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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

November 2017

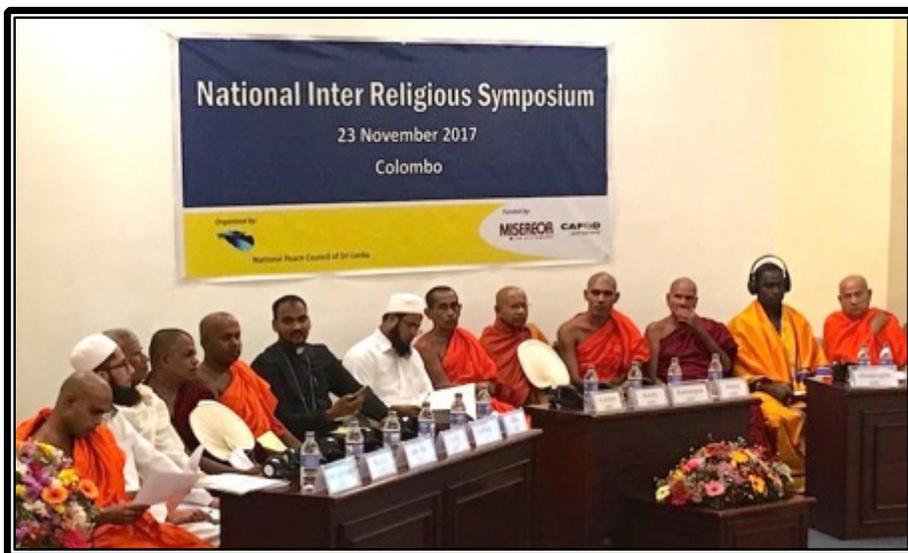
DIRCS Celebrate Success in Peace Building at National Event

One hundred and seventy religious leaders, civil society activists and community leaders gathered in Colombo for the National Inter Religious Symposium of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) under NPC's Initiating Multi Level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT) project.

DIRCs were established in 16 districts under the guidance of NPC to resolve inter ethnic and inter religious disturbances in the districts of Jaffna, Vavuniya, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Puttalam, Kurunegala, Badulla, Moneragala, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Ratnapura, Hambantota, Matara, Galle and Kalutara, and intervene at grass roots level to promote reconciliation.

The National Inter Religious Committee had formulated a set of recommendations for finding solutions to many challenging issues facing the country. The recommendations were handed over to the Chief Guest, Minister of Minister of National Co-existence, Dialogue and Official Languages Mano Ganesan, at the symposium.

Project Manager Saman Seneviratne said the symposium was an acknowledgement of the work done by DIRC members and an opportunity for them to voice their views and gain due recognition.



NPC Chairman Joe William said NPC had been coping with the challenges of religious and ethnic diversity for two decades, and part of its answer was to set up DIRCs, which now served as a focal point at local level for problem solving. The issues and solutions brought up at the local level were taken to national policy makers for consideration.

Dr William said that role models were to be found in religious leaders, who could work with shared values to heal the wounds of war.

Mr Ganesan said that although some may think Sri Lanka was losing the battle for peace and coexistence, he rejected that opinion because it was still possible to find solutions to national issues through dialogue and discussion. “We are glad we have little ethnic and religious tension. Although there are some issues, conditions have improved compared to the past,” he said.

NPC Executive Director Jehan Perera said NPC’s work was recognised by the government and the international community. He said the situation in the country had improved and that civil society had the freedom to work without fear. On the negative side, people who lived outside the North and East thought the war was over so only economic development was necessary and NPC’s work was not valuable. But in the North and East the situation was different, he pointed out.

Representatives from the 16 districts shared experiences and success stories in their areas of diffusing ethnic and religious tension and intervening to bring about peaceful solutions to many varied issues.

In Moneragala. Buddhist monks and Sinhalese DIRC members had visited a Muslim community, who welcomed them warmly. They shared meals, visited mosques and cleaned up schools, creating a bond between the two communities that had been hostile towards each other. Members from the Jaffna DIRC had gone to Kandy to meet the chief Buddhist monks to try and change their minds about the need for Constitutional reform as well as explaining issues affecting people in Jaffna.

Sinhalese and Tamil people in the Galle district live in a constant state of tension. The DIRC had worked to minimise the conflict with activities such as art competitions and talks by religious leaders who preached peaceful coexistence. In Matara, DIRC activities such as seminars on national unity and awareness raising marches were aimed at minimalising radical views. These activities had a good response from the public. In Polonnaruwa, the DIRC had worked to allay fears of the Muslim community during the Ramadan period by requesting additional security during that time.



Bringing Communities Together in Hambantota

NPC organized an exposure visit by representatives of its 16 District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) to Hambantota. A total of 35 people including religious leaders and civil society members were hosted by the Hambantota DIRC.

The main objective of the exposure visit was to share experiences gathered from each district. DIRC members shared information about the issues that arose in their areas and what steps were taken to find solutions. They got to learn that many of the problems they faced were common to those in Hambantota.

The group visited several places to understand way of life of Hambantota people. They met fishermen at the harbour, who complained that no one listened to their grievances. They said they were not given any assistance from the government and were undergoing many hardships due to the renovation of the harbour.

"I thought the south was fully developed. During the visit I realised that farmers, fishermen and other people have many problems that are not being addressed by the authorities. People in the North and South only engage with their own communities without thinking about the problems faced by other communities. This kind of exchange visit makes people understand each other."

**S. T. Tharshini
Vavuniya**

DIRC members also shared views with the Muslim community living in Hambantota. The Muslim people in the group were happy to see their community members living peacefully in the district compared to other districts such as Galle where there were tensions among different communities. At the District Secretariat, DIRC members were able to see how the country's most effective Secretariat functioned. All government institutions in the district were in the same building. At a discussion with local politicians, the group realised that politicians from different parties wanted a united and peaceful Sri Lanka, as did injured army personnel who wanted reconciliation in the country.



Varieties of Mitigatory in Activities in Peacebuilding



District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in the Galle and Matara districts carried out Community Cohesion activities and Mitigatory Interventions under NPC's Religions to Reconcile project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented with a Jordan-based partner organization, Generations For Peace (GFP).

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. It is based on strengthening inter religious people-to-people community engagement for reconciliation and social cohesion in Sri Lanka.

Mitigatory Interventions are community based activities aimed at addressing an inter religious or inter ethnic issue present or are brewing in a community and have the potential to lead to a conflagration in the future. They are identified by DIRC members and discussed during their meetings and a possible solution is devised by them to address the issue.

In Matara, the DIRC addressed potential dissent in the community in relation to religious conversions that has led to fractured community relations between Buddhists, Hindus and non-Catholics in the area. The DIRC organised a visit for Deepavali to the Ensalwatte Tamil Junior School, identified as the least developed school in the Matara District.

A group of 60 students from St Mathews College in the Deniyaya town, parents and teachers travelled to Ensalwatte with the DIRC for a half day programme of cultural performances. The basis of the programme was to understand that despite differences, people in a community could come together to celebrate each other's cultural activities.



The Principal of the Ensalwatte Tamil Junior School and member of the Matara DIRC, Mr. S. Uthayakumar, said that reconciliation would be a reality if the future generation understood the concept of living together in one community.

The Matara Local Politicians and Community Leaders Sub Group carried out a Community Cohesion activity by organising an Ayurvedic medical camp aimed at creating awareness on the dengue epidemic and treating diabetes related complications. A group of seven Ayurveda doctors treated 190 patients during the medical camp.

"Galle DIRC is fulfilling a long-required need of the people in the area irrespective of their ethnicity."

**Nilan Dandeniya
Superintendent
Ketandola Estate**

In Galle DIRC's youth group organized a cricket tournament and the women's group presented cuisine from cultures during the event.

Galle DIRC carried out their Mitigatory Intervention and Community Cohesion activity by identifying possible conflagration between Tamil estate workers in the Katandola Estate in Elpitiya and Sinhalese villagers in the adjoining village over the provision of water and aimed to address this by setting up a community water system. It included cleaning up and repairing a disused well, setting up a water tank and motor and laying pipelines to provide water for the estate line rooms and village homes.

NPC at UN Peacebuilding Commission

Foreign Secretary Prasad Kariyawasam, Governor of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka Indrajit Coomaraswamy and Secretary-General of the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms Mano Tittawella shared information on Sri Lanka's journey of peacebuilding with the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission in New York.

The briefing focused on the comprehensive reforms required for sustaining peace and the prevention of recurrence of violence that is essential for establishing a reconciled, peaceful, and stable country.

NPC's Executive Director, Jehan Perera, was invited to present the civil society perspective of developments in Sri Lanka and made his contribution to the briefing through video conferencing.

In his comments Dr Perera referred to the challenges the government faced in taking the reconciliation process forward. He pointed out that those who spoke of Transitional Justice and holding those guilty of human rights violations accountable were being branded as traitors who were deserving of execution.

He also said that there was a major propaganda campaign by the opposition that Constitutional reform that devolved more power to the provinces was tantamount to the division of the country. In these circumstances, the work of civil society had to be redoubled, he stressed.

The UN Peacebuilding Commission is an intergovernmental advisory body that supports peace efforts in various ways in countries emerging from conflict, particularly during the transitional phase. The Commission brings together a range of actors to discuss possible solutions for a country and generates support and resources for peacebuilding processes. It also seeks to ensure continued focus on countries in a post conflict reconstruction phase with a view to preventing the recurrence of conflicts.

Young People Discuss Peacebuilding In Batticaloa

Batticaloa DIRC held a youth meeting under NPC's project Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic dialogue in Sri Lanka with its partner organization, Human Rights Civil Committee of Batticaloa.

Eighty eight people representing a variety of organizations and religions gathered together to gain a better understanding of key themes in peace building: Constitutional reform, mediation, Transitional Justice (TJ) and Non-Violent Communication (NVC).

M.I.M. Usanar spoke on the Constitution, reviewing it since the inception. His presentation was a starting point to consider the current constitutional reform debate.

S. Ethirmanasingam outlined the mediation process, its importance and how it has functioned in the country while R. Manoharan spoke on the basic theories and principles of TJ. He referred to the successful case of South Africa and pointed out the value of unofficial actors such as NGOs and civil organizations in the process of TJ.

M. M. M. Naleam explained the essence of NVC, giving examples such as relationships between parents and children while K. Yoshihama shared a discussion on Constitutional reform in Japan and emphasised that it was essential for the younger generation to learn about the issues.

Almost 60 percent of the participants were below the age of 29 years. The youth had discussions with the older generation and exchanged views.

During a discussion on the mediation process, there was disagreement between the younger and the older generations about the Mediation Board Commission, which had no term limit for its members. One participant said that bringing in younger people was important for the mediation process while some older people maintained the importance of experienced members.

One participant said there was a lack of opportunities to learn about such topics. Another participant suggested that there should be more interactive components such as activity and group work.



Relatives of Missing Persons in Vavuniya Criticise Lack of Information

A seminar was held in the Vavuniya district for 47 relatives of missing people to help them to understand what was being done to find their relatives and what steps they could take to engage in the process.

The seminar was organized by Rural Women Forum in collaboration with Vavuniya DIRC under the FOKUS programme UNSCR 1325 – Women Building Peace in Sri Lanka. The participants included relatives of missing persons, FOKUS and NPC members, DIRC members and religious leaders.

Director of Local Activities Coordination Unit of the secretariat to Coordinate Reconciliation Mechanisms of the Prime Minister's Office, Sanjeewa Wimalaguneratne, explained what the government had done so far to address the issues of war affected people in the North and East including Transitional Justice mechanisms and issuance of Certificates of Absence.

A statement was handed over to Mr Wimalaguneratne highlighting the problems faced by relatives of missing persons and calling for government to take action to address them, and to implement the Office of Missing Persons with immediate effect.

Other speakers included Programme Manager of Rural Women Forum S. Priyatharshini, lawyer K. Aignkaran and NPC Board Member Professor M.S. Mookiah. Five people presented their stories of how they have been looking for their missing their husbands and children.

"It is only today that I learnt about the Certificate of Absence. Many people here need to get that certificate but without being informed about it, how can we apply? We can see the inefficiency of the officials in government offices. The government needs to have a proper method to bring information to the people."

A female participant



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.

Government Must Investigate Torture Allegations

The Associated Press (AP) has carried a news story that gives a graphic account of torture practices in Sri Lanka that allegedly continue to this day. This story which has been carried by newspapers and media outlets throughout the world, including the New York Times, gives accounts of some 50 men who claim they were tortured and raped on multiple occasions and are seeking asylum in foreign countries. What is particularly disturbing about the current allegations is that the torture is alleged to have occurred during the period of the present government which was voted into power on a platform of good governance and respect for human rights. Earlier this year, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter terrorism, Ben Emmerson said that Sri Lanka's tolerance of torture, was a "stain on the country's international reputation".

The government statement in response to the story published in the New York Times acknowledges the gravity of the allegations and the damaging impact of the story on the international community's confidence in the Sri Lankan democratic and good governance process. Foreign Secretary Prasad Kariyawasam said that in 2017 disciplinary action had been taken against 33 members of the police for assault and torture, while one officer was dismissed. Disciplinary matter pertaining to 100 police officers he said were currently pending. He added that the government "strongly condemns any act of torture, and will ensure that allegations of torture committed in the country will be investigated and prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

The National Peace Council welcomes the government's commitment to investigate the highlighted incidents of torture and calls on it to appoint a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the issue of torture, specifically with regard to the AP report, but also with a wider mandate. It is necessary to know the truth before a solution can be designed. It is not only Tamils and LTTE suspects who have been victims of torture. The most recent report of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka shows that most cases of torture that have been reported are outside of the North and East of the country and affect members of all communities. The practice of torture is dehumanising to both the victim and the perpetrator and generates a culture of fear and repression. Eradicating the culture of tolerance and impunity for torture is the responsibility of the government and civil society as a whole. We urge members of religious and civil society organisations to advocate and work against the practice of torture in any form and for any reason.

Sri Lanka's human rights record including torture and other human rights abuses will face international scrutiny again when UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review meets on Sri Lanka. This will be a challenging time for the government delegation led by the Deputy Foreign Minister Dr Harsha de Silva as over a hundred countries have asked for time to ask questions. Denying the allegations as done by previous delegations, or attempting to gloss over them, will not be the way to go forward. The government needs to show in concrete and convincing terms how Sri Lanka can improve its human rights commitment in order not to further stain the country's international reputation.

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