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கிளங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

June 2017

Engaging Civil Society in Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review

At the invitation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, NPC facilitated a meeting to bring together government officials and civil society organisations engaged in the promotion and protection of human rights to discuss Sri Lanka's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Colombo.

About 60 participants drawn from human rights groups and NGOs, including 22 members from NPC's District Inter Religious Committees, attended the meeting.

The United Nations reviews the human rights records of a state every four and a half years in a report called the (UPR). All UN countries are reviewed for the promotion and protection of human rights. Each country states what actions have been taken to ensure human rights and improve them. The country's national report, reports of independent human rights groups and UN entities and other stakeholders and civil society organisations are taken into account for the review. Sri Lanka's third UPR comes up in November 2017.

Sri Lanka's national report details progress made in regard to human rights since 2012 and addresses recommendations and voluntary pledges made in the 2008 cycle made. A draft report was made available to the participants. Similar national consultations will be held around the country before the report is finalised.

At the consultations, participants brought up many issues that have not been included in the national report and asked that they be included in it.

Some of these were:

- The national report needs to specify time lines. Time frames were necessary in some cases. The draft report mentions investigations into past extra judicial killings but there are no details about the investigations.
- A number of bodies have been established for reconciliation but little planning and coordination. Bodies not responsive. The process is not transparent.
- There is no government outreach on reconciliation. No one is doing anything at grassroots level on reconciliation.
- Violations of freedom of religion are not prosecuted. It is difficult to get state action on violations for minority communities. The situation is getting more serious.
- There are no time frames for language programmes. Trilingual and bilingual officers are needed in public places such as police stations.
- Programmes to help war affected women should be expanded with statistical data and information.

- Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission's recommendations are not implemented. It must be monitored.
- Need to bring economic, social and cultural rights into the new constitution.
- Food security is an issue.
- Inadequate attention to disability issues. Disabled children of school going age have problems. There are no facilities for wheel chairs. There are no translators for deaf or blind people so they cannot convey their issues to doctors. Physical obstacles should be removed. There should be special programmes for the disabled.
- Limited resources should be made use of properly and sustainably. Agriculture policies are formulated but not implemented because the government is afraid its economic power will be lessened. The Government is doing contrary things. Projects should be environmentally safe.
- Information needed about people detained without charge, as progress is slow.
- Need details about enforced disappearances.
- OMP is not operationalised.
- People searching for missing relatives are harassed and abused by the army. There are no independent investigations of complaints. Enforced disappearances are still not a crime.
- OMP was not a consultative process. The CTF report came after it was legislated so the OMP was not set up through a consultation process.
- Reforms are needed to strengthen existing law on victim protection.
- Military continues to remain in civil areas. Why are such large tracts of land not released post war by the military?
- There is a clear language policy but officers do not implement it. There are no Tamils officers in many areas. Boards are only in Sinhala. How can minorities get to know about the services?
- Good governance principles have been identified but are they being implemented? The Government is going against principles of good governance. There are financial corruption charges against the government. There is very slow progress is punishing wrongdoers. Laws do not apply to Government party members. Laws should be equal for all.



TJ Training For Local Politicians

The NPC carried out training on Transitional Justice (TJ) for a group of local level politicians and community leaders from the Galle and Matara Districts under its USAID-funded Religions to Reconcile project, which is implemented with a Jordan based partner organization, Generations For Peace.

The training took place in Matara with 29 participants representing the government and the opposition. Resource person Jagath Liyana Arachchi, a legal expert on TJ and Director of the National Media Centre, explained the concept of TJ and its practical application in the Sri Lankan situation.

Documentation, video footage and other creditable resources, were used to impart knowledge on the post war reconciliation in the country.

The politicians appreciated the knowledge they gained and discussed with NPC and the resource person on how this knowledge should be further enhanced and shared with a wider community. They asked NPC to share its training and resource material to enable the knowledge transfer. The group also discussed how best the TJ framework should be implemented in the country, with several recommendations being put forward.

During the course of the training, NPC and the resource person were able to identify that very little knowledge was actually shared at the community level with regard to addressing the underlying issues to the ethnic conflict. This is why work carried out by CSOs such as NPC is important.

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 TJ process and helping communities evolve a pluralistic national identity. The project is based on strengthening inter religious people-to-people community engagement for reconciliation and social cohesion in Sri Lanka.



Ifthar For All Religions In Batticaloa

Around 50 people including representatives of Community Based Organizations, Kattankudy community leaders and DIRC members took part in an Ifthar organized by the Batticaloa DIRC under NPC's Promoting Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue project.

The event was organised near a crowded beach during the breaking fast time. Most the people who passed by were curious to see that different religious leaders were taking part in the Ifthar. DIRC members were able to explain its work and objectives to people.

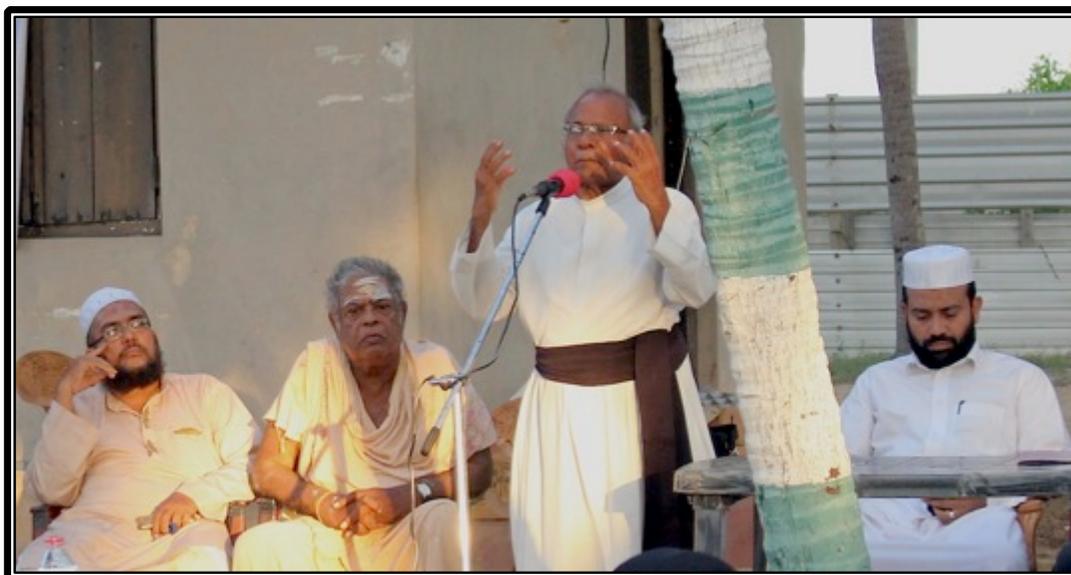
The project is supporting inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue at the local level in order to create networks and understanding among religious and other community leaders in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts, both located within a high risk province. For this purpose, a DIRC will be formed in Trincomalee and the existing one in Batticaloa will be expanded to include areas prone to conflict within the district.

Tensions in the Batticaloa district had risen recently among people of different religions because of a lack understanding of cultural practices and festivals, leading to misconceptions about the meaning of these practices.

One of the ways identified by Batticaloa DIRC to alleviate this problem was finding commonalities in religions and religious practices in order to bring the divided communities together. The members decided to conduct the Ifthar event with the participation of leaders from all four religions, since the concept of fasting was present in them all.

The event started with the prayer from a female Maulavi followed by a welcome speech by the group leader who explained the work of the DIRC. Other religious leaders spoke about the concept of fasting in their respective religions.

A Christian leader mentioned that it was her first time to learn about fasting in other religions while a Sinhala participant said that he had not been aware of the commonalities among the religions.



Sharing Religious and Cultural Values in Polonnaruwa

A session on learning about and sharing of cultural and religious values for supporting peace and reconciliation was held in Thambala and Oonagama areas in the Polonnaruwa district.

After the Buddhist extremist group Bodu Bala Sena's attack on Muslims in Oonagama, extra security had been provided for the Ramadan season and a meeting had been held to tell people how to respond to any disturbance during that time.

About 120 people from three communities living in the area participated in the learning and sharing event, which was organized to emphasise the importance of building trust and maintaining friendship and harmony among the neighbours in spite of ethnic, religious or other differences. Participants were also told not to be misled by extremist groups.

The day prior to the session, when organizers met to discuss final matters, a religious leader said there was normalcy in the village and that there was no need for the event, as it could cause further problems. He wanted to cancel it.

NPC's Project Manager Saman Seneviratne explained that the meeting would strengthen the bonds that bind the village community. He said it was necessary to remember the past in order not to repeat mistakes. His views were accepted and the meeting went ahead as scheduled.

The session included speeches from religious leaders, senior citizens, villagers and a police officer. The religious leaders spoke about importance of considering all people as equal human beings because they are neighbours, friends, brothers and sisters. They emphasised maintaining harmony among everyone for the development of the country and for peace for future generations.

The elders shared memories of unity and togetherness that created feelings of goodwill among the participants, making the event a healing activity.



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.

End Religious Extremism Together

A multiplicity of racist attacks are erupting in different parts of the country and affecting different ethnic and religious communities. The widespread and systematic attacks against members of the Muslim community are insidious and low profile. They are individual attacks on commercial establishments and mosques that are sometimes reported in the media and sometimes not. It appears that this is a testing ground where extremist groups are testing the space for racism. Violent extremists pose a security threat; it is naturally, yet not exclusively, the responsibility of the government to respond to ensure the safety of all its citizens. This involves the mobilization of law enforcement agencies to enable the state to tackle the root causes of violent extremism, to create societal buy-in across diverse stakeholders toward a common goal, and to demonstrate the respect for both the rule of law and equality of all citizens. The danger is that left unchecked by deterrent governmental action they will lead to a buildup and erupt in an unpredictable way.

A similar phenomenon has been taking place in regard to sections of the Christian community. Here too the attacks are widespread and systematic and yet insidious and low profile. President Maithripala Sirisena has said various attempts are being made through the internet and some media institutions, to spread civil unrest among communities in the country. The state media reported the President saying “that when he asked the Colombo Archbishop, Most Rev. Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, regarding a statement made by a person during an interview with a private news channel that 166 Catholic churches were attacked during the past few months, the Archbishop of Colombo said no such incidents have been not reported. The President further said that he vehemently rejects such kind of statements made by some persons misleading society with ulterior objectives in mind.” The news item in a private news channel that Catholic Churches were attacked either smacks of ignorance or willful distortion of facts.

Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith is a representative of the Catholic community and has spoken as such. However, there are also a minority of non-Catholic Christians who feel threatened and under siege. We regret that the distinction between Catholic and non Catholic Christian has not been made. The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka has reported that 111 incidents took place in 2014, 90 in 2015, 89 in 2016, and another 36 incidents in 2017 so far. The report said that although these figures reflect a slight decline in the overall number of reported incidents, notably the number of incidents involving state officials has increased. In this context the National Peace Council is dismayed that the Hon. Minister of Justice had threatened to remove Attorney-at-Law Lakshan Dias for highlighting incidents of religious violence as recorded by the National Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka and presented by him in a talk show. Mr Lakshan Dias is a leading lawyer and a committed human rights defender who has been engaged in civil society activism for over two decades. He is a member of the Bar Association of Sri Lanka and many local and regional human rights groups. He has appeared for many fundamental rights violation cases on a pro-bono basis on behalf of marginalized and underprivileged people and also in many cases representing the victims of religious hate crimes against the Christian and Muslim communities in the country. We note that it is only the Supreme Court that is empowered to remove lawyers. The National Peace Council calls for the protection of all and the upholding of Fundamental Rights enshrined in the constitution that give to all religions, big and small, the same rights of equality and freedom of propagation. The impunity that is currently available to those who attack minority religious groups is an enormous danger to society at large as it heralds the breakdown of the Rule of Law. We are pleased to note that in the past few days the police have acted and arrested several persons for engaging in hate crimes. We urge the leaders of all religions and civil society to stand together, displaying a shared interest, to insist to the government that the Rule of Law is sacrosanct, and must prevail, or else we fear that what Sri Lanka collectively sows will be collectively reaped.

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