



# Paths To Peace

## Voters Urged To Select Clean Candidates At The Polls

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With the local government elections to be held shortly, Kandy and Kurunegala District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) launched campaigns to canvass for clean elections free of racism, violence and corruption. Voters were urged to select representatives who opposed racism and discrimination while supporting reconciliation and coexistence.



In Kandy, the DIRC organized a press conference to ask politicians and their supporters not to promote racism, engage in violence or be involved in corruption and other unethical practices.

Reporters from the main TV and radio stations and newspapers attended the conference. Speakers included Ven Dr Etipola Mangala Thero, Bishop Kumara Illangasinghe, Moulavi Sadakathulla and Kurukkal Ajan.

The DIRC also organized a demonstration in the city after the conference to display banners carrying positive messages and to distribute leaflets to raise awareness on how to use the vote to elect proper candidates to local government bodies.



"We accept that now we have freedom and democracy in our country. But have we got the system of governance that we hoped for in 2015? That is the problem. All the political party leaders and candidates should distance themselves from racism and religious extremism," Bishop Illangasinghe said.

In the Kurunegala district about 40 DIRC members, including religious leaders, distributed leaflets and displayed slogans in five towns to educate the public on voting for clean candidates. The leaflets explained that ethnic and religious discrimination was going on in the district and stressed the need for coexistence and reconciliation. They urged voters to reject candidates who advocated racism and supported discrimination and were involved in corruption.

The public response was enthusiastic and many people wanted to have a further dialogue with the DIRC to discuss the issues that were raised.

## Women From East Demand Answers

Under the FOKUS programme UNSCR 1325 - Women Building Peace in Sri Lanka, 13 war affected people from Trincomalee and Puttalam came to Colombo to submit many unresolved concerns to the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms.

The participants at the event included relatives of missing persons, FOKUS and NPC staff and District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members. The women from Trincomalee made an oral submission, while women from Puttalam handed over a statement to the Director of Local Activities Coordination Unit of National Secretariat for Coordination of Reconciliation Mechanism (NSCRM), Sanjeewa Wimalagunaratne, calling on the government to take necessary action to resolve the issues.

The concerns raised were about missing persons, land, housing, self employment opportunities for women, vocational training and jobs for youth, problems faced by women headed households, implementation of Office of Missing Persons and need of involvement of international experts in the accountability system.

A request to look into the implementation of the language policy in Puttalam was submitted to the Minister of National Co-existence, Dialogue and Official Languages, Mano Ganesan.

"We have talked many times to many officials. We have had demonstrations asking for the truth about our children. We have accepted the fact that many our children, husbands, fathers and brothers were killed during the war. But can anybody tell us that what happened to the children who were given over to the authorities? How long do we have to wait to know the truth? Let us know whether they are alive or not. Then we can accept it," pleaded a mother who lost her child soon after the war.



# Youth Group Engages In Coexistence Activities

The youth group formed 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), organized a campaign to clean up the Puttalam hospital and the surrounding premises to address the dengue epidemic that has become a life threatening issue in the district.

The youth group also carried out a sticker distribution campaign to create awareness on dengue and the importance of keeping the environment clean to beat the epidemic.

The Religions to Reconcile 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 youth group, which includes Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim youth, donated paint for the children's ward and main gate of the hospital. It handed over plastic bins to the hospital to keep in different wards. Stickers were provided to differentiate garbage.

The Media and Youth Groups of the Kilinochchi District, formed under the Religions to Reconcile Project, organized a Cultural Sports Festival for 12 sports clubs from the Kilinochchi district with Tamil and Muslim youth members taking part in the event.

The program was held to facilitate peace and reconciliation among youth in the district and to celebrate the Thai Pongal Festival.



# Eye-Opening Visit To The North

Thirty seven members from 16 District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) participated in an exchange visit to Vavuniya and Jaffna. The members shared the social, economic and cultural situation in their respective districts and identified many issues of concern.

In Poonthotam village, they met 15 families of the disappeared who said they appreciated the visit of religious leaders to the north. They felt people in south were not listening to them. They were also unhappy with Buddhist monks in south opposing Constitutional reform. They wanted reparations and did not trust the Office of Missing Persons to find a solution because it was similar to previous commissions of inquiry into disappearances. They asked the army to give back the people who had been handed over to it. People in the group from the south who had missing family members shared their experiences with the villagers of Poonthotam.

The group then visited Kokkiliya village, home to 40 displaced families of all ethnic communities, where the major concern was the lack of livelihood opportunities for the mostly female headed households. Those who did have small businesses were unable to market their products. School facilities were poor. They had to travel far to find water and land for cultivation was scarce as was housing and other infrastructure.

When they met the Muslim community in Jaffna who had returned after being chased out by the LTTE during the war, the group heard stories of displacement and lost livelihoods, history and education. Many Muslims still lived in Puttalam as refugees because they were suspicious of Tamils in Jaffna. The Muslim community pointed out that they were unable to get a Muslim representative in Parliament from the district. When people came to discuss problems in the district, they paid attention to Tamils and not Muslims, who were disregarded although they had undergone the same hardships, community members said.

At the Udayan newspaper office, the group met Mr C. V. K. Sivagnanam, Chairman of Provincial Council, and discussed the views of people in the south and north on the current political situation. On the new Constitution, some people told DIRC members that they had no problem with Buddhism being given priority. Others believed that devolution was necessary to solve the political problem.



*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.*

## Resolve National Issues With Bipartisanship

Sri Lanka currently has a government of national unity comprising the two largest political parties, the UNP and SLFP, which have hitherto been rivals for political power. As can be expected the forthcoming local government elections have aggravated the tensions between them. It is customary that those who seek to win an election engage in boosting their own images and running down their rivals. The most recent cause for a spike in tensions came with President Maithripala Sirisena's application to the Supreme Court to obtain its opinion on the duration of his term of office. This action was taken in the midst of public disaffection with the government's handling of the Central Bank bond scam case.

The National Peace Council is pleased that in compliance with the principles of good governance, President Sirisena has accepted the opinion of the Supreme Court, thereby reaffirming the supremacy of the Constitution and the Rule of Law. However, recent reports that the President has taken offence at the various statements made against him on public platforms by members of the government in this regard are a matter of concern to us. We welcome Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's admonition to his party members to desist from public criticism of the President. At the same time we value the check and balance function that having two parties in power brings to the government in tackling national issues. The exposure of the Central Bank bond scam is a relevant example.

The National Peace Council also stresses the importance of the two parties working together to bring resolution to the country's protracted ethnic conflict. We believe that the present partnership of the UNP and SLFP is of utmost importance and needs to be nurtured and preserved until the national ethnic issue is finally resolved. Previous efforts to find a solution foundered on the rocks of narrow political partisanship. We urge the resumption of both the constitutional reform and transitional justice processes after the conclusion of the local government elections. The leadership provided by the President and the Prime minister will be crucial in giving proper direction to the future of the country and taking it out of the shallows in which it has been stuck for too long.

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