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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

October 2016

NPC Takes Transitional Justice To Jaffna University

Fifty faculty members and 60 students of the University of Jaffna attended two workshops on Transitional Justice (TJ) conducted by NPC under its project Initiating Multi-level Partnership for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT).

TJ has four pillars: truth, prosecution, reparations and institutional reform. The students were asked to work in groups to prioritise one of the four pillars. They discussed the question and reported back to the workshop.



Five of the nine student groups chose institutional reform as their first priority as it was the long term solution. They said that if this was achieved, the other three pillars could be accomplished over time. Four of the nine groups chose truth as their priority. They said that without truth it was difficult to find out what the problem was and what the best answer would be. It was necessary for the government to give detailed answers about what had happened during the war, as well as addressing suspicions that Sinhalese colonisation was still happening in the North and East.

The external resource persons were Lal Wijenayake, chairman of the Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reforms and Raga Alphonsus, a member of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms for Mannar District.

The Eluga Tamil (Tamils arise) rally that took place in Jaffna in September gave a picture of resurgent Tamil nationalism. The demands put forward by the organisers included a call for federalism, return of land in the Army's control, release of political prisoners, an international investigation into war crimes and addressing the issue of missing persons. Some of the academics at the workshop explained that they supported the Eluga Tamil event but not all its slogans.

Although there were critical questions and comments, the discussion was constructive and cooperative. The outcome of the student presentations showed that even the students, who are always more radical than their elders, were practical in their expectations.

NPC Fosters Reconciliation In Batticaloa

One hundred students drawn from the Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim communities attended a NPC workshop on Transitional Justice at the Eastern University in Batticaloa conducted under its project Initiating Multi-level Partnership for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT).

In their group discussion, when they were asked to list their priorities in terms of reconciliation, the students said that the law must apply equally to all, regardless of status or ethnicity. They also recommended having educational campaigns on the important reform processes within the country so that politicians could not exploit the ignorance of the people.

The students took care not to hurt the sentiments of those of other ethnicities. However, none of the students were aware of the public consultation process that had taken place with regard to both constitutional change and the reconciliation mechanisms. This corresponds with the findings of public opinion surveys on public knowledge about political processes.

In the absence of public education programmes, there was a danger that nationalist propaganda could fill the vacuum. Among them are charges made by the Eluga Tamil protest rally is that there is Sinhalese colonisation of Tamil lands and the building of Buddhist temples in these areas. Charges that give emotive or misleading interpretations about the reforms that are taking place are made in the South. The possible resurrection of the LTTE due to the actions of the government and the division of the country by the international community are some of the favourite propaganda lines. Unless countered effectively this can lead to a loss of trust and confidence and back to a negative cycle of renewed conflict.

Peace Building Through Sport In Jaffna

NPC, in collaboration with the Centre for Communication Training, provided the peace building component at a sports event organised by the Foundation for Goodness in Jaffna, which included the participation of cricket star Muttiah Muralitharan. The event was supported by Netball Australia.

Coaches and students from six schools each in Jaffna and Galle were given skills training in netball by Netball Australia. They were also offered a broader perspective about living together peacefully in a united country.

Representatives from Netball Australia were satisfied with the success of the event. They said that at a similar programme in an African country, children from two conflicting communities had refused to sit together. In Sri Lanka children and adults of the different ethnic and religious communities got along, which was an advantage when it came to strengthening post war reconciliation.

Students from the north and south were put into mixed groups and asked to draw a picture that described what they are, wish to be and hope to become. They were asked to explain their drawings to those in their group. Although most students could not speak in the language of the other community, they managed to explain what their drawings meant.

One child drew a pen and wrote letters in the Sinhala, Tamil and English alphabets. She explained that she was the pen and writing her own life, and that it would be lived in the three languages.

RIID And IMPACT Focus On TJ and Coexistence

Under NPC's two projects, Reconciling Inter Religious and Inter Ethnic Differences (RIID) and Initiating Multi-level Partnership for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT), monthly meetings were held in 16 districts across the country.

Action plans to solve identified issues were followed up and arrangements were made to conduct Transitional Justice (TJ) workshops to create community awareness about the TJ framework being implemented by the government.



Lawyer Jagath Liyanaarachchi and NPC Project Manager Saman Seneviratne spoke on the interconnection between human rights and transitional justice, the relevance of TJ to Sri Lanka and how to use TJ as a tool to build reconciliation.

Under the RIID project, Matara DIRC conducted a youth programme attended by 140 students from the three communities. Teachers and parents also participated. The objective of the event was to enhance awareness of the multi cultural nature of the Matara district and how to coexist without ethnic and religion conflict.

Under the IMPACT project, Hambantota DIRC conducted a similar youth programme in Hambantota for 150 Sinhala and Muslim students as well as teachers and parents.

Jaffna DIRC Joins Protest Over Student Killings

Jaffna District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) leaders took part in a protest against the killing of two university students by police, which had created a tense situation in the north. Victims' families, students, academic staff and human rights activists participated in the protest outside the Northern Province governor's office.



The DIRC religious leaders later visited the victims' families and expressed their sympathy. They contributed funds to each of the families.

Women's Groups Tackle Language Barrier

“Tell me anything but don't tell me he's dead,” were the words Kanmani muttered as she took out a letter from her bag, tears rolling from her eyes. “My son went missing in Mannar in 2007 and there is no place in this country I haven't gone to find him, to see him one last time. I've been to every police station, army camp, government office and commission,” she says.



In 2014, Kanmani was informed about the Presidential Commission to Investigate into Complaints Regarding Missing Persons. She was one of the first people in her village to go before the Commission. “I will not lose hope, I know my son is alive somewhere,” she says.

She told the Commission everything she knew in her native tongue and the Commission contacted her twice via letters in Tamil. However on February 16, Kanmani received her final letter from the Commission in a language she did not understand; English. Living in a secluded village in Vavuniya, Kanmani knew no one who read or understood English. “I was helpless, I didn't know where to go or whom to ask,” she recalls.

Kanmani is one of the many women NPC has been able to reach out to through its project Post Conflict Healing: A Women's Manifesto supported by FOKUS Women. It was during an exchange visit to connect the North with the South that Kanmani told her story, only to find that many others had also received letters in English from the same Commission.

The women's networks that NPC had established started a signature campaign to address this breach of the national language policy and to ensure that the government did not repeat the mistake.

The women's groups collected over 1,400 signatures from across the country. On September 29, the first copy of the petition was submitted to Mr. Mano Tittawella, the Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Tittawella promised he would ensure that such errors would not be made in future Transitional Justice mechanisms. He noted that letters needed to show empathy when giving details about investigations or information found about the missing person. He recommended that victims should be informed personally with psychosocial support instead through an impersonal letter that they did not even understand. After the meeting Kanmani says she feels more secure about Transitional Justice mechanisms in the country and hopes that they will help her to find her missing son.

The women's networks will raise the issue with other government authorities such as the Ministry of National Co-existence, Dialogue and Official Languages, Office Of National Unity and Reconciliation and Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation.

Restoring Normalcy Is A Priority

The importance of restoring normalcy to the North has become evident in the aftermath of the fatal shooting incident involving two university students. The students were shot by police when they failed to stop at a police check point in the early hours of the morning. Students and businesses in Jaffna have been engaging in public protests.

There are suspicions voiced in the North that this was a planned incident to deliberately create tensions, which would justify a continued strong military presence. In a context in which the North (and East) of the country continue to remain militarized, with large contingents of military personnel in the two provinces, such incidents are also bound to be seen in ethnic terms and therefore contribute to a spiral of negative sentiment.

The National Peace Council condemns the shooting of the unarmed students and welcomes President Maithripala Sirisena's swift order to the police to conduct an investigation of this incident. He has also ordered compensation to the bereaved families. We condole with the families who have experienced this tragedy. We call for an impartial investigation that will be seen to be impartial in addition to being impartial. We are aware of a massive trust deficit due to the lack of normalcy in the affairs of the North. We also note that the initial report filed by the police stated that the deaths were caused by a traffic accident. The five police personnel involved have been arrested which is a positive indication of the law taking its course.

In restoring normalcy to the North and East of the country, where most of the three decade long war was fought, we call on the government to emphasize the building of good relations between the police and the people. The local recruitment of more police officers will be necessary. We also call on the government to work with the elected authorities in the North and East, especially the provincial councils to ensure that law and order prevails in a manner so that the people feel greater confidence that all levels of government are functioning for their benefit.

At the present time the government is absorbed in a constitutional reform exercise that involves the whole parliament but whose outcome is not certain. Instead of waiting an indefinite period for this constitutional reform process to be finalized, we call on the government to implement the 13th Amendment to the constitution, which exists as the supreme law of the land, and devolve police powers to the provincial councils. Sustainable solutions require dealing with all of the relevant issues articulated by civilians and political leaders in the North and East. It equally demands that all interests are at least acknowledged, if not entirely satisfied in the short term. Failure to do so would potentially lead to negative outcomes in the long term.



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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.

Heed Voice From North And Answer Allegations

The protest march and mass rally organized by the Tamil People's Council in Jaffna has been criticized by the government and generated misgivings in the rest of the polity. The TNA, which is the main Tamil party in North, has disavowed the protest. It has said that launching a protest march like Eluga Tamils (Rise Up Tamils!) is not beneficial to the Tamil people at this time when discussions are being conducted for a new constitution. On the other hand, the protest has the support of Tamil parties and groups that are outside of the present constitutional talks and other government-led reconciliation processes. The large number of people who attended the rally, estimated to be 10 to 15,000 indicates a substantial degree of public participation and support for the protest.

The issues highlighted at these events reflect long standing Tamil grievances, aspirations and fears. They include the demand that Tamil aspiration for a federal solution be recognized in the new constitutional reforms, that an international inquiry be conducted on the closing stages of the war, the pull out of military units from the Northern province, the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and the release of Tamil detainees. There were also allegations about the government's allegedly intentional moves to reduce Tamil population density in the region and promote Buddhism.

The National Peace Council is hopeful that the draft constitution currently being developed by a Parliamentary Committee headed by the Prime Minister and comprising elected representatives of the Tamil and Muslim people, will meet the aspirations and concerns of all communities. We believe that Sri Lanka has entered into a period of conflict transformation. There is a new relationship between the government and the main Tamil and Muslim parties so that the issues at hand can be addressed at a different level, which offers the chance to resolve the problem in a new way. At the same time we also believe that the voice from the North needs to be heeded and not ignored or rejected, as it represents the grievances, aspirations and fears of a substantial number of people who are also stakeholders in a peaceful and reconciled country.

Allegations that give emotive interpretations about the reforms that are taking place are made in the South of the country as well, and not only in the North. The possible resurrection of the LTTE due to the actions of the government and the division of the country by the international community are some of the propaganda claims. Unless countered effectively this can lead to a loss of trust and confidence and back to a negative cycle of renewed conflict. The perception that the people of the North are rejecting the government's approach to peace building can strengthen the extremist forces in the rest of the polity. We call on the government to answer each and every one of the allegations made against its reconciliation process and to take this message to the people through an effective communication strategy.

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