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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

April 2017

Learning From Colombia's TJ Experience

NPC's Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera visited Colombia to attend a peace building programme with a group of peace workers from different parts of the world, with an emphasis on South America.

The workshop on Memory, Truth and Justice – Dealing with the Burden of the Past. Learning in the light of the Colombian Experiences was organized by the Comisión de Conciliación Nacional (National Reconciliation Commission) CCN on behalf of the Colombian Catholic Bishops' Conference, the German Commission for Justice and Peace and the Association for Development Cooperation (AGEH).

Colombia is one of the countries at the cutting edge of transitional justice. Its government reached a peace agreement last year with FARC, a long standing guerilla organization that has a history of engaging in armed struggle that goes back over half a century and resulted in the loss of over 200,000 lives. Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize as a result.

Today, as part of its commitment to the negotiated peace process it has entered into with the Colombian government, FARC has yielded large tracts of territory it once controlled as it demobilizes its armed forces on the ground. Colombia might seem to be in an ideal situation but in reality the situation is much more complex.

The programme for the international peace workers in Colombia was organized as an interactive learning process, where the learning was not only in the conference hall but also out in the field. During a visit to a high security prison in Bogota the international visitors were informed by the FARC prisoners that they wanted international monitors. They were sceptical that the government would implement the peace agreement on its own. This has its parallel in Sri Lanka, where the Tamil minority is supportive of international intervention and tribunals. Those on the weaker side of the divide in internal conflicts do not trust the stronger side to be fair and impartial.

In both Colombia and Sri Lanka, the majority of the population, and those in the political establishments, see the military as having performed their duties in the national interest. In both cases those on the losing side represent a minority of the population. Those on the winning side represent the majority. Those majorities who dominate the power structures in the two countries side with the military and not the rebel forces. This accounts for the governmental malfunction in both countries to implement the agreements they have signed. There is a role for the international community as a counter balance to the asymmetry of power that cannot be overcome through reliance on internal actors alone.

Training for a Difference

April
2017

Under the Initiating Multi-level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT) project, a new District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) was established and several meetings and seminars were held to discuss issues of importance.

A new DIRC was established in Moneragala with 39 members attending, including 14 religious leaders representing the four main religions.



Project Manager Saman Seneviratne introduced the project and told participants about the role of civil society in the current political situation while Assistant Project Manager Rasika Seneviratne explained the monitoring and evaluation process.

A workshop on Democracy and Good Governance and Transitional Justice was organized for Matara DIRC members. Thirty Five DIRC members attended the training. The participants included religious leaders representing Buddhism, Christianity and Islam as well as government officials, journalists, youth and CBO leaders.

An awareness seminar on the proposed constitution was held in Kurunegala. Two lawyers, Sudarshana Gunewardena and Hemamali Fernando from Rights Now, addressed 70 DIRC members and civil society activists.

Many issues were discussed including the unitary state versus Federalism and it was evident that there was a lot of misunderstanding and criticism about the process of constitutional reform. DIRC members were motivated to educate civilians about the need for a new constitution.

Participants said awareness about the issues was important at the rural level and that the new constitution should give priority to economic rights. Most of them wanted to have a new constitution but also wanted to know what it would include. They said a draft should be provided as soon as possible.

Polonnaruwa DIRC held its monthly meeting. Thirty one DIRC members attended the meeting including religious leaders. A special guest was Gamlath Wijeratne, Coordinator to President Maithripala Sirisena.

“The government has been implementing different types of programmes to building national reconciliation. We appreciate what Polonnaruwa DIRC is doing and we will bring it to the attention of the president. We are also prepared to give our support to you in your future activities,” Mr Wijeratne said.

Conflict Mitigation in the East

April
2017

DIRC members in Trincomalee and Batticaloa, districts where all three communities live side by side, discussed several issues that were disturbing harmony in their districts and came up with plans to deal with them under the Promoting Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue project.



In Batticaloa, a dispute arose about the burial of non Roman Catholics in a graveyard in Vaharai. The graveyard had been used by all Christians but after some Roman Catholics and Hindus converted to Christianity, they were not allowed to be buried in the cemetery. Therefore dead bodies had to be carried to a burial ground several kilometres away. DIRC Batticaloa wanted to resolve the problem before it led to violence and appointed a group to meet the Vaharai District Secretary, who agreed to have a meeting with the relevant people. It was decided that government land would be provided as a cemetery for non Roman Catholic Christians and a team was appointed to look for the land. DIRC members said the Non-Violent Communication and mediation skills they had learnt during the training programmes helped them during the negotiations.

Most people do not understand the cultural practices and religious rituals of other people's religions, leading to misunderstandings despite the fact that there are many similarities among religions. The DIRC decided to hold an Ifthar ceremony in June with all community and religious leaders, who will talk about commonalities between religions.

A Vesak function will also be held with the participation of all religions in Batticaloa town to bring the communities together. DIRC members will wear their traditional clothes to show the public that people of different religions were involved in organising the event. DIRC members will speak about the DIRC and its activities.

Members of the Trincomalee DIRC felt that young people did not respect other religions because they did not understand them. They had to be taught to respect other religions and pass the message to their peers and communities. The DIRC will hold a symposium among schools in Trincomalee. Four Hindu, Islam, Buddhist and Christian will be selected and ten students will be nominated to collect information on religious teachings from a religion other than their own. At the symposium, the students will present their findings and a document will be published.

Since local media, which plays a key role in maintaining or destroying religious and ethnic harmony in the district, did not know about the DIRC and its activities, it was decided to organise an event inviting local and national media people. Religious leaders will be invited to share the stories of ethnic and religious harmony. The journalists will be able to learn about religious practices such as why Muslim women cover their faces and why Hindus wear pottus.

Coping with Religious Sensitivities

A dispute between Buddhists and Muslims because of a Buddha statue in front of a meat shop belonging to Muslims was discussed at DIRC Badulla's monthly meeting under NPC's project Initiating Multi-level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT).



The building is owned by the Walimada Pradeshiya Sabha, who also built the statue.

A Moulavi who raised the issue pointed out that it was difficult to remove the statue because some extremist groups were involved. He suggested that the Pradeshiya Saba shifted the meat shop to a different building, since the shop owner was willing to leave. "Then we can resolve this problem before it turns into a conflict," he said.

NCP Project Manager Saman Seneviratne spoke to DIRC members on social networking and advocacy. Participants shared their views and experiences.

Pluralism Training For NE DIRC

Forty nine members of the Nuwara Eliya DIRC, including seven Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders, attended a training session on pluralism conducted by NPC.

The participants were told about the elements of pluralism, as it was an effective way to reconcile a society of diverse backgrounds by promoting understanding and respect.

The day started with a discussion about the progress of the project for the past two years. Photographs of the DIRC's achievements were displayed. Members were happy about the success they had achieved.

"I learned about the values of pluralism. It is an interesting concept but it will be very difficult to practice. As DIRC members, we should work to promote pluralism in our society. We need to thank NPC for organizing this training for us."

A participant

"It is very good to achieve our goal of contributing to building peace. It was a difficult task and sometimes it was controversial to talk about peace building. Sometimes we were harassed by extremists. Now we should do more advocacy in collaboration with similar organizations to promote peace and coexistence," a DIRC member said.

Our Vision: A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.

Our Mission: To work in partnership with different target groups with an aim to educate, mobilize and advocate the building of a rights conscious society of people that work towards a political solution to the ethnic conflict, reconciliation and equal opportunities for all.

Institutional Reform to Deal with the Past

One of Sri Lanka's most prominent advocates on behalf of missing persons, Sandya Ekneligoda, has received international recognition by being awarded the International 'Women of Courage' award, presented by the U.S State Department. The International Women of Courage Award is an American award presented annually to women around the world who have shown courage and leadership, while advocating for peace, justice, human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment at personal risk.

The National Peace Council congratulates Sandya on this award, which is the result of long years of commitment and fearless advocacy on behalf of all who have gone missing in the course of past several decades of violent internal conflict in Sri Lanka. Ever since her husband the cartoonist Prageeth Eknaligoda, a public critic of human rights violations, disappeared in January 2010, just a few days prior to the 2010 presidential election, Sandya has been searching for him and joining civil society efforts that call on the government to locate missing persons. She is a symbol of many others, numbering many thousands, who are missing their loved ones and cannot rest until they know what happened to them.

The award presented to Sandya by the US First Lady is an indication that the international community has not forgotten this incident nor will it do so. Despite the change of government in 2015, the investigations into the disappearance of Prageeth, and others who went missing, have been proceeding slowly and in fits and starts. The sooner this matter is concluded will enable the government to deliver on one of its commitment made to the UNHRC in October 2015.

In August 2016 the Sri Lankan parliament approved legislation to establish an Office of Missing Persons, which the government had pledged in October 2015 during a session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. However, more than 8 months later, this office which is intended to address the problem of missing persons has yet to be established. At the last session of the UNHRC in March this year, the government was given a 2 year extension to deliver on its commitments made in October 2015.

The National Peace Council urges the government to establish and operationalise the Office of Missing Persons without further delay. This will only be the first of the four reconciliation mechanisms that the government pledged to establish in October 2015, the Truth seeking Mechanism, Office of Reparations and Judicial Accountability mechanism. We also take this opportunity to remember all who campaign for truth and justice with regard to the disappeared and those in civil society and the international community who help them to raise their own demands.

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