

RYS in Sri Lanka holds service project from Uhana, Wijayapura in Ampara

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Ampara, Sri Lanka -- The Religious Youth Service (RYS) in Sri Lanka held its annual service project from August 12 to 19, 2016 in Uhana, Wijayapura township in the Ampara district in Eastern province. Fifty-six people from ten different nations and various faith traditions participated in the week-long program, whose theme was “Youth for Eradicating Poverty and Achieving Sustainable Development.”

RYS, a project of UPF, has organized service projects in Sri Lanka since 1991. For the past 17 years, it has held regional projects in the island nation every year. Since the close of a long chapter of violence in Sri Lanka -- the 25-year Sri Lankan Civil War, RYS has taken steps to strengthen the peace process and unify youth in the country, beyond region, religion and language.

From Around the World to a Remote Village

Ampara is located 329 kilometers (204 miles) from Colombo, Sri Lanka’s capital. Wijayapura is a small village located about 20 kilometers (12 miles) from Ampara. Almost all the people who live in this area work in agriculture. This year’s project was the building of a community center located in the village.

Day 1: Traveling Through the Hinterlands

On the afternoon of August 12, the participants and staff left Colombo to Ampara. During the trip, they encountered heavy traffic, which slowed down the journey, and the luxury bus they rode in broke down. Around 5 a.m. the next day they reached the hostel where they were going to stay for the length of the project.

Day 2: Orientation & Opening Ceremony

On the first full day of the project, the participants attended an orientation session, which was led by RYS-Sri Lanka’s national director, Dr. Chula Senaratne and secretary general, Ms. Dinesha Liyanasuriya. The ground rules for the project were read and explained by Dr. Ravi Galhena, a pioneer member of RYS-Sri Lanka and its vice president. Dr. Robert Kittel, education director of UPF-Asia, spoke about the theme of this year’s project, which is related to the theme of this year’s International Youth Day, “The Road to 2030: Eradicating Poverty and Achieving Sustainable Consumption and Production,” which was celebrated on August 12.

The opening ceremony took place in the evening at an apparel factory owned by the Minister for Primary Industry of Sri Lanka, Hon. Daya Gamage, and his wife, Deputy Minister for Petroleum Resources and Development, Hon. Dr. Anoma Gamage, who were the chief guests of the event. The program commenced with prayers and blessings, which were given by representatives of various faith traditions. The emcee, Ms. Dilini Sandeepika of RYS, welcomed everyone. Opening remarks were given by Dr. Senaratne, who shared the experiences and outcomes of previous RYS projects and explained the objectives of the current project. The keynote address was given by Dr. Kittel, who introduced UPF. Dance and music was performed by children from the local village, including two young girls, who danced to the rhythms of Indian songs. Mr. Gamage then gave a special message in which he expressed his appreciation to UPF and RYS for their efforts in Sri Lanka. He also spoke about his humble beginnings; his life story inspired and moved many of the youth and staff to tears.

Ms. Liyanasuriya read UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s message for this year’s International Youth Day.

The ceremony concluded with a young participant from the village thanking UPF and RYS for coming

this far to help Wijayapura village, which has had a great need for a community center. Afterwards, everyone enjoyed a delicious dinner.

Day 3: Educating Future Leaders

The third day started in the morning with a Buddhist prayer and meditation, which was followed by a time for stretching and exercising, which everyone did in the large garden outside the premises. After breakfast, Dr. Kittel led the education program on leadership and life development, and spoke about the importance of living for the sake of others. In between his lectures, the participants took part in ice breakers and energizers.

Dr. Kittel has been an inspiring presence in many RYS projects in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, and his vast and varied experience as a leadership trainer was evident in all his interactions with the participants.

In the evening, Dr. Edgar Tanate, director of education of UPF-Southeast Asia, conducted the special program, "The Legacy of Peace." Leaders who led their lives for the sake of others who have passed away, including Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon, were remembered, and the participants were encouraged to follow their legacies of peace.

Muslim participants led the Islamic cultural evening, sharing information about the Muslim religion and culture.



Day 4: Whole-Hearted Hard Work

The fourth day began with a morning prayer and meditation. Every morning during the service project, participants belonging to different faiths led the prayer. After breakfast, all the volunteers went to the project site where they were assigned to different groups and were given details on the work that was to be done. The volunteers dug soil and placed it around the foundation of the community center and lay concrete mix on the walls, and became fully immersed in what they were doing. Later in the day, a group of villagers visited the project site and brought with them tea, which everyone enjoyed with some local snacks.

After a long morning with temperatures rising up to 42 degrees Celsius (or 107 degrees Fahrenheit), the staff decided to take all the volunteers to a lake to swim. In the afternoon, Dr. Tanate led an educational session, which continued to the next day.

Day 5: Visiting Religious Sites

After attending the session with Dr. Tanate, the participants visited four places of worship. The first was a historical Buddhist temple called "Buddangala." There, a young monk shared how he left his busy life in the city and entered a monastic life. Afterwards, the participants visited a Christian church, a Hindu temple and a Muslim mosque.

Day 6: Working Together for Others

On the second day at the project site, the volunteers worked from the morning until the evening to lay the roof on as well as concrete mix to create a floor in the community center.

Afterwards, the staff invited the villagers for an interfaith prayer and a group photo, and the secretary general of RYS-Sri Lanka thanked the villagers for their warm hospitality. A lady then thanked the service project staff and RYS, on behalf of the local community, for their commitment to build the much needed community center.

The day concluded with an interesting and a colorful cultural show that was presented by the Buddhist participants.



Day 7: Field Trip

After breakfast, the participants went on a field trip. The first place they visited was a Buddhist temple where Mr. Gamage had organized a marriage blessing ceremony. Afterwards, they visited another Buddhist temple, whose head priest had given the blessings at the opening ceremony of the project and had invited all the volunteers to visit the temple and have a cup of tea. Everyone appreciated the monk's kindness.

The participants then took a long ride towards one of the most beautiful beaches in the world, located along the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. The beach, with its golden sand and vast area to see the horizon, was amazing. After having lunch, everyone swam in the warm waters of the ocean. The team returned to the training center for dinner, which was followed by sharing, singing and dancing around the campfire.

Day 8: Closing Ceremony

On the final day, Ms. Liyanasuriya facilitated a session in which all the participants reviewed and reflected on their experiences. The closing ceremony was very moving, and included the distribution of certificates and souvenirs to all the volunteers.

Many of the participants said they felt the service project was a transformational experience and were touched to know that their work would benefit the lives of many less privileged people living in Ampara. They also expressed their gratitude to UPF and RYS for providing them with a chance to learn, develop their leadership qualities and work together for the greater good of society -- and departed the project with a strong desire to practice what they had learned in their own societies and to meet again for RYS's 2017 service project in Sri Lanka.