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கிளங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

September 2017

Vavuniya Families Will Not Give Up

About 400 people marched through Vavuniya town in support of families of the disappeared. A letter requesting information about missing people and demanding justice was handed over to TNA MP Sivashakthi Anandan, who promised to give it to the President and Prime Minister.

For the first time, religious leaders also participated in an event in support of demanding that the government finds out about missing persons.

The march was organized by Vavuniya District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) with its partners the Federation of Institutions for Rural Management and Rural Women's Forum under the MISEREOR, CAFOD and FOKUS-supported project, Initiating Multi Level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT).

"I have lost my 16 year old daughter. She has been missing since 2009. Like me, there are several parents who are suffering. I hope the government answers all the questions arising from the war that affect Tamils and Muslims as well as the Sinhala people and resolve the issues quickly. We appreciate the work done by the DIRC to bring together religious leaders," said Kamaladevei from Vavuniya.

"I urge all TNA MPs to sit here and make their voices heard by the international community. I lost my elder son in 1990 and in 2008, a white van abducted my younger son too. Can anyone imagine my loneliness in my old age? Where is the UN? Where is Mr Sambanthan? What they are doing and when will they hear our sadness?" asked Arirathinam Analakshtumi, who is on a hunger strike in Vavuniya town.



Religious Leaders Light Peace Lamp in Badulla

Badulla DIRC organised a peace walk through Badulla town for raising awareness on building national unity through inter religious harmony. DIRC members met several leaders of the four religions to obtain their support for the walk and to set the agenda.

About 100 people including religious leaders, government officials, civil society leaders and trade unionists took part in the walk, which ended at the local government office where a Buddhist monk, Christian priest, Hindu Kurukkal and Moulavi spoke on the need for religious tolerance and harmony.

“In a town such as Badulla, what is most important is to respect reach other’s religion, so we should all unite to protect the rights of every religion,” said Father Priyalal Cooray from Bishop’s House.

“Lord Buddha never insulted other religions. Badulla is a town with ethnic and religious diversity therefore we should refrain from hate speeches,” said Rev. Godunne Piyatissa Adhikarana Sanganyaka.

“The Muslim community appreciates the work done by Badulla DIRC. This is the first time in the district that all religious leaders have gathered to demonstrate the importance of religious harmony,” said Chief Moulavi Suhaib,

“It was nice to see all four religious symbols printed on the handbill distributed to the public during the peace walk. It is a sign of religious unity,” said Kurukkal Ganeshalingam.

The religious leaders also lit a peace lamp to demonstrate the importance of religious harmony.

“There are no problems among the people. Problems are created by politicians. We should bring pressure on the politicians not to disrupt the peace among religions,” said Rev. Muruddeniye Dammaratana.



People's Dialogues on New Constitution

Aspects of the new Constitution were discussed and misconceptions were cleared up at a meeting organized by Kandy DIRC under NPC's project Initiating Multi Level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT). Around 100 DIRC members, religious leaders and activists, of whom 30 per cent were women, participated.

Similar people's dialogues have already been held in Kurunegala, Colombo and Badulla aimed at building awareness of the new Constitution and explaining its importance. Ten discussions in total, supported by CAFOD, will be held around the country, including the North and East.

The three facilitators were journalist and Convenor of Puravesi Balaya (Citizens Power) Gamini Viyangoda, lawyer and Chairman of the Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reforms Lal Wijenayake and lawyer Crishmal Warnasuriya.

At the meeting, many people said they did not know the difference between a Federal and a Unitary state and believed that Federalism meant separation. Others thought that the government would not be able to win a referendum on Constitutional reform while some people voiced the opinion that although many fundamental rights were enshrined in the Constitution, Sri Lankans were not knowledgeable enough to fight for those rights through the legislative system. Some believed that the new Constitution was being drafted by the United States. The facilitators clarified the misconceptions and explained the issues.

Other questions raised included what were the rights of the Sinhala people if they went to Jaffna, how the centre could retake the powers if the Provincial Councils misused their authority, why Provincial Councils needed so much money when they were not providing services to the people and whether devolution would unite or divide people.

Estate workers complained that their rights were not addressed in the Constitution and asked how they could be guaranteed. One participant wanted all references to religion removed from the new Constitution.

Mr Wijenayake described the process of framing and passing a new Constitution. Mr Viyangoda explained why a citizen needed a Constitution while Mr Warnasuriya described the duties and roles of citizens in implementing the Constitution.



Promoting Pluralism and Constitutional Reform

Workshops on pluralism and diversity were held in Batticaloa and Trincomalee for DIRC members under NPC's project Promoting Inter-Faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Sri Lanka.

After almost one year since the project began, it was clear that DIRC members were interested in finding similarities in different religious and cultural practices. As community leaders who were directly dealing with inter faith and inter ethnic issues, awareness on diversity and pluralism was essential to work effectively in their districts.

Among the topics covered at the workshops were a basic understanding of concepts of pluralism, diversity and inclusion; introduction to popular theories related pluralism; and challenges and advantages of a pluralistic society.

Participants discussed their understanding of pluralism according to their own experiences and according to definitions given by scholars. DIRC members separated into groups and identified the concepts of diversity and pluralism in their own religions and cultural practices.

An activity was conducted to help them to eliminate stereotyping while recognising the diversity of individuals. They identified the challenges and advantages of a pluralistic Sri Lanka. One concern was that even though the majority of the people wanted to live in peace and harmony, extremist groups were stirring up divisions for political and economic benefits.

Two workshops were also held on the Constitutional reform process under the same project in Trincomalee and Batticaloa. The topics included an introduction to Sri Lanka's Constitutional history and an introduction to on going Constitutional reforms.

The Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reform finalised its report in May 2016 but no programme has been carried out to take the content of the report to the general public.

Under the project, the report was summarised into five booklets, translated into Sinhala and Tamil and printed. The booklets were used to carry out awareness meetings on Constitutional reforms for DIRCs.

Some political parties and extremist groups, especially in the south, were spreading falsehoods and negative views on the proposed Constitutional reforms to turn communities against process. Raising awareness of DIRC members on the content and recommendations of the report and the importance of a new Constitution for sustainable peace and reconciliation was essential because they could give people the necessary knowledge to support the government's efforts to establish a new Constitution.

"It's essential for a peace building activist who works in a religious context to know about concepts such as pluralism, diversity and inclusion. We all enjoyed the training"

**Participant
Batticaloa**

Sri Lanka Should Help Rohingyas

The flight of Rohingya people from Myanmar has captured the attention and concern of the international community of which Sri Lanka is a member. The vast majority of those fleeing Myanmar have sought refuge in Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and neighbouring countries. Only a handful has attempted to come to Sri Lanka. The plight of the Rohingyas has been evident for several years now, with its intensity at atrocities against men, women and children at unprecedented levels in the last few weeks. The National Peace Council is perturbed that the Sri Lankan government has issued instructions to the immigration authorities to deny permission to Rohingyas to enter Sri Lanka. We regret that they have been sent away without being considered as refugees. The plight of entire communities of people who have lost their loved ones, homes and properties due to the conflict in Myanmar has a special resonance to us in Sri Lanka. Due to the ethnic conflict, terrorism and war that last over three decades, we lost over a million of our people who left the country to seek asylum in other parts of the world.

The National Peace Council therefore urges the government to reconsider its decision to screen out Rohingyas to prevent them from entering Sri Lanka. We believe that just as other countries accepted asylum seekers from our country we need to reciprocate on the basis of humanitarian ideals which we have accepted as a country. Although Sri Lanka is not a signatory to the UN Convention of 1951 pertaining to the status of refugees, as a member country of the United Nations we believe it has an obligation to take on its share of international humanitarian responsibilities.

We also endorse the statement issued by the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, and Minister of City Planning and Water Supply, Rauff Hakeem, to share our concerns with the government of Myanmar, urging an immediate end to violence against the Rohingya people, in the interest of peace and stability in the region; offer relief and rehabilitation assistance to the affected people through international agencies; issue a public statement demonstrating its clear interest in addressing the situation faced by the Rohingya people and ensuring peace and stability in the region; and call a debate or session in Parliament to explain the position of the government of Sri Lanka urging for non-violence and peace building in Myanmar. Sri Lanka has enjoyed a long and mutually supportive relationship with Myanmar, including religious ties that bind us. Even as we proceed towards reconciliation within Sri Lanka after decades of our own war and conflict we have a duty to stand by the government of Myanmar and its people in their time of need.

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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.

Do Not Delay Setting Up Proposed Transitional Justice Mechanisms

The war crimes cases registered against former army commander General Jagath Jayasuriya in five South American countries even while he was Sri Lanka's Ambassador to Brazil would alert the government that it needs to take remedial action without further delay. Although the former army commander had diplomatic immunity, international law also states that those accused of war crimes are subject to universal jurisdiction. Last week at the current session of the UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, expressed his concern over the slow pace of reforms in Sri Lanka and said the absence of action on accountability meant exercising universal jurisdiction would become even more necessary.

The possibility exists that the cases registered against General Jayasuriya and the international publicity they have generated, will encourage similar international legal actions not only military personnel, but also political leaders and public service officials who had significant roles to play in the war. International law comes into operation when the national (or domestic) law is not properly implemented. The resolution of the UN Human Rights Council that was co-sponsored by the government in October 2015 states that the government will set up four special domestic mechanisms to deal with the aftermath of the war. These are a truth commission, office of missing persons, office of reparations and special court for accountability purposes.

In March 2017, at the last session of the UN Human Rights Council session in Geneva, the government obtained two more years to implement its commitments. Instead of procrastinating on setting up the four mechanisms promised to the world, the government should start operationalising them. So far only the legislation for the office of missing persons has been passed by parliament and gazetted by the president, which will become operational from today. If the government is able to show that it has a credible domestic legal process underway in the transitional justice mechanisms it sets up, and that justice is done within the country, the requirement of international legal processes will diminish correspondingly. The National Peace Council calls on the government to implement the four mechanisms it has promised without further delay.

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