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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

April  
2019

## Diffusing Tensions in the Wake of Easter Sunday Attacks

District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in 15 districts across the country began working immediately after the Easter Sunday bombings to diffuse ethnic tensions and prevent a backlash against the Muslim community.

Under NPC's project, Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) funded by MISEREOR and CAFOD), DIRCs held several awareness meetings, visited government leaders, held press conferences, displayed banners, condoled with relatives of victims and planned future activities.

- Kandy DIRC members visited high ranking police officers and government officials to discuss steps taken to ensure the security of the public. DIRC members visited churches and sympathized with victims. They conducted a press conference to urge the public not to fall prey to extremist opinions or engage in retaliatory violence.
- Galle DIRC members met government officials to discuss steps taken to provide security and maintain the peace. They visited Christian churches to express their sympathy. DIRC members planned to conduct a press conference to highlight the need for ethnic harmony and also planned to hold a commemoration for victims of the attacks.



- Kurunegala DIRC held a press conference and displayed banners in Kurunegala town to express their sympathies and to condemn the attack. DIRC members planned to visit community leaders and religious leaders to motivate them to intervene in reducing tensions and also planned to hold a conference on reconciliation with religious leaders.
- Nuwara Eliya DIRC members visited Christian churches and Hindu temples to express their condolences and to listen to people's concerns. They held a press conference to appeal to the public not to engage in violence against other communities. Members planned to visit community leaders and religious leaders to motivate them to intervene in reducing tensions and also planned to conduct a meeting with religious leaders.
- Monaragala DIRC displayed banners to condemn the attacks and condoled with victims. They organized a meeting with police officers, civil society leaders and religious leaders to diffuse tensions. They planned to organize a press conference with the Muslim community.
- Ratnapura DIRC members visited churches and mosques. The Moulavis expressed their sympathies to Christian priests. DIRC members met community leaders to share their concerns.
- Anuradhapura DIRC members participated in a meeting to discuss security in the area. A lamp lighting prayer gathering was held.
- Matara DIRC members visited Christian churches to express their sympathies and share their concerns. They also visited the Muslim community. A meeting was held with religious leaders, police officers, government officials, civil society organization and media personnel to discuss steps to reduce tensions and protect the Muslim community from any attacks. DIRC planned to organize a press conference with the participation of Muslim religious leaders.
- Badulla DIRC members met local government leaders to discuss action taken by the police to protect religious places and the Muslim community. They planned to display banners expressing sympathy and urging people to avoid violence.
- Batticaloa DIRC members met church leaders to express condolences. They visited the Government Agent to discuss the role of the civil society and religious leaders in reducing the tension and promoting ethnic harmony. A press conference will be held shortly.
- Vavuniya DIRC members met the Government Agent to discuss security issues and the role of civil society. They visited places of worship and also condoled with victims. A notice will be placed in newspapers urging people to provide information to authorities.



- Hambantota DIRC members talked to Muslim and Christian religious leaders about preventing conflict. They visited places of religious worship as well as Muslim homes. They planned to have a prayer service in a church in one month.
- Puttalam DIRC held a press conference where religious leaders expressed their views on reducing tensions. They discussed steps to minimize the critical situation in the area. A peace protest will be organized demanding government action to punish the offenders.
- Polonnaruwa DIRC members had a meeting with religious leaders, Sinhala and Muslim community leaders and high ranking politicians about preventing any conflict in the area. They planned to hold an awareness meeting in the near future.
- Kegalle DIRC members visited Christian churches to express their sympathies. They planned to conduct a civil society meeting to discuss ways to ensure the security of the Muslim community and reduce tensions.

## Weligama LIRC Deals with Easter Attacks

Catholics, Buddhists and Muslims, including religious leaders, government officials and police officers, came together in Weligama the day after the Easter Sunday bombings to pray for the victims under NPC's project, Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

After attending the commemoration, the Moulavis said they felt less threatened and afraid. Weligama Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) also organized a Buddhist prayer evening for the recovery of the injured. Weligama LIRC members intervened to diffuse tensions in aftermath of the bomb attacks by visiting Christian clergy to express their condolences.

The following day religious leaders of all faiths, government officers, police officers and civil society organizations had a meeting to discuss how to prevent any violence between different ethnic communities.

LIRC members also drafted a statement to present to Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith signed by religious leaders and the Divisional Secretary expressing their condolences for the lives lost.

LIRC members facilitated an awareness programme on conflict mitigation for 200 members of Community Policing Committees at village level. Religious leaders delivered lectures on the importance of maintaining peace in the area while police officers spoke about security measures and crisis management.



# Civil Society Moves to Counter Crisis

Over 45 CSO leaders and religious leaders met at NPC to discuss what steps are to be taken as a combined group to address the current situation in the country. NPC will follow up and update the group regularly.

As a first step it was decided to set up five committees for the following actions:

1. Assistance to Afghan and Pakistani refugees evicted from their shelters  
*Find shelter and provide support for the groups*
2. Messages of care and communication  
*Get advertising space for messages of care and collect voice cuts for social media to counter hate and tension*
3. Monitoring excesses in carrying out Emergency Regulations  
*Monitor, record and report on excesses. Any persons with information regarding excesses can report to the group*
4. Mitigating tension on the ground  
*Coordinate with inter religious groups on the ground to actively engage with police and Community Policing Units to ease tension and educate the public*
5. Meeting with political leadership and key persons including religious leaders  
*Meet the Parliamentary Committee on Ethnic Harmony, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith and relevant ministers*

The following statement was drafted and circulated to the press:

Your Excellencies:

We, the undersigned women and men, are members of civil society and are drawn from all religious and ethnic communities. Our common goal has been to advance the political, social and economic and cultural rights of the people by promoting peace, harmony and social justice for all. We have engaged constructively with all governments in the past and will continue to do so in this instance. We are appalled by the carnage in Sri Lanka. Our sympathies are with the victims and their families and with our beloved country. We urge the government to expeditiously establish the truth and find the perpetrators and their allies, within the framework of human rights standards.

We draw the government's attention to the urgent need to contain the developing situation of vigilante justice and mob attacks particularly on the broader Muslim community. We urge the government to establish mechanisms to address these situations with appropriate public messaging and to instruct law enforcement authorities to act swiftly to demonstrate that such acts will not be tolerated. We recognize the need for emergency laws to respond to this situation and rightly so. Yet, we note with deep regret that the emergency regulations published on 22nd April 2019 are overly broad. It is the responsibility of the government to take measures to ensure that misuse/abuse of these extremely broad powers are anticipated and addressed.

There have already been reports of ill treatment during searches and there is an urgent need for law enforcement and security personnel to be informed that they must act professionally and with due care. Excesses experienced during times like this are likely to fuel insecurity, nurture hate, and even lead to more violence.

There is a communication vacuum and it is the government's responsibility to provide accurate and timely information to the public. False rumours and misinformation cannot be stopped by legislation – they can only be countered by facts and credible and accurate information. The government must speak with one voice on this matter. We urge that the President and Prime Minister put aside their personal and political differences and collaborate whole-heartedly and without reservation to bring this situation under control. The high cost of this political in-fighting was most clearly revealed in failures to share vital intelligence. We cannot afford a second breach.

We urge all Members of Parliament to put aside their political differences and act responsibly to support the long-term national interest. We request a joint meeting with the President and Prime Minister to discuss this situation. We, as civil society offer our assistance through our wide networks of community-based organisations. They are currently engaged in advocating for calm, for peace, and national unity. These networks can share information and be source of feedback about consequential community issues that may arise. If the government develops the capacity to respond swiftly and decisively to such issues it would certainly strengthen the efforts of the authorities.

Geoffrey Alagaratnam - President's Counsel  
 Dr Vinya Ariyaratne - Sarvodaya  
 K.N.Deen - All Ceylon YMMA Conference  
 Visaka Dharmadasa - Association of War Affected Women (AWAW)  
 Fr Rohan Dominic - Claretian Missionaries (CMF)  
 Mangala Fernando - Women's Political Academy (WPA)  
 Fr Oswald Firth - OMI Peoples Association for Peace and Development (PAPD)  
 Manjula Gajanayake - Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV)  
 Saman Hamangoda - Partners in Alternative Training (PALTRA)  
 Rohana Hettiarachchi - People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL)  
 Jezima Ismail - Muslim Women's Research and Action Forum (MWRAF)  
 Sakunthala Kadirgamar - Law and Society Trust (LST)  
 Sepali Kottegoda - Women and Media Collective  
 Sri Lanka Women's NGO Forum  
 Viola Perera - Action Network For Migrant Workers (ACTFORM)  
 Jehan Perera - National Peace Council (NPC)  
 Fr Srian Ranasinghe - OMI Director Oblate Missions  
 Prabodha Rathnayaka - Rights Now (Collective for Democracy)  
 Kumudini Samuel - Women and Media Collective (WMD)  
 Christobel Saverimuttu - Sri Lanka Council of Religions for Peace (SLCRP)  
 Fr. Rohan Silva - OMI Centre for Society and Religion (CSR)  
 Padmini Weerasuriya - Mothers and Daughters of Lanka  
 Dr Joe William - Centre for Communication Training (CCT)  
 Mohamed Adamaly - Attorney-at-Law  
 Sanchia Brown - Women and Media Collective  
 Shashika De Silva  
 Minoli de Soysa  
 Sr Nichola Emmanuel  
 Ramesh Fernando  
 Adrian Ferdinands  
 Lasantha Garusinghe - Attorney-at-Law  
 Amar Gunatilleke  
 Velayudan Jayachithra - Women and Media Collective  
 Diana Joseph  
 Nishantha Kumara  
 Prof M S M Mookiah - National Peace Council  
 Safi Nayaj  
 Shantha D. Pathirana  
 Shivantha Ratnayake - Centre for Communication Training  
 Raja Senanayake - National Peace Council  
 Vijayanathan Thusandra  
 Nagaratnam Vijayakanthan - National Peace Council  
 Saman Seneviratne  
 Chithrupa Vidhanapathirana  
 Sumadhu Weerawarne  
 Thiyagaraja Waradas - University of Colombo  
 Subha Wijesiriwardena - Women and Media Collective

# Importance of Continued Engagement in Times of Stress

NPC along with its partner the Centre for Communication Training (CCT) visited to Mannar shortly after the Easter Sunday bombing to meet with the District Reconciliation Committee. These were set up two years ago when President Sirisena in his capacity as Minister of National Integration and Reconciliation, got the Cabinet of Ministers to grant approval to establish District Level Reconciliation Committees (DRCs) to address the incidences of inter religious and inter ethnic tensions and to promote national integration and reconciliation in all 25 districts.

The functions of the DRCs were to undertake study on the background and causes of religious and ethnic tensions in the locality; formulate suitable strategies and approaches to mediate the problems; provide rapid response to resolve conflicts and tensions; invite the perpetrators and victims and facilitate conflict resolution; maintain database on incidence of tensions and attacks on religious places; mediate, negotiate and resolve conflicts and prevent hate speeches.

The DRCs were to be convened by the District Secretary of the relevant District with representation of inter religious leaders, the Superintendent of Police, retired Judges, School Principals and other relevant officials as observers. These are all prominent persons at the community level who are expected to be able to contribute towards social harmony and peaceful coexistence. But they have still to be activated. At the present time they can be a valuable mode of engagement between the communities so that no one community feels it is being marginalized or excluded. The meeting at the Mannar district secretariat was between the government officers working at the secretariat, civil society and religious leaders from all communities and the police.

The role of the DRCs in keeping all communities together through engagement with each other, and without isolating any one community was highlighted on this occasion. Their role in keeping the communities integrated even as the problem of violent extremism was addressed was the theme that had the most resonance with those present at the meeting.

The lessons learnt about coping with violent extremism during the previous conflict with the LTTE was alive in the consciousness of those gathered at the district secretariat. This was evident when a lawyer present on the occasion who claimed that there had been many arrests made in Mannar and there was a danger of innocent persons being detained, which the police was responsive to without a knee jerk rebuttal of the claim. This reaffirms NPC's conviction that there needs to be more engagement between the communities in this time of extreme stress and anxiety rather than less.

***Dr Jehan Perera***  
***Executive Director NPC***



# Back to the Future: Travails of Travel

The Centre for Communications Training (CCT) was invited by the District Secretary/Government Agent of Mannar to participate in a meeting convened on the instructions of the Secretary to the Ministry of National Integration, Official Languages, Social Progress and Hindu Religious Affairs.

The journey from Colombo up to Chettikulam was quick due to a vastly reduced number of vehicles on the road. We were stopped at a military checkpoint near a mosque before reaching Chettikulam. Our van was checked thoroughly after our bags were examined while we stood by the wayside.

The process took nearly half an hour. We explained to the military personnel that we were travelling to Mannar at the invitation of the Mannar District Secretary for a reconciliation programme, which did not impress them. This was the beginning of our experience and we were informed that more checking would be conducted on our way to Mannar. We were checked a further three times, which delayed our arrival by at least an hour and a half.

On the return journey we were stopped at the earlier checkpoints on Mannar island, Murunkan and Medawachchiya/Vavuniya/Mannar crossroads and Chettikulam town but we were able to explain the purpose of our visit to Mannar and were cleared to move on. What we did not expect was the extra delay at the first point where we were stopped on our way to Mannar the previous evening. We were asked to alight from the vehicle and move forward and wait till the vehicle and bags were checked thoroughly. Here, the process took nearly 45 minutes.

It transpired that our driver had displeased the officer who was checking us, and he had ordered his men to go through each of our clothes as part of the search. Before we were cleared to travel we were also warned that we will face similar checking at the next point and they will pass a message to that checkpoint.

I have experience of travel to the North and East during the height of the armed conflict but I had never experienced such sustained checking at so many checkpoints in close proximity to one another. I wonder what would have happened to us if there had been a Muslim member in our team. I only hope that the situation will return to normalcy swiftly and people can proceed with their lives unhindered as experienced by us.

## **Snippets:**

At another checkpoint, after we had been cleared to proceed, a soldier discovered a small bottle of arrack (250 ML) in the cubbyhole on the side door by the driver. The driver who had been assigned for the trip stated that he did not check the vehicle before he took charge of it. As a result of the discovery of the small bottle of arrack, the officer manning the checkpoint stated that he had lost trust in us and proceeded to search the vehicle again.

At another checkpoint one soldier said that they were hungry but refused to accept a packet of biscuits, saying that his senior officers would not condone this.

We spoke to a traffic police officer who informed us that the military personnel spend nearly 30 hours at a stretch at these checkpoints. This could perhaps explain their frustrations to some degree.

*Dr Joe William  
Chairman NPC  
Executive Director Centre for Communications Training*

# Young People Take Initiatives on TJ

Young people from 12 universities and 21 districts across the country met in Colombo for a three day Youth Peace Champions Event under NPC's project, Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka.

The project is funded by the UN Peace Building Fund with support from Legal Action Worldwide and the Harvard Law School.

The event showcased creative initiatives by the students to explain the concepts of Transitional Justice (TJ), dispel the many misconceptions and carry the correct version to the grassroots. They used dramas, debates, workshops, short films, interviews and surveys.

Speaking at the event NPC Executive Director, Dr Jehan Perera, said that there was a great lack of awareness about TJ, so the greatest challenge was to educate the public.

“We have to take the difficult message of Transitional Justice, of dealing with our divided past and trying to create an unified future,” he said.

The UN Secretary General's Envoy on Youth, Ms Jayathma Wickramanayaka, in a video message said it was the younger generation that had to live with the mistakes of their elders.

Young people were seen a perpetrators or victims of violence but they also made positive contributions to preventing violence, building peace and reconciliation. Most young people were natural peacemakers and it was this generation that could bring about change, she pointed out.

During the event, the students came up with over 100 recommendations on how the government, civil society, the UN, media and victims could contribute to the effective implementation of TJ and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

They also had the opportunity to questions officials from the United Nations, the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, the Office on Missing Persons, the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation and civil society representatives on the progress and prospects for TJ in the country.

Working in groups formed according to the various districts, the young people discussed levels of awareness of TJ in their areas, what they had done to educate the public and the challenges they faced while taking TJ to the grassroots.



*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.*

## Urgent Tasks After Easter Sunday Bombings

The carnage on Easter Sunday against three Christian churches, three leading hotels and two other locations have killed more than 250 and injured over 500. The scale and coordinated nature of the bomb attacks have been shocking. This brings an end to the ten year period of freedom from terror and violence that the country enjoyed. The National Peace Council condemns these acts of terror which have brought immense suffering to so many of our fellow citizens and also to citizens of foreign countries who were present at the sites that were attacked.

The Prime Minister in his statement stated that a top Sri Lankan police official issued an advisory warning of potential suicide attacks on churches but unfortunately no action was taken to follow up on this warning. The warnings given had not been taken to the advantage of national security and the lives of innocent people. We are shocked at the evident lack of coordination within the government and urge our political leaders to visibly cooperate with each other in the national interest especially in this time of massive crisis.

NPC is concerned that the attack by suicide bombers, believed to be of a small group of radicalized Muslim, who targeted Christians at worship will lead to increased inter-religious tensions. It is uncertain if this group had international support to plan and carry out these well-coordinated attacks. Already incidents are reported of localized clashes. Unless constantly resisted by dialogue and interaction, the distancing of the communities can grow to the detriment of peaceful relations.

As an organization that lays an emphasis on inter-religious peacebuilding activities at the local and community levels, NPC can affirm with certainty that the vast majority of people wish to live in tolerance and amity with their fellow co-religionists. The acts of terror that the country witnessed will get no support from them. The district and division level inter-religious committees formed by NPC and by other civil society organisations can play a crucial role at this time.

NPC also calls on the government to take all steps to identify the perpetrators, investigate their sources of funding linkages and support and apply the Rule Law bring them to justice expeditiously. In the longer term there will also remain the long unfulfilled task of identifying and implementing the necessary political reforms that makes every individual and community have faith that the Sri Lankan state will be equitable and just to them.

We call on the state television stations to carry the same discussion topics on their Tamil channels as they do on their Sinhala channels instead of showing films, music and sports thereby undermining the desire of Tamil-speakers to be one with the nation in its suffering. We request that such media programmes be translated for all to understand. We deeply appreciate the service of all medical personnel and citizens who responded to the needs of the victims immediately and with much devotion. We salute the citizens who had volunteered within the minutes of the call for blood so much so that the blood bank announced that they had sufficient stocks within a short time. We are confident that the resilience and wisdom in our society will prevail over the forces of division and hate.

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