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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

December 2016

Project Highlights Women's Views On Transitional Justice

The National Peace Council (NPC) presented the findings of its project, Post Conflict Healing: A Women's Manifesto, at a national level meeting at SLIDA on December 15. The findings included policy briefing papers, a Women's Manifesto and a video.

The meeting was attended by Minister of National Co-existence Dialogue and Official Languages Mr. Mano Ganesan,

Secretary-General of the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms Mr. Mano Tittawella, Chairperson of the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms Ms. Manouri Muttetuewgama, NPC Board Member and Founder and Chair of the Association of War Affected Women Ms. Visaka Dharmadasa, and Country Director (Sri Lanka) FOKUS Dr. Shyamala Gomez.



Minister Ganesan stressed the importance of getting involved in the peace building and reconciliation process, pointing out that neither women in the north nor the south had seen justice served or received compensation for trauma they had suffered during the war.

He urged them not to wait for the government to take action but to take their futures into their own hands and start making their own decisions. "We need to build hearts and minds of people to develop the country. We cannot do it without women. Women must take on the leadership," he said.

NPC's project was implemented with the support of FOKUS from April 2014 in nine districts across the country that were both directly and indirectly affected by the war: Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee, Ampara, Galle, Hambantota, Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, and Puttalam. The policy briefing papers and manifesto are outcomes of the objective to bring women's voices at the grass roots to the forefront of the reconciliation process.

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The project mobilised women to take an active part in community healing, to establish lasting peace and to increase the participation of women in the process of post conflict transition.

It also trained participants on Transitional Justice (TJ), women's rights, role of women in post conflict society, reconciliation, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission and its recommendations and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 that deals with women and security.



The briefing papers, which covered the topics of restitution of land and property and economic reintegration, physical security, psychological recovery, democratisation and governance and justice, will be presented to decision makers with the aim that the affected women's concerns and recommendations will be considered in the future reconciliation process to ensure it is more gender sensitive.

NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera said women were being excluded from decision-making. Through the project, NPC had been able to reveal what women thought, their hopes and aspirations. "Women have different priorities than men and we have been able to bring those priorities to the fore," he said.

Three women from Puttalam, Mannar and Hambantota told the meeting about the trauma they had undergone during the war and the difficulties they were now facing as widows bringing up families and encountering discrimination in many forms. By participating in the project, they had come to realise that all communities suffered during the war, not just their own, and were able to understand and sympathise with the others.

Given the opportunity to ask questions from Minister Ganesan, the women cited the non-implementation of the language policy as a major drawback to reconciliation. Tamil speaking government officials, doctors and lawyers were not available in the north and east, causing many problems in the daily lives of the people.

Another woman asked why the Office of Missing Persons had not been established despite the passing of legislation while others said they were still looking for missing relatives without any success and one asked why political prisoners were not being released.

"My husband died in the war when my child was two years old. I was angry because I thought Tamil people were the cause of my suffering but when NPC took us on a visit to the north, I understood that the women there had suffered even more. Now we are not angry, we sympathise with the Tamil people and realise we have to be together. NPC has been a pillar of strength to me."

Yamuna Badrani Hambantota

Over and over again those who spoke, either as victims or as observers, said this must never happen again. The victims who testified will be expecting some remedial measures to be taken to address their urgent needs.

Apart from saying never again, those who participated in the Truth Forums said that something had to be done to address the needs of the victims. Government servants who attended, although not in their official capacities, pledged that they would do what was in their power to help



the victims from within the structures of government. Community leaders said they would see what they could do to follow up on the disclosures made.

However, along with these positive indications of the willingness of the community to take on the task of reconciliation, there were also intrusions of harsher realities. The ability of civil society organisations to solve people's problems cannot be compared to that of the government. In one location, the manager of the conference hall was visited by the security forces. They questioned and intimidated him so much that he said he would no longer provide facilities for such a programme.

The positive outcome of the civil society led Truth Forums points to the promise of the government's Truth Commission which is about to be established. It also suggests that instead of a single and centralised Truth Commission, a decentralised process of truth seeking could also be envisaged.

Alongside the main Truth Commission, there could be local level Truth Commissions that are entrusted to local community and religious leaders and which feed into the government-led truth seeking process.

"The issues were very complex. We, the citizens of Sri Lanka, irrespective of North, East or West, should take care to prevent another war in the country. After experiencing three decades of war, the opportunity is available for all citizens to unite as children of one mother. Politicians should refrain from igniting the flames of communalism just to achieve their narrow ends of coming to power."

**R. Vasantha Senass
Chairman of the Truth Forum
Jaffna**

The conviction that the violence and human rights violations of the past must never again happen needs to capture the mass imagination to facilitate constitutional reform that unlocks the door to a lasting political solution to the decades long ethnic conflict.

Their Stories of Loss and Pain; Their Questions Unanswered

“My husband was killed during the JVP instruction in 1989. In the night, armed gunmen came to my house and said they were from the Army. They asked for my husband. A brother-in-law of my husband and another relation were also there. They assaulted my husband inside the house. I cried and my child also started crying. The following morning my mother went everywhere in search of him. We made a complaint at the police station. I found out that my husband, his brother-in-law and the other relation had been killed and hanged on a tree. I was left alone with my child. My husband was not involved in any illegal activity. Since his death I have led a miserable life. On several occasions I thought of committing suicide. Who took my husband away? Why? What was his crime? Who answers these questions? Who will bring justice?”

Colombage Priyanthi

“A large number of soldiers died when the Kottadi army camp was attacked by the LTTE. Some other soldiers disappeared. My son was one of them. I live in Deniyaya. My husband was dead and I have five children. I became a labourer to support them. My fourth child joined the Army in 1996. He regularly sent me money, which helped us to lead a better life. After the camp was attacked we went everywhere to find information about him. After about six months we received a letter from the Army saying that my son was missing. We received an allowance but it was stopped once my son’s wife got married again. I believe that my son is still living and I’m waiting for him to return one day. I live because of my other children.”

Landage Karunawathie

“My husband was abducted in 2007 by the Army in a white van. I made complaints about the abduction to the Uralu Army camp and Kopay police station. They did not take any action to trace my husband. Just after six months later, I saw him riding a motorbike with a soldier. Three years later I saw my husband in an Army truck. His mouth was covered with a piece of cloth. I’m a mother of two children. We lead miserable lives and I find it difficult to provide my children with food and education. I live with my mother and earn some money on daily basis, doing odd jobs as a labourer. What I need is justice. I want to know my husband’s whereabouts and what actually happened to him.”

Jayakanthan Narmila

“My husband was arrested by the Navy while he was on his way to catch fish in 1996 in Chavakachcheri. Other fishermen witnessed his arrest. I have informed the Human Rights Commission, the police and the Presidential Commission asking them to find out what had happened to my husband. We have been suffering over the years since my husband’s disappearance. I want to find out what really happened to my husband. Legal action should be taken and justice has to be done for the victims. Effective measures should be taken to prevent the recurrence of similar violence in future.”

Chitra Devi

“We had been running a bakery in Madu and our family was financially well off before six of them were gunned down by the LTTE between 1984 and 1985. My father, my two sisters-in-law and myself were at home in 1985 when three armed men came and demanded that my father to come out. When he refused one of them put a gun on my chest and threatened to kill me. Then he came out and was taken away. Then we heard a gun shot and my father never returned. My mother-in-law was killed with a crowbar and her mutilated body was found later near our bakery. Both the bakery and residence were set on fire. Some other members of our family were also gunned down by the LTTE. We lost everything. We have not received any financial assistance or compensation from the government or any other organisation.”

K. H. Priyanthi

Sticker Campaign in Polonnaruwa

Most people living in the Polonnaruwa District are Sinhalese Buddhists. It contains border villages that were attacked during the war.

Extremists have been able to promote their ideology and mislead people, damaging the relationship between Sinhalese and other communities by using “Sinha Le” stickers and other means.



To counter these efforts, the Polonnaruwa District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) organised a campaign to distribute leaflets and put stickers on vehicles to promote importance of inter religious and inter ethnic harmony by emphasising equality irrespective of ethnicity, religion, caste, or political party.

DIRC members and youth, together with religious leaders, carried out the campaign in the Kaduruwela and Polonnaruwa town areas. The police, Ceylon Transport Board and other government authorities supported the campaign. Their participation strengthened the civil society organisers of the event.

Many people who read the leaflet and wanted to display the sticker on their vehicles pointed out that this was an important effort to counter extremist movements.

Protest March in Kurunegala

The Kurunegala district is a strongly nationalist area where most people are Buddhists. It is home to many servicemen and it is the district chosen by former president Mahinda Rajapakse to contest the last general election.

Many politicians from the district are opposed to the present government and mislead the people by saying that the government is going to betray the Sinhala people and Buddhism.

In an effort to counteract such views, Kurunegala DIRC organised a protest and march in Kurunegala town, attended by about 200 civil society activists carrying placards with messages condemning racism and extremism. The protest ended with a seminar about protecting human rights. About 250 people participated. Speakers included Chairperson of Human Rights Commission Deepika Udugama and Executive Director of People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) Rohana Hettiarachchi who spoke about the



importance of protecting human rights and national reconciliation.

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.

Reform State Institutions To Ensure Justice To All

The need for the reform of state institutions to suit post-war conditions has become highlighted by a pattern of recent incidents. During the past year the rise of inter-religious tensions particularly in the North and East was marked, with an increase in hate speech, acts of physical violence and illegal constructions. Those who engaged in such acts did so as if they enjoy impunity, which is not in the interest of national reconciliation and ethnic harmony. The responsibility of the government is to ensure that the Rule of Law is applied at all times whether it concerns those who occupy positions of religious or secular leadership. The police need to be trained to be pluralist and secular in their outlook and to take action whoever may break the law. The National Peace Council calls for all state institutions to be reformed to be in consonance with the requirements of a post-war multi ethnic and multi religious society.

There is also the need to wean the security forces away from the impunity associated with wartime dealings with the civilian population. The need for security sector reform was evident in the break-up of a strike by port workers. While the strike was costing the port, and the country, greatly in terms of their credibility as an economic hub, the manner the security forces dealt with the strike was not appropriate. The strikers were physically dispersed by the security forces, with the service commander himself leading the charge and striking out at journalists also. The National Peace Council believes that the security forces need to be provided with retraining so that they deal with civilians in a manner that is appropriate for peacetime. This is especially the case when the North and East continue to remain areas with a high military presence.

Making the case for state reform more clear was the recent failure of legal proceedings to ascertain the identity of those who assassinated an opposition Tamil parliamentarian in 2006. This was a case of a jury trial before the courts in which the accused were members of the security forces all drawn from the Sinhalese community, the jury itself was all Sinhalese, while the victim was a member of the Tamil community. The security forces are today routinely described as war heroes by government leaders for having won the war. The all-Sinhalese jury decided that the prosecution had failed to prove its case. The issue is whether the judicial system can ignore the factor of ethnicity. Therefore the National Peace Council reiterates that state institutions, including the judicial system, need to be reformed to ensure justice in the context of a multi ethnic and multi religious society. We trust that in the New Year the government will show the necessary leadership and take constructive actions that will meet the expectations of all the people who have rallied around it in the hope that it will improve life in the country for all.

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