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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

July
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Religious Leaders Share Stories of Success in Peace Building

Four hundred participants including religious leaders of all faiths, government officials, university academics, students and representatives from youth organizations and civil society organizations attended NPC's Inter Religious Symposium held in Colombo.

NPC has set up 16 District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in all parts of the country, which contribute to civil society's efforts to address conflict transformation and reconciliation by building community support for the national Transitional Justice process, especially truth telling and building trust within their communities.

The main objective of the symposium was to acknowledge the successes and failures of the intervention process by DIRCs in addressing ethnic and religious issues in selected districts. This will provide important lessons in dealing with the current issue of inter community and inter religious violence that troubles the country.

Addressing the symposium former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Chairperson of Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), stressed the urgent need for a new Constitution, which was necessary to build national unity and peace.



“Minority rights should be ensured by law through the Constitution, either with amendments or with a new Constitution. The government has to do this. It is moving very slowly,” she said.

The foundation for development, she said, lies through peace. “NPC is rendering a very important service. Let us all get together and strengthen the process.”

She said it was good to see that Buddhist monks were getting together at district level and working towards reconciliation.

Mano Ganesan, Minister of National Integration, Reconciliation and Official Languages, said the question of language use was one of the main issues in the ethnic conflict. He said his ministry was taking measures to ensure that the provisions on language use in the current Constitution were implemented, including training language officers and using technology for translating.

NPC Chairman Joe William pointed out that religious intolerance was still a threat undermining the hard work to build reconciliation and peace. However, Sri Lanka was a multi ethnic and multi religious country whose survival depended on being able to coexist harmoniously.

“The challenge is for communities to live peacefully and denounce acts of violence. All religions preach the golden rule - do not do to another what you do not want done to yourself,” he said.

German Ambassador Jorn Rohde thanked the DIRCs for their daily work that created trust and understanding among communities in Sri Lanka. He added that religions impacted all people and were a source of solidarity, while playing an important role in promoting peace.

Representatives from the 16 districts shared gave an overview of the ethnic and religious issues that created conflict in their areas and highlighted instances where DIRCs had intervened and prevented an escalation of tension and violence.



Resolution Calls for Holistic Reconciliation Strategy

Members of the National Inter Religious Committee representing the District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) established in 16 districts under the guidance of NPC handed over a resolution to former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, Chairperson of Office for National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), and Mano Ganesan, Minister of National Integration, Reconciliation and Official Languages, at a National Inter Religious Symposium in Colombo.

The major role of DIRCs was to intervene in the resolving of conflicts in the districts of Jaffna, Vavuniya, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Puttalam, Kurunegala, Badulla, Moneragala, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Ratnapura, Hambantota, Matara, Galle and Kalutara due to inter ethnic and inter religious unrest and to build reconciliation at grass root level.

The resolution was presented with the view to eventually forwarding the issues identified by DIRCs and recommendations for solving them to responsible national level institutions.

- Recommendation 1: Develop school education reforms and implement them for building reconciliation.
- Recommendation 2: Reform Sunday School education for developing reconciliation, co-existence and attitudes.
- Recommendation 3: Take steps to heal the minds of victims affected by the war.
- Recommendation 4: Develop a national media policy for building national reconciliation.
- Recommendation 5: Strengthen the national reconciliation programme of the government.
- Recommendation 6: Social protection and multi-cultural promotion and building a humanitarian society.



Young People Speak Out on Transitional Justice

Two workshops on Transitional Justice (TJ) for youth were held in Kurunegala and Jaffna under NPC's project Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace, with the participation of the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM).

At the Kurunegala workshop, which included people from the Puttalam District, participants said that seeking the truth was a necessity. They wanted counselling and memorialisation as part of reparations as well as a financial plan for those who were affected by the war.

One participant said that as there was no way to learn the Tamil language, he was unable to communicate properly with Tamils and Muslims because of the language barrier. All the participants agreed that war crimes had been committed. The majority of them disagreed with the statement that the LTTE had fought for Tamil people's rights. Most of the participants accepted that Muslim people had suffered because of the war. Some of them believed that international intervention was needed to investigate war crimes.

The Jaffna workshop included participants from Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi. Most of the youth had been directly affected by the war and had no hope in government initiatives on TJ. They had to be persuaded to reflect on their responsibility to act as a pressure group for the state programme on TJ. They had not been interested in knowing about TJ but through the training, they saw the opportunity to engage with other young people in the country about the issue.

Female participants were encouraged to contribute to the discussions during the workshop and showed the importance of hearing marginalized voices.



Support for Victims of Human Rights Abuses

NPC has launched a project to set up and maintain Human Rights First Aid Centers (HRFACs) where victims of human rights abuses can seek support and redress. The project, Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT), is supported by the European Union under its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights Country Based Support Scheme (CBSS).

The ACE-IT project is a 30-month intervention being implemented in the districts of Nuwara Eliya, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Jaffna, Mannar, Gampaha, Galle, Matara, Hambantota, Badulla and Moneragala. It is carried out in partnership with the Right to Life Human Rights Centre (R2L), an NGO working to protect and promote human rights in Sri Lanka.

The project also involves working with Women's and Children's Desks at police stations to sensitise them towards victims, educating government sector officers including law enforcement officers on available mechanisms to support human rights awareness and providing legal support for victims seeking right to information.

Ten orientation programmes have been completed. By August, HRFACs will be set up in Jaffna, Mannar and Batticaloa.

An HRFAC is a centre that aims to give victims and survivors of human rights abuses advice and guidance on the how to proceed and seek redress for their grievances. NPC will be working with local partner organizations in areas where a HRFAC is established.

Examining Religious Tension in Beruwela

A series of dialogues with religious leaders in Beruwela, aimed at bringing together Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders to identify and discuss the root causes of religious tension and to make suggestions for possible solutions, is being held under NPC's project, Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The most recent dialogue was with 33 Muslim religious leaders where the issues they faced because of the actions of other communities were identified and possible solutions were suggested.

A meeting with both Buddhist and Muslim religious leaders, with the participation of Divisional Secretariat officers, police and local politicians, will be held for both communities to discuss their concerns and agree on possible solutions.

The idea of the dialogues originated in the action plan that was developed at the first meeting of the Beruwela Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) in March this year after the clashes between the Sinhalese and Muslim communities occurred in Kandy. The members of the LIRC suggested identifying early warnings of communal conflicts and taking action to prevent them.

The first two dialogues were held with 20 Buddhist monks at the Beruwela Divisional Secretariat. The fears and suspicions of Buddhist monks, many related to religious tension, were identified and discussed in detail. Muslim religious leaders also gathered on the same day discuss their concerns and come with possible solutions.

Trust Building Activities Outdoors

Create Closer Bonds

DIRCs in Batticaloa and Trincomalee organized outdoor activities for 33 participants as a bonding and team building exercise under NPC's project Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Sri Lanka. DIRC members felt that these activities were necessary to build trust and acceptance of each other, which would lead to better ways of dealing with conflict and finding inner peace.

Trust building exercises at the two outdoor events helped participants to get to know one other and lower inhibitions, especially as they came from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

A Batticaloa DIRC member, who was a retired Moulavi, recalled how all communities used to live peacefully in the Batticaloa district and shared their limited resources to develop education, health and infrastructure. However, now politicians had created divisions among the communities for their own benefit to gain votes during election time, he said.

At the monthly meetings, DIRC members shared their understanding of early warning and early response mechanisms.

The main issues identified in the Batticaloa district were that students were not attending Sunday School because they had tuition classes, posters against the Hindu religion, unfair state land allocation and racist statements by local politicians.

In the Trincomalee district, drug abuse was identified as a major problem as well as repaying micro finance loans, child abuse and the selection of the trustees to kovils and mosques.



Non Violent Communication as a Tool To Transform Society

Members of Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) in Weligama including religious leaders, Grama Niladharis, police officers, government officials and civil society leaders, were trained on Non Violent Communication (NVC) under NPC's project, Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The training provided a conceptual overview of NVC as well as practical skills. NVC is a tool for personal and individual transformation that would ultimately change a society.

The training was facilitated by two resource persons from the Centre for Communication Training. The theoretical overview was complemented by an analysis of case studies. The workshop format combined role playing, flow dances, presentations, group work and reflections. There was an emphasis on the skills and processes necessary for creative NVC strategies.

Participants were taught methods of communication developed by Dr Marshall Rosenberg that encouraged compassionate responses to emotions and fostered empathy instead of blaming and judging one's self and others. They learnt about universal needs and that when those needs were met, people had peace, joy, and love. When needs were not being met, there were feelings such as frustration, anger and fear.

The participants were introduced to the four-step process to enable effective empathetic communication to manage conflicts and identified the difference between strategies of communication and strategies of NVC. They were able to improve their skills on empathetic communication, which created heart to heart connections among people and groups.

The activities helped participants to improve their empathetic skills and clarify the difference between evaluations, story telling, judgements, advice and empathy.



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.

Victims Must Not Be Held Hostage to Politics

The government has established an Office of Missing Persons (OMP) and is now in the process of passing legislation to establish an Office for Reparations as part of its commitment to ensure post war reconciliation. The government promised to set up these mechanisms, amongst other reform measures, during the September 2015 session of the UN Human Rights Council.

The National Peace Council has welcomed the establishment of the OMP in February 2018 with the appointment of independent commissioners led by those with long records of human rights activism. The credibility of an institution depends greatly on who runs it and those who currently lead the OMP are those who have been committed to inter-ethnic and inter religious justice for decades.

The NPC appreciates that the government continues with its post-war reconciliation process despite strong opposition from nationalists and party political rivals on both sides of the ethnic divide. This opposition is fueled both by misinformation about the purpose of these reconciliation mechanisms and by the desire to gain partisan political advantage.

Political opponents of the government have been alleging that the OMP is meant to find evidence against the Sri Lankan security forces and take them to international war crimes tribunals and to a non-existent electric chair at The Hague. They have accused the government of betraying the security forces and deserving to be punished as traitors. Ironically in the North too there has been opposition to the OMP.

The NPC is concerned about the protests that are taking place at information sessions of the OMP. Public meetings held by the OMP have seen victim families being prevented from gaining access to the meeting place by those protesting against the OMP which includes both political activists and victim families themselves. We deplore making victims a part of a political agenda of any side.

The issue of how best to deal with the past continues to divide Sri Lankan society. There are different points of view as to how best move forward. However, there is a need to respect the right of victims and their families regarding their engagement with mechanisms set up by the government. The right of people to attend the sessions of the OMP without disruption is paramount. The NPC calls on the government, political parties and civil society to ensure that the right of the people to make their own decisions is respected.

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