

ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERT WARNS OF A LARGER NATURAL DISASTER



The Institute of National Security Studies Sri Lanka (INSSSL) hosted a Public Lecture titled *Human Security in a Changing Climate: Addressing its Impact in Sri Lanka and South Asia* on 14th June 2017 at Suhurupaya, Battaramulla. Senior officers of the tri forces, members of the private sector, environmentalists, journalists and students were present at the occasion. The speaker, Ms. Anoka Abeyrathne is an eco-social entrepreneur and youth advocate, passionate about sustainable development. She serves as the Asia-Pacific representative to United Nations Habitat YAB and the Policy and Advocacy representative of the Commonwealth Youth Climate Change Network. Featured in the Forbes 30 under 30 Asia list 2017, she is the youngest female recipient of the Commonwealth Youth Award for Excellence in Development.

Ms. Abeyrathne's lecture focused on the causes of climate change, its impacts globally and ways of mitigating these effects. Climate change resulting in disasters which then have social and economic implications that could lead to conflict was also a facet that was explored from a human security angle. She explained the phenomenon of global warming, melting glaciers and rise in sea levels. In this context, man-made issues like sand mining, destruction of forest cover and mangroves along the coast makes a bad situation even worse. Ms. Abeyrathne presented findings and dismal projections of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change with an observation that these projections could be far worse than expected.

Speaking of the recent catastrophe in the country where heavy rains resulting in flooding and landslides claimed the lives of more than 200 persons and displaced many others, she pointed out that floods are not unique to Sri Lanka but is a regional phenomena. Here, she drew a parallel with the case of Bangladesh which also faces frequent droughts and floods, stating that groups most vulnerable are the impoverished, whose homes and livelihoods are affected by these disasters. In addition, the reality is that such countries do not have sufficient funding for disaster mitigation. She also noted that as a result of climate change, Sri Lanka has experienced severe weather conditions two years in a row and predicted that this phenomenon could be repeated each year during the monsoons, the effects slowly worsening.

Ms. Abeyrathne elucidated the concept of climate change as a human security issue with facets such as climate migration, food security, the balance between human habitat and wildlife and health risks associated with it. As she highlighted, "**climate affects every single facet across a human's life and society.**" Climate change and disasters, as she points out, could also jeopardise social and political stability. It not only erodes assets but impacts communities. The rise of climate induced migration leads to economic instability and conflict, which in turn is a concern for national security. The violation of maritime borders and maritime laws as a result of the impact of the climate on sensitive marine ecosystems is also a cause for concern.

Ms. Abeyrathne raised concerns of Sri Lanka's commitment towards reducing the effects of climate change and mitigating disaster. She explicitly pointed out that there is no proper climate resilience plan in the country and minimum investment made on better adaptation mechanisms, which is of paramount importance. **Therefore, she suggested that with the involvement of all ministries concerned, there is a need to design a greater plan to address all facets of climate change and disasters.** Sri Lanka has a dearth of research on climate induced migration which leads to new challenges to the state. Ms. Abeyrathne stressed the importance of building a society that is more resilient by way of community driven solutions. **"A key aspect of climate risk management is making choices under conditions of uncertainty"** she said.

In the stimulating discussion that followed, several questions and suggestions were raised. The lack of awareness and networking between relevant authorities was a cause for concern with the need for a cohesive work plan among ministries. A recommendation to document the work universities have done in this regard, convening of academics and key stakeholders to deliberate and share knowledge and experience, thereby documenting the outcome of such discussions was suggested as a starting point which could be translated into further action plans.

As this is a sector that requires a large amount of funding, there was a question as to who would be responsible for initiating such action. INSSSL, as the premier national security think tank was commended for creating a platform for discussions which would in turn be translated into recommendations for policy makers. It was suggested that the institute could also investigate the impact of climate change on reconciliation efforts, which was pointed out as an important issue concerning the country today. Climate change and disasters being a timely topic, INSS has once again taken the initiative in creating a forum for discussion and sharing of information on this very important subject and aims to provide recommendations and a foresight map to policy makers with the hope of mitigating and adapting to climate change and natural disasters in the future.