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கிளங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

August 2017

People Power to Urge Government Action in Colombo

Puravesi Balaya (Citizens Power) brought activists together in Colombo to show solidarity with international efforts to direct the government onto the path of reform promised at the presidential and general elections held in 2015.

The event took place to mark the two years since the election of the National Unity Government on August 17, 2015. The main feature of this exercise was to bring to public attention what the government has yet to do, even while applauding the government what it has done.

This was a collaboration with over 20 organisations that span victims' rights, human rights, good governance and peace building. There was participation by over 100 activists from NPC's DIRC network.

The event was in the mode of a peaceful gathering of people from around the country including victim families. This exercise was necessary at a time when the reform momentum has been receding. Several government leaders committed to the reform process, including Mano Ganesan and Rajitha Senarathne, attended the meeting and delivered short speeches.



Varying Opinions About TJ Process In Sabaragamuwa

Academic Staff of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka attended an introductory session on Transitional Justice (TJ) organized under NPC's project Initiating Multi Level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT).

At the end of the session, participants were asked for their opinions and feedback. All 13 participants said the workshop clarified what TJ was. Four said they would be a resource person to educate DIRC members on peace and reconciliation related topics.

Most believed that all four pillars of TJ – truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of non-recurrence -were applicable to Sri Lanka and should take people's opinion into consideration. They also thought that the opinions of parliament members needed to be changed.

Some participants thought that institutional reform should be given priority, while others believed reconciliation was most important to avoid another war. Some felt that punishment could not be avoided and that international involvement was necessary up to a certain level to ensure impartiality. Several participants felt that the government was not doing enough to discuss the issues with the people and that structures such as the judiciary, Police Commission, and Auditor General's department were not independent.

Five out of 13 respondents supported to the current TJ process and none of them objected to it while eight did not object or support it. Some said the process should be improved because the implementation process was weak, with the public not aware of what was happening or going to happen. Others said equal rights of victims must be ensured.

Sports and Arts to Build Understanding In Galle

Sixty seven young men and women attended a sports and arts session to build understanding among different communities conducted by peace delegates in Divithurawatta in Galle. The weekly sessions are held in eight districts.

The peace delegates were trained under the USAID-funded Religions to Reconcile Project being implemented by NPC together with their international training partner, Generations For Peace (GFP) based in Jordan.



The 26-month project, which began in October 2016, targets the districts of Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Puttalam, Nuwara Eliya, Galle, Matara and Ampara.

The project focuses on strengthening community networks mentored by religious leaders and engaging them in building consensus for a Transitional Justice (TJ) process and helping communities evolve a pluralistic national identity.

The group took part in a warm up activity followed by the main game, passing a marble using a spoon, which nurtured cooperation among the participants.

After the session, participants said that they did not see language as a barrier for coming together to play. They wanted the sessions to continue even after the project concluded and asked more people in the community could be included.

"I am very happy to be taking part in these weekly sessions. We are learning a lot through the sport and art. We are interacting with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. I don't feel any different to them – I feel we are same in many ways. We belong to one community."
Shen

Youth Day Celebrated in Trincomalee

Young people in the multi ethnic Trincomalee district were given the opportunity to interact with their peers of different religions and ethnicities to celebrate Youth Day. The activity was organized by Trincomalee District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) under NPC's Promoting Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue project.



The project is supporting inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue at the local level in order to create networks and understanding among religious and other community leaders in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts, both located within a high risk province.

Four students from four Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist and Christian schools were selected to collect information on basic religious practices and rituals and non-violence. The students visited religious places of worship and met religious leaders. After they had gathered the material, they attended the DIRC meeting to present their findings. They shared the experiences they went through during the visits. DIRC members then discussed young people's role on peace building and interfaith dialogue. Steps were made to document the young people's findings and follow up.

One of the common issues discussed was how young people did not respect other religions. The reason for this attitude was that they did not know about other religions and needed an opportunity to study them.

Some schools in Trincomalee districts are attended by students of only one religious group, so they are not exposed to other religions or ethnicities and become culturally insensitive. When young people know and appreciate other religions, they will pass the message on to their peers and the community.

The participants were enthusiastic about the activity, which was welcomed by DIRC members. They were motivated to share their experiences with their communities and peers. The outcomes of the activity were discussed at the DIRC meeting.

Media as Part of the Solution in Batticaloa

The District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) Batticaloa organised a media awareness event with the participation of leading media personnel in district representing newspapers, TV and radio as well as news bloggers and websites.

NPC Project coordinator, V. Thusandra, facilitated a discussion on the role of media in peace building and interfaith dialogue. Topics such as influence of media, information control, politics of the media and power of social media were discussed. DIRC members spoke about ethnic and religious tensions in Batticaloa and asked the media to join the inter faith and inter ethnic dialogue. The media personnel promised to give more visibility for DIRC events and to take part in peace building process.

They also discussed the ethnic and religious clashes taking place on the Internet. It also was mentioned that there was a possibility of conflicts to spill over into physical violence.

Intra Religious Tensions Defused in Batticaloa

Batticaloa District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) worked with religious leaders and government officials to end a conflict over burial grounds in the Vaharai area. Pressure and advocacy of the members resulted in government land being allocated for a new graveyard for non Catholics.

The Catholic graveyard had been used by all Christians for many decades. However, when Catholics and Hindus converted to other denominations of Christianity, they were not allowed to be buried in the Catholic graveyard they had used previously. As a result bodies had to be carried more than 70 km away for burial.

Batticaloa DIRC was keen to find a resolution before it became a flash point for religious violence. A committee was appointed to meet the Vaharai District Secretary (DS), who agreed to conduct a meeting with representatives from local government, Catholic and other religious leaders and the police.

The meeting was filled with heated arguments. Catholic leaders were angry about conversion activities of other religious groups. However, at the end of the meeting, it was agreed to provide government land for a new graveyard. A team was appointed to look for suitable land. Batticaloa DIRC members agreed to pursue the matter.

Resolution of the matter was obstructed due to personal clashes and delay at the Divisional Secretariat's end. DIRC members contacted the Batticaloa Government Agent (GA) and the Governor of Eastern Province. The governor wrote to GA and DS to inquire about the progress. The DS Vaharai told the GA that suitable land was available, that he was in the process of negotiating with local governmental authorities and that the ground would be cleared shortly.

The DIRC committee said that the skills and knowledge they had gained during capacity building sessions through the project helped them to deal with problems that arose. They had applied the skills such as Non-Violent Communication (NVC) and mediation during the negotiations.

Easing Inter Religious Tension in Hambantota

Hambantota town is a multi religious and multi ethnic place; although the majority are Sinhalese, there is a sizeable Muslim and Tamil population.

For many years people of different ethnicities and religions have lived in harmony without disputes or conflicts.

During the early part of 2017, three incidents caused distrust and suspicion between the Sinhala and Muslim communities: Buddha statues had been placed on the main roads leading to the town and there were disputes about removing them; a Muslim youth had killed a Sinhala youth over a personal matter; and for the second time, the glass cover of a Buddha statue in front of a temple was broken by stones that were thrown at it.

The Chief Police Inspector of Hambantota discussed the situation with Hambantota DIRC to see what could be done. DIRC members also met government officials as well as members of the Hambantota Trade Union and the Chief Incumbent of the Jayabodhi Temple. Efforts were made to meet and discuss the issues with the Muslim community.

DIRC organized a dialogue with religious leaders, with collaboration from Hambantota Police Headquarters, getting together those directly and indirectly related to the incidents. There were also 65 people representing various sectors who participated in the dialogue.

A Co-existence Committee was established that included police officers, religious leaders and civil organization representatives. The Chief Police Inspector agreed to support the work of the committee, whose primary role was to take action to minimise conflicts.

A sticker pasting programme was launched to create awareness among the people of the town. Police officers, religious leaders, DIRC members and members of other civil organizations pasted 1,000 stickers, bearing the message, “stand together for religious coexistence” at commercial locations as well as in buses and three wheelers.

“This was a special event. We were able to come together and work for coexistence among ourselves. It is not only the duty of the police to maintain peace; it is the responsibility of all of us,” said a police inspector.



Healing Activities For Women Continue Through DIRCs

NPC's project, Post Conflict Healing: A Women's Manifesto, was implemented with the support of FOKUS from April 2014 to December 2016 in nine districts across the country that were both directly and indirectly affected by the war: Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee, Ampara, Galle, Hambantota, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Puttalam.

The project mobilised women to take an active part in community healing, to establish lasting peace and to increase their participation in the process of post conflict transition.

It also trained participants on TJ, women's rights, role of women in post conflict society, reconciliation, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission and its recommendations and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that deals with women and security.



Although the project ended in 2016, follow up action has been taken throughout this year.

In Vavuniya, it was decided to highlight missing persons, especially the establishment and operation of Office of Missing Persons, with a peace walk with the participation of about 300 war affected people and handing over a request to local MPs, a discussion with relevant authorities to share the ground situation of the families of missing persons, and a meeting with higher level government officials in Colombo. The peace walk will be held in September, organized by local partners and Vavuniya DIRC.

In Trincomalee, a mobile service will be conducted in Muttur for counselling and to issue birth and death certificates to affected families.

In Hambantota, a meeting will be held between members of Ranaviru Seva Sansada (an organization formed by family members of missing and injured soldiers) and officials from government's Ranaviru Seva Authority.

Discussions on the five briefing papers formulated during the project which covered the topics of restitution of land and property and economic reintegration, physical security, psychological recovery, democratization and governance, and justice, were held during DIRC meeting in Nuwara Eliya, Galle and Puttalam.

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.

Need To Reformulate 20th Amendment

The proposed 20th Amendment to the constitution seeks to amend the law relating to elections to the provincial councils to ensure that these are held on a single day and not on an ad hoc basis. The government has explained that this would lead to a reduction in the costs of elections and give more stability to governance. While the government is entitled to hold these views, and to prioritise these matters, the National Peace Council notes some features of the proposed amendment that contain disturbing elements.

The proposed law can lead to the postponement of elections to those provincial councils whose terms of office lapse early. Three provincial councils have their terms ending by October of this year. Some provincial councils, on the other hand, will have their terms continue until 2019. The proposed law vests the power to administer provincial councils whose terms have ended with the central authorities until such time as elections are held.

The design of the provincial councils was a result of the quest for a political solution to the ethnic conflict and was meant to ensure political autonomy and self rule on a limited basis to the provinces. The provincial council system was originally established in 1987 to deal with the escalating war against the Tamil militancy led by the LTTE. The democratic Tamil parties have sought to utilize it to as a building block to progress to a greater sharing of power while functioning within the existing unitary constitutional framework.

In this context, tampering with the provincial councils, by postponing the elections to them, and by further reducing their devolved powers even temporarily, needs to be viewed with the utmost concern. The provision in the 20th Amendment to vest governance of a provincial council whose term has ended in the central authorities is violative of the basic principle of devolution of power. The National Peace Council calls on the government to desist from the passage of the 20th Amendment to the constitution in its present form.

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