apologise to affected individuals and communities who have, in the past, been prevented from memorializing their loved ones and who have suffered further harms as a result of reprisals;
3. Acknowledge that it has a duty to protect the rights of its citizens to remember and mourn their loved ones in both public and private spaces.

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