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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka



# Paths To Peace

FEBRUARY 2024

## National Symposium Highlights Reconciliation Through Religion

The National Symposium on Religions to Reconcile: Strengthening Inclusive Reconciliation was held in Colombo under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project, marking the conclusion of the project that covered 17 districts.

Participants at the symposium included President Ranil Wickremesinghe, former speaker Karu Jayasuriya, German Ambassador Dr. Felix Neumann, Head of Cooperation of the European Union Mr. Johann Hesse, former minister Prof. G. L. Peiris, Misereor Regional Officer Corinna Broeckmann, former MP Ferial Ashraff, MP Mano Ganesan, MP Eran Wickramaratne, MP Rauff Hakeem, former MP Nalinda Jayatissa, NPC chairman Dr. Joe William and NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera.

President Wickremesinghe expressed his support for the project's achievements, drawing a link between religion and reconciliation. He called on the religious leaders to come forward to promote peaceful coexistence, adding that Sri Lanka was in the last part of reconciliation, which was coexistence. He cited disappearances as one of the issues that still needed to be addressed.

Dr. William likened inter religious dialogue to a treasure that united diverse religions on a path of righteousness. Emphasising principles of non-violence, he asked participants to journey together through injustices and challenging times, encouraging a spirit of cooperation and understanding.



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Mr. Jayasuriya noted that for the future of the country, national reconciliation was important. He said there was a consensus that religious leaders should join together as a positive movement for change. “There should be unity created between the North and South, which still requires trust building and gaining confidence among people.” He added that the problems should not be handed over to the next generation. “We should build a peaceful society in our country. I wish that,” Mr. Jayasuriya said.

Mr. Ganesan appealed to religious leaders not to get involved in politics, pointing out that there needed to be a distance between politics and religion. He emphasised that plurality and diversity should be celebrated. “People should not feel proud separately but as Sri Lankans,” he said.

Dr. Neumann said the religious dimension fostered through several NPC projects was important for people to heal from war and violence. “There should be a mutual acceptance of the past. I hope that recent constitutional reforms can contribute to addressing past grievances and promoting dialogue. The voices of all communities need to be respected,” he said.

Dr. Hesse observed that building trust was central to reconciliation. Engaging in dialogue, listening to one another would help in trust building. He expressed the hope that interventions such as this would help to rise above divisive rhetoric.

Ms. Broeckmann, who represented Misereor, the main donor partner of the PACT project under which this symposium took place, referred positively to the role of Civil Society Organisations, which are acting in a shrinking space. She affirmed that the core approach of Misereor was a global solidarity when it comes to civil society and to fill gaps where they are present in other countries.

Prof. Peiris said there was a need to genuinely engage in dialogue and express one’s views. He pointed out weakness in the political systems and communications and the need to implement the devolution of power.

Mr. Wickramaratne said that the main issue was that of majoritarianism and that it affected the thinking of all communities. He read out a special message sent by the Leader of the Opposition, Sajith Premadasa, in which he congratulated NPC on holding the symposium.

Mrs. Ashraff said that religion could be used as an excuse for certain behaviours. She noted that rights of women were accordingly restricted.

Mr. Hakeem regretted that reconciliation was not pursued at the close of the war when it had been most possible. He said that laws need take into account the prevailing context and reality.

Dr. Jayatissa said that people should be unified and be brought together rather than divided. He said that elections were important as this would ensure the sovereignty of the people.

Discussions at the symposium extended beyond religious dialogue, touching on the importance of an inclusive education system and the need for constitutional reforms to address past grievances. It brought to light various perspectives on reconciliation from acknowledging cultural differences to addressing language barriers. The consensus among speakers was clear: unity and trust building were essential for a peaceful future. The call for immediate action, avoiding the transference of unresolved issues to future generations, was a reminder of the urgency of reconciliation efforts.



# Capturing Stories Ethically and Respectfully

NPC's People Unite for Justice and Accountability (PUJA) project represents a significant step towards reconciliation and peacebuilding in the country. With a focus on independent, credible and transparent transitional justice processes, PUJA aims to redress past grievances and pave the path for a cohesive society.

During the orientation meetings with partner organizations Center for Human Rights and Development, Peace and Community Action and Right to Life the discussions focussed on the commitment to ethically and sensibly capturing stories while ensuring that stories are collected and shared with dignity and respect.

Amplifying voices and fostering empathy, the project and its partners reaffirmed their dedication to upholding ethical standards in narrative documentation and dissemination. The discussions facilitated a better understanding of each partnering organization's policies and boundaries, ensuring due respect for these boundaries in collaborative efforts.

The project prioritizes staff wellbeing through upcoming psychosocial support workshops. By providing essential tools for self-care, the project ensures the resilience of its team members, thereby enhancing their effectiveness in addressing challenging tasks.

## Empowering Youth and Human Rights Defenders in the Malaiyaha Community

A three day residential workshop was held for 30 youth community facilitators and human rights defenders in the Malaiyaha community representing 10 estates in the Sabaragamuwa Province. The workshop focused on improving the capacity, skills and leadership of youth facilitators to foster conducive relations between the facilitators and government officers. The facilitators and human rights defenders will be access points when faced with issues related to obtaining government services.

A leadership training programme was conducted by resource people at the workshop along with human rights, legal and policy framework, physical security of the Malaiyaha community and inclusive service delivery.

The participants were aware of the problems faced by the Malaiyaha community in getting government services but they were unable to properly analyse the problems, the legal framework for the related problems or the importance of inclusive service delivery.

At the leadership training, the participants were divided into groups to map the problems faced by the Malaiyaha community in accessing government services based on what they learned in the workshop and to choose one problem and think about how to solving it and what the legal framework was related to the problem.

The positive results of the post evaluation showed that the participants have acquired significant knowledge and skills that they could apply to actual situations.



# Addressing Inequality in Public Service Delivery in the Estate Sector

The lack of service delivery is the cause for many issues faced by the Malaiyaga Tamils. To address them NPC conducted a mobile service in the Sapumalkanda estate in the Kegalle District under its Protecting Civic Space in Sri Lanka Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project.

After 200 years since their arrival from South India, the Malaiyaga Tamil community continues to lack respectful citizenship and rights regarding public services.

People around the Sapumalkanda estate, including school children who do not have a national identity card or birth certificate, benefited from the mobile services.

Because many people were not aware of public service delivery by the government, they did not have a birth certificate, marriage certificate or a national identity card. If they wanted to get these documents, they were required to provide a letter from the estate manager certifying their residence on the estate. The estate management does not facilitate this process. The Grama Niladari, who works closely with the public and is responsible for the implementation of public services, is unable to read and write Tamil.

“This mobile service is very useful for us. Please continue this service so that others will also get the benefit in the future,” said one recipient.



## New NPC Project to Encourage Student Research

NPC’s new project, Mobilising University State Engagement for Reconciliation (MUSTER), aims to increase university students’ capacity to research, facilitating cooperation between academics and the state administration with a view to encouraging state entities to take informed decisions based on research.

Having chosen coordinators from the universities of Jaffna, Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa and Eastern, an introductory meeting was held on zoom attended by the coordinators, NPC’s Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera, the programme consultant and the NPC project staff.

Decisions were made regarding the selection criteria of the students, the activities that will be necessary and the best ways to proceed.



# From Negative Peace to Positive Peace

The need for political consensus with regard to the solution to the ethnic conflict and achievement of national reconciliation was notable at the national symposium organized by the National Peace Council on the theme of “Religions to Reconcile: Strengthening Inclusive Reconciliation” with the participation of over 300 religious clergy of different religions and grassroots leaders from inter-religious committees from 17 districts including the north and east. Political party leaders representing the government and opposition who participated in the symposium emphasized on the necessary steps to be taken, new mechanisms to be established and the need for an enabling environment.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe sketched out his reconciliation plan on the occasion and said that the country was in the last stages of the reconciliation process with the identification of the problem of prisoners, disappeared and missing persons and their resolution through a truth and reconciliation mechanism to be set up; the passage of a land commission law which would be implemented to deal with land issues; and provincial councils that could be strengthened through the concurrent list. In that regard he said that some Buddhist monks and Tamil leaders [from the Diaspora] had presented the Himalaya Declaration, which outlines points of convergence on a mutually acceptable solution which would be taken forward.

Opposition members expressed sentiments that focused on the need for an enabling environment including the adherence to the democratic process, holding of elections and independence of institutions. The National Peace Council observes that in the context of civil society’s work to create this enabling environment for peace and reconciliation, the proposed new NGO registration and supervision law would be a major setback. NPC is heartened by the message of Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa to the symposium that “We believe it is non-negotiable for any government to create a conducive environment for organisations dedicated to promote peace and reconciliation to carry forward their good work with minimum legal constraints.”

We believe that as much as there is a need for a consensus on resolving the ethnic conflict and bringing about national reconciliation, there needs to be a consensus on protecting democratic and human rights and civil society freedoms that create the enabling environment for state mechanisms to have credibility and to work effectively, in providing software to the system. Such a consensus alone can bring about the positive peace that the late Professor Johan Galtung posited, where all people feel that the state protects and nurtures them, in contrast to negative peace, which is merely the absence of war.

*Media release issued on 29.02.2024*



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**National Peace Council of Sri Lanka**

*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.*

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