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PRESS RELEASE:

APPEAL TO PROTECT THE SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF MADHU FROM ALL MILITARY PRESENCE AND OPERATIONS,

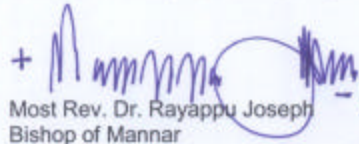
The Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu is a much respected and venerated shrine to Catholics all over Sri Lanka. For more than 400 years, Catholics and as well as non Catholics have gathered around Our Lady of Madhu as a unique Shrine that has served the spiritual needs of Sri Lankans from different walks of life, different ethnicities, different religions and different areas of the country. For more than two decades, in the midst of the conflict and mass displacement, Madhu Shrine also served as a place of refuge for all affected people. Madhu Shrine has been recognized locally and internationally as a "safe haven" and "place of refuge" for people fleeing in the face of war and destruction.

The Church administration has always maintained the Shrine and the area around purely as a place of religious worship and a place of refuge for displaced people. It was strictly kept out of bounds for any type of military or political activity. In the last few weeks, we have been extremely concerned that this sacred Shrine and its functions as a centre of spiritual and humanitarian service has come under severe threat due to the escalation of the ongoing military conflict. Shells are falling within the Church premises several times and many of those staying there have been compelled to leave, while priests and the other church workers who are still remaining, live in fear and are being forced to seek shelter in bunkers.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of Sri Lanka, the Bishop and the priests of Diocese of Mannar have been appealing to the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Army to refrain from using the area gazetted as the "Madhu Church Reservation under the "Pilgrimage Ordinance" in 1982 for military and political purposes and to respect its sacred and humanitarian nature. Appeals have been made to the President of Sri Lanka to declare the Madhu Shrine as a "Zone of Peace" through a special gazette notification, in order to ensure that the Shrine can continue to serve as a religious and humanitarian space.

Today, as military operations are taking place very close to the Shrine, we are compelled to make an urgent appeal to both the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to respect the Madhu Shrine and the area mentioned above as a Zone of Peace, keep away from the Shrine area and to ensure that the area remains completely and solely under the administration of the Church. At this crucially difficult juncture, we appeal to all Catholics, all Sri Lankans, particularly those who have a deep sense of belonging and devotion to Our Lady of Madhu, as well as all religious leaders and the international community to join in our efforts to safeguard the sacred and humanitarian character of this very special place of worship.

For this intention, we will hold a special prayer service in Mannar, tomorrow, 2nd April 2008, starting from 9.30am at the St. Sebastian's Cathedral. We invite all our Catholic and people of goodwill to join in our cry addressed to both the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to completely desist from using the Madhu Shrine for their military and political purposes. We also invite all faithful and devotees to commit themselves to fast and pray on Fridays and pray the rosary every Saturday for this purpose and for peace in our dear land. May our Lady of Madhu, the dear Mother of the people of this land, bless our country, with peace through politically negotiated settlement.

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