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கிளங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

November 2016

Religions to Reconcile: New NPC Project

NPC has launched a new project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), focused on strengthening community networks mentored by religious leaders and engaging them in building consensus for transitional justice and a pluralistic identity.

The project, Religions to Reconcile: Strengthening Inter-Religious People-to-People Community Engagement for Reconciliation and Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka, is implemented in partnership with Generations for Peace (GFP), an international peace-building organisation based in Amman, Jordan.

The new government has begun a process of reconciliation with its framework of an Office of Missing Persons; a Truth, Justice, Reconciliation and Non Recurrence Commission; a Judicial Mechanism; and an Office of Reparations. Progress on the path towards reconciliation continues to face internal and external challenges. A people-to-people approach to reconciliation is vital at this critical moment. Concerns of the people in North over political disempowerment and past injustices have not yet been addressed properly. Reconciliation needs to engage the Sri Lankan public in order to address systemic hurdles and inequalities and build solutions and healthy inter-communal relationships.

The goals of the Religions to Reconcile project include strengthening the capacity of District Inter-Religious Councils (DIRCs) to lead engagement in social and political reform for sustainable Transitional Justice. The project builds upon the credibility of DIRCs as message bearers in order to support people to engage across conflict divides, break down barriers, foster acceptance for a pluralistic national identity, and support inter-district community engagement through exchange visits between DIRC-led communities.

NPC has established 16 DIRCs across the country that have brought together religious leaders and key stakeholders from different faith groups to identify common needs and lead efforts to address them. Under the new project, NPC will set up two new DIRCs in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, and develop the capacity of six already-established DIRCs. The 26-month project targets Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Puttalam, Nuwara Eliya, Galle, Matara and Ampara districts.

Nationalist and racist ideologies are negatively affecting the establishment of a long lasting peace between diverse ethnic and religious groups in Sri Lanka. Therefore, a people-to-people approach to reconciliation is vital and timely at this critical moment to foster ethnic and religious harmony.

Peace Building At Jaffna University

November
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In July this year there was a clash between Tamil and Sinhala students at Jaffna University. The immediate cause of the conflict was whether a Sinhala cultural dance could be added to a welcome ceremony for incoming first year students.



The student association decided against it and opted for the traditional Tamil cultural dance only. This led to a violent clash. One of the outcomes was the temporary closure of the university and departure of Sinhala students from Jaffna due to their fear of further incidents.

The university administration invited NPC and its partner Centre for Communication Training (CCT) to conduct a peace building programme for the students. The team of facilitators comprised NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera, NPC Project Officer S. Kirubakaran, NPC Chairman and CCT founder Dr Joe William and CCT Project Officer Shivantha Rathnayake. Over 500 students attended the programme. About half of them were Sinhala students, with almost the same number of Tamil students and a lesser number of Muslim students (in the ratio of 4:3:1).

As part of the day's events the students received a crash course on non-violent communication and thereafter were divided into 45 groups of 12 students each. In order to ensure a maximum of interaction between the different communities, they were assigned to the groups that were mixed by ethnicity (Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim) and by their years (first year, second year and third year).

They were asked to give answers to three questions: what were the burning issues they faced, what could the university authorities do to address them, and what could they as students do to help resolve those problems. Each group was asked to choose one member of their group to come up onto the stage and present the outcome of the discussions to the rest of the student body and to the members of the university administration who were also present.

The main issues highlighted by the students in their group presentations related to the need for better infrastructure facilities for their studies.

They asked for free WiFi facilities to enable them to access the worldwide web, which is available in universities such as Moratuwa University. They asked for a study hall for science students.

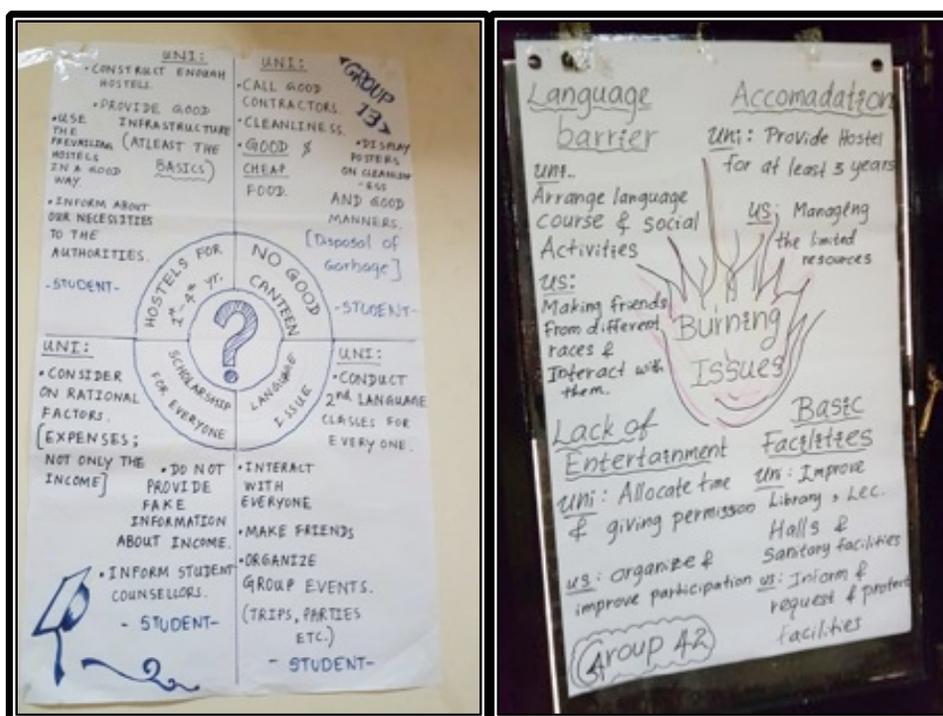
"Underlying all human actions are needs that people are seeking to meet. There is a need to listen and elicit what they are and devise strategies to achieve them. Nonviolent communication (NVC) is based on this fundamental principle developed by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. The main focus of the work of the Centre for Communication Training (CCT) is to promote NVC skills."

Dr Joe William

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They asked for a second canteen to purchase their meals as there is currently only one canteen in the university to service over 5,000 students and 1,000 staff members. They asked for a gymnasium that is available in most other universities and for a swimming pool as found in Sri Jayawardenapura University. They asked for better hostel facilities, and that these hostels should accommodate students of all years, and not only first year and final year students.

In addition the students asked for improved language training facilities so that they could bridge the language barrier. They asked for more intercultural and social activities so that they could interact more with each other. They asked for more interaction with students from other faculties through sports. They also asked for spaces in the university in which those of minority religions in Jaffna could worship.



Different Transitional Justice Priorities

As part of its ongoing transitional justice awareness creation activities, NPC conducted two workshops for students of Kelaniya and Moratuwa universities. The students were asked to come up with their priorities in terms of transitional justice.

At both universities, truth seeking was given as a priority concern. The reasons given included the need to find the whereabouts of missing persons and also the need to understand the full extent of what happened during the war.

Students of Kelaniya University gave reparations as their second priority. This was to enable those were war victims to be able to look after themselves and their families and become independent. However, students of Moratuwa University gave institutional reform as their second priority. This was to ensure that the roots of the conflict could be addressed and independent institutions enabled the process of reform to be successful.

While both groups of students were primarily of Sinhalese ethnicity, those at Kelaniya were predominantly female students while those at Moratuwa were predominantly male.

DIRCs Promote Religious Harmony

Nuwara Eliya, Ratnapura and Anuradhapura District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) organised three events to ease religious tensions that had arisen in their areas.

In Nuwara Eliya, DIRC members moved swiftly to defuse a volatile situation in the Hatton area, sparked by rumours of a hotel being built close to the sacred mountain of Sri Pada.



A Muslim man from Dubai had bought some land a few years ago and was now planning to build the hotel. This led to a group of monks and Sinhala extremists carrying lion flags to protest in Nallathanni, disrupting the communal peace that had existed in the area. The matter resulted in distrust and arguments between the two communities.

In an attempt to ease the tensions, DIRC members decided to hold their own rally in Norwood town, which was attended by religious and community leaders, teachers, students and the public carrying banners and placards stating the virtues of ethnic and religious harmony. The rally ended at a Sinhala school on Norwood estate where religious leaders spoke about the need for coexistence and tolerance and peace between religions. They told the audience not to be influenced by extremists and troublemakers. A multi cultural programme was later held to show the different aspects of diversity and unity.

On an estate in Ratnapura, young Hindu, Christian and Sinhala men had been playing sport together for many years. But due to a recent dispute during a cricket match, they started quarreling and it escalated into an inter-ethnic conflict, resulting in violence.



At the Ratnapura DIRC monthly meeting, an action plan was developed to address the situation.

DIRC members met the young men regularly until they agreed to have a one day programme on peace building and conflict transformation. Thirty men from all religions participated in the programme, where they were able to restore trust and understanding. They decided to play a cricket match to show willingness to engage with each other and stop hostilities.

In Anuradhapura, allegations of conversions by Christians had led to conflicts developing in recent years among Buddhists, Christians and Muslims, resulting in court action and investigations.

At its monthly meeting, Anuradhapura DIRC decided to have discussions with the people involved. A district religious leaders' forum was organised to identify possible action. Twenty three prominent religious leaders made their recommendations on how to restore harmony at the forum. The recommendations will be handed over to various stakeholders to take necessary action to mitigate tension among the communities. The District Secretariat supported the event.

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.

Action Needed To Eradicate Inter-Community Violence

After a two year lull that followed replacement of the former government through the electoral process, public manifestations of inter community tension have increased in recent months. There are indications of political maneuvering behind these efforts to disturb the peace in the country and to bring ethno-religious nationalism to the fore. Video footages of religious clergy engaging in vitriolic attacks on those of other ethnic and religious groups have gone viral on the social media. Ethno nationalist organizations have been engaging in hate campaigns and intimidating those of other communities at the local level. Most notably in the North and East, there are clashes being reported on inter religious grounds. There are many incidents of religious clergy getting involved in expansionist projects, such as religious conversions, destruction of ancient sites or building places of worship in areas where they are less numerous

The National Peace Council welcomes President Maithripala Sirisena's admonition that anyone who violates the law would be dealt with by the law enforcement agencies. In a context in which religious tension is rising, the government is planning to conduct programmes to educate the clergy of all religions on the importance of integration and reconciliation. The Ministry of National Integration and Reconciliation A. H. M. Fowzie is making arrangements to hold programmes to promote national reconciliation. Minister of Justice and Buddhasasana, Wijeyadasa Rajapaksha has said that all ethnic and religious groups are welcome to participate in the dialogue. He said various groups, including the Bodu Bala Sena and Ravana Balaya, had agreed to participate in the effort to resolve issues through dialogue.

In addition to its awareness creation and dialogue-centred activities, the National Peace Council calls on the government to take action against those who engage in hate speech which creates disaffection and mistrust between communities. The suspected arson attack last Saturday on a Muslim owned warehouse in a Colombo suburb that was previously burned down in 2013 by a mob makes it clear that law enforcement is an urgent priority. In the past there has been a climate of impunity with charges not being brought against the perpetrators, and the victims being railroaded into informal settlements or face worse consequences. This has only served to embolden the aggressors. As their conduct is in clear violation of the law we demand that the laws against incitement to disaffection be enforced by the Attorney General and the Police and those engaging in violence are given exemplary punishment through the judicial process as a deterrent to racist and mob action before they grows out of hand.

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