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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

August 2016

## Truth Forums to Prepare for Truth Commission

Provincial level truth forums will be conducted under NPC's project Reconciling Inter Religious and Inter Ethnic Differences (RIID). District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members are being trained to how to identify a victim and how to collect their stories so that they can understand the importance of truth telling in building reconciliation.

Selected members of some DIRCs are now collecting the information from victims. Chosen stories will be shared at the provincial level truth forum. In this way, DIRC members will have the skills to serve as a compassionate council at a community level. Victims will be able to submit their stories to the Truth Commission to be set up by the government in the national reconciliation process.

Sustaining the reconciliation process requires widespread support from the general population. One of the key problems NPC has observed in its fieldwork is the lack of empathy of participants for the other side's experience of the war.

This lack of empathy can be attributed to the participants being embedded in their own communities, and being the recipients of a single narrative from their own perspective. The Truth Forums being designed by NPC will seek to provide a platform to share the wartime experiences of different communities. The Truth Forums will be moderated by religious leaders and will provide an opportunity for the larger community to see that they too have a role to play in the search for justice to victims.

Introductory workshops have been conducted to take this message to the membership of the DIRCs. This will be a civil society initiative that will support the government's intention of establishing a truth seeking commission as pledged by the government to the UN Human Rights Council in September 2015.

DIRCs are being trained in facilitating the Truth Forums as they are headed by religious leaders who have the trust of the community, and have also built up amicable relations with each other. It is envisaged that the experiences of victims will be presented by religious clergy if there is a danger of re-traumatisation of victims who narrate their own stories.

The Truth Forums are designed to capture all voices from the perspective of multiple truths, and not just one truth or one narrative. They will not be forums for narrative and counter-narrative, but rather a space where multiple narratives get woven together in the search for justice for the victims.

# NPC Gives Proposals To Task Force

The Zonal Task Force for the Western Province, which invited submissions from civil society organisations and members of the public, received submissions from NPC members on August 15. An NPC team obtained a meeting with the Task Force at the Divisional Secretariat Office in Colombo. The idea of a Compassionate Council consisting of religious clergy that was mooted by the government delegation to the UN Human Rights Council in September 2015, as a part of the Truth Commission, was supported by the NPC members.

NPC members led by Saman Seneviratne, who manages the inter religious programme of the organisation, proposed that the Compassionate Council should be linked to district level religious clergy who could be message bearers of the reconciliation process and also serve as psycho social support structures to victims who might provide evidence before the Truth Commission and suffer re-traumatisation as a result.

In addition, the NPC members provided data and information about the consultation process that NPC itself has been engaging with community leaders on the government's proposed reconciliation and transitional justice approach. The positive feedback they have been receiving in their consultation process includes a willingness to accommodate international participation in the envisaged judicial accountability mechanism. They emphasised the need to broad base and further intensify the process of public education on the reconciliation process as knowledge about what the government is proposing to do is not well known at the community level. This leaves open a vacuum of knowledge that can be filled by nationalist propaganda and inaccurate information that can reduce the public support for the transitional justice process.

## Early Warning for Conflict Mitigation

Under NPC's Initiating Multi-level Partnership for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT), a second series of workshops was conducted highlighting the theme of early warning for members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in Badulla, Kurunegala, Polonnaruwa, Ratnapura and Hambantota.

Participants are being trained on how to recognise impending conflicts and how to respond. Topics include the basic elements and various stages of a conflict, how to do conflict analysis using conflict mapping and later at the field level, how to take necessary action to protect their communities from escalated violations and to support post war transition.



Following a training of trainers workshop in July for selected members, participants are being provided with a more broad based training to ensure that conflicts in their areas are resolved through interventions before they escalate.

The first element in the training is in early warning to help them identify the tensions within their communities that may be lying beneath the surface. Adjuncts to the early warning training are other specialised trainings in conflict analysis and in analysing stakeholder responses.

# DIRCs Find Solutions To Language Discrepancies

Under NPC's project Reconciling Inter Ethnic and Inter Religious Difference (RIID) a meeting of the Kandy DIRC identified three issues relevant to reconciliation that needed to be addressed in the district.



The first issue was about the commentary at the on going Kandy perahera that was done only in Sinhala. This meant that Tamil people could not understand the explanations of the rituals, dances and history even though there were several Tamil cultural items included in the pageants.

The second issue was protests about road name boards, bus name boards and signs on government buildings having errors in the Tamil versions. Despite many complaints, no action had been taken to correct them, giving the impression that the government was not interested in advancing the cause of reconciliation between the two communities.

The third issue concerned the classification of estate Tamils as Indian Tamils, which they said led to discrimination when it came to getting birth certificates, identity cards and government jobs. People from the estates in the district wanted to be classified as Sri Lankan Tamils on documentation.

DIRC Kandy decided to start a campaign to persuade the government to rectify these shortcomings, starting with discussions with the Chief Minister and the District Secretary. DIRC members submitted written requests about first two issues. The Chief Minister and the District Secretary recognised these concerns and said they would be corrected as soon as possible. The next day, a Tamil commentary was included in the Kandy perahera.

As a next step, DIRC members will meet the governor and raise other matters with her.

At the Nuwara Eliya DIRC meeting, too, the absence of government officials who were fluent in Tamil was raised. Officials taking down names for a birth certificate or a form, for example, wrote them down in Sinhala as they heard them and often got it wrong. As a result, there was a great deal of confusion and misinterpretation. People felt the government was not taking their requests for Tamil speaking officers seriously. They wanted officers who understood proper pronunciation and could write in the language.

A decision was taken to discuss the issue with government officials in district. In the Kotmale area, a member of the DIRC took the problem to the Divisional Secretary, explaining that the lack of a Grama Sevaka who knew proper Tamil was causing complications for the people. The Divisional Secretary agreed to appoint a Tamil speaking Grama Sevaka and the new official has already taken up his post.

*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.*

## OMP is Part of Larger Transitional Justice Process

The passage of the Office of Missing Persons bill (OMP), albeit in controversial circumstances in Parliament, augurs well for the forward movement of the reconciliation process. The National Peace Council welcomes the new law, and the legal foundation of the first of the four transitional justice mechanisms that the government has pledged to establish.

We are disappointed that the Joint Opposition members failed to cooperate with the parliamentary process, and refused to debate the new law according to the agreed schedule in parliament. It was unfortunate that those who were human rights champions in the 1980 and 1990s, and widely admired for this, displayed their opposition to OMP by word and deed.

The underlying rationale of the OMP is that people need to know what happened to their loved ones so that they can stop the endless search for them. It is to help them to end the search, and to bring closure to that open wound that exists in the body politic. The purpose of the OMP is to find out what happened to those missing that stretch back decades and to the insurrections that took place in the South of the country and were bloodily suppressed.

The OMP law constitutes the maximum effort that the Sri Lankan state can take to find out where they are if they are living and if not living what happened to them. This is why evidence that is not admissible in courts of law is admissible in the OMP investigation. This is also why evidence that is confidential is permissible, which even the Right to Information Act cannot access.

We note that the OMP is a very important element of the country's transitional justice process and the set of institutions and measures outlined the government. But it is only one part of the process of transitional justice. After the successful passage of the OMP bill in parliament, government spokespersons have said that the government would set up a Truth Commission, a judicial mechanism to deal with accountability (and punishment) issues and an office of reparations.

We believe that these additional mechanisms that the government has still to set up will offer more avenues for truth and accountability seeking. Truth, justice and reconciliation will be delivered via the totality of these bodies, and not just the OMP. We call on the government, opposition and society at large to cooperate in the implementation of the OMP and the setting up of the other transitional justice mechanisms so that the past does not stand in the way of Sri Lanka's future as a just, peaceful and developed society.

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