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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

Pluralism Charter Launched at Inter Religious Symposium

January
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Over 200 religious leaders, community leaders, persons with disabilities, local politicians, women, youth and journalists attended a National Inter Religious Symposium in Colombo under NPC's project, Religions to Reconcile.



The symposium was the culmination of a major initiative that saw the launch of a Pluralism Charter embodying the distillation of three years of consultations with multi religious and multi ethnic communities mobilized through work at the ground level. The Charter called for the establishment of a Pluralism Commission on the lines of other independent state commissions whose members would be appointed by the Constitutional Council, and whose mandate would be aligned to the observations and recommendations contained in the Charter.

The Religions to Reconcile project is being implemented in the eight districts of Galle, Matara, Nuwara Eliya, Puttalam, Mannar, Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Ampara to reach a wide and diverse audience keeping in line with the people-to-people approach.

The project is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which is the U.S. Government's development agency, and implemented in partnership with Generations for Peace (GFP), an international peace building organization based in Amman, Jordan.



The overall goal is to strengthen community networks mentored by religious leaders and engage them in building consensus for Transitional Justice and a pluralistic identity.

US Ambassador Alaina Teplitz said NPC's efforts to bring together multi religious and multi ethnic communities were vital for building understanding and tolerance and to achieving a peaceful and prosperous future.

"As role models for others, I believe your successes encourage people to reflect on their own beliefs and their own actions and their own values, and that this will hopefully lead to an even more peaceful and inclusive Sri Lanka in the future and help stand as a global model for reconciliation," Ms Teplitz said.

Minister of National Integration, Official Languages, Social Progress and Hindu Religious Affairs, Mano Ganesan, stressed that in order for Sri Lanka to prosper, the pluralistic nature of the country must be recognised.

While everyone had his or her own identity that should be preserved, a Sri Lankan identity was also necessary, he added. "When extremists from the north and the south speak out, they score marks. They are trying to break the country, we will have to mend it," Mr Ganesan said.

NPC's executive Director Dr Jehan Perera said the project had reached a large number of people who received the message that Sri Lanka was a pluralistic and multi religious country. "However this does not mean that we have lost our identity. We all have our own religion and culture to be practiced within the rule of law and universally recognised human rights," Dr Perera said.

Sarvodaya Founder Dr A. T. Ariyaratne advocated a change in the system to build a new nation under a new leadership where everyone had equal rights. "We have to find an alternative economic, political and social system, otherwise we have no future," he asserted.

During the symposium representatives from the eight districts covered by the project described how interventions and activities by DIRCs had helped to ease religious and ethnic conflicts in their areas and prevented them from escalating into violence.



1. Political leaders and State officials have a key role to play in building a pluralistic society in which there is equal voice irrespective of number and in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain and develop their traditional culture or special interest within the sphere of a common citizenship.
2. It is important that the state acts with justice and equity at all times in serving the people.
3. Religious leaders have a key role to play in embedding the concept of pluralism in the larger community. They necessarily need to be trained in the idea of pluralism so that they in turn can share their learning through the lens of social cohesion and religious coexistence.
4. Review existing laws and introduce necessary amendments in alignment with pluralistic values.
5. Minimise regressive provisions in traditional laws, aligning them with accepted fundamental principles, international standards and provisions in the Constitution.
6. All provisions in the Constitution for power sharing should be implemented in full without favour to any particular religion/ community or region.
7. Ensuring equity in the distribution of resources and equality in delivering services – all State services including police, health, education etc.
8. Strengthening Independent Commissions established through the 19th Amendment to the Constitution to ensure that the public sector acts without fear or favour.
9. The State should create sufficient awareness concerning the powers and functions of the Independent Commissions among State officials, the private sector and members of the public to maximise their effectiveness and create the environment necessary for them to function freely.
10. The State should create sufficient awareness on laws and policies that relate to the protection of ethnic identities, diversity and the administration of justice, among State officials, the private sector and members of the public to ensure that fundamental freedoms are upheld.
11. Ensuring there are adequate legal frameworks at district and provincial level to enable the sharing of marine resources, drinking water, and land equitably across populations.
12. All ethnicities should enjoy freedom of expression equally. It is especially important that equal space is ensured in mainstream discourse.
13. Sufficient laws should be introduced to bar hate speech or expression inciting violence against a particular group or community. Article 14(1) (a) of Chapter 3 of the Constitution guarantees the right to free speech and expression. However, if it is to be enjoyed in the intended spirit of the provision, it is necessary for the State to ensure safe space.
14. Punish all politicians, religious leaders or any other groups or individuals inciting religious and/ or ethnic hate, without exception.
15. Legal action against hate speech should be swift and adequate. Social media has become a principal source of information for the public. There is both positive and negative aspects to the role of social media as a primary news and information platform.
16. The State should ensure that all media hold to principles of objectivity in disseminating news and information. The public should also be made aware to consider news and information with sufficient critical evaluation.
17. The State should adopt an effective process to identify and proscribe political parties or organisations that promote divisions along religion or race.

18. Early warning mechanisms should be a necessary element of government and administration to pre-empt possible conflict and to proactively deal with problems. The existing practice of the Sri Lankan State is reactive where action is taken once the problem has grown to the point of tension or conflict. The State leadership, policymakers and State institutions should be trained in the use of the early warning tool.
19. Including pluralism in the school curriculum. It is necessary for Sri Lankans to understand the values that underpin pluralism if it is to consciously take root as an effective response to ethnic divisions.
20. The State should abandon the practice of setting up education institutions on the basis of ethnicity or religion, which vitiates efforts to create a more engaged, cohesive and reconciled society.
21. The State should necessarily educate the public on the values and cultural practices of all communities and the need to respect diversity.
22. Elevating the Police service to be more sensitised and effective in the performance of its duties. The Police force should have sufficient awareness of the cultural practices and sensitivities of the communities that it serves and also the ability to communicate in Sinhala or Tamil, as necessary. The police force should be sufficiently diverse, in its ethnic composition to serve all populations equally.
23. The State should make it compulsory for all Sri Lankan citizens to learn Sinhala and Tamil. It should be ensured that the language skill is of sufficient functionality to serve meaningfully, in the search for pluralistic reconciliation.
24. Recruiting trilingual – Sinhala, Tamil and English, officers to the health sector to ensure an effective service. This falls within the broader category of deficiencies in the implementation of the Official Languages Policy. Part of the action to remedy this would be the recruitment of doctor/ patient-interpreters locally.
25. Adopting special mechanisms to include youth in the country's development process. Youth were the primary victims of the insurgencies of 1971-72, 1987-1990 and the ethnic war from 1980-2009. There is a need to include youth through an equitable process that takes into account education and skills.
26. Affirmative action should be taken in terms of Article 12(4) of Chapter 3 of the Constitution to empower those with special needs. There should be adequate provisions to include matters particular to them in development plans at sub national level – provincial and district.
27. Adequate resources should be provided to enable persons with special needs to fulfill their basic needs. Institutions should be established at district/ provincial level to strengthen education, health and welfare services to these sectors. A special cadre of trained officers should be introduced to support this community.

Rule of Law Training in Negombo

About 42 participants, including religious leaders, took part in a two day training on the rule of law in Negombo under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The training, facilitated by Jagath Liyana Arachchi, aimed to inform Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members about the concepts of human rights, rule of law, fundamental rights and international and local legal provisions on religions rights.

The participants wanted to know about practical actions to take against violation of religions rights. They discussed right to life, economic freedom, equal rights for all the religions and right of religious leaders to contest in elections. They said that the training helped them to learn not only at a theoretical level but also at a practical level that was helpful in day-to-day life.

New Project Builds on DIRCs' Experience and Knowledge

Three orientation meetings were carried out under NPC's new project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) funded by Misereor and CAFOD.

COMPACT is a two-year extension of NPC's Initiating Multi-level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT) project that ended in September last year.

The new project seeks to use the experience gained by members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in preventing and solving ethnic and religious conflicts that arise in their areas. Solving unresolved issues that were identified under the IMPACT will be a focus of the project, which will be implemented in 16 districts and target new beneficiaries including local level politicians and youth parliament members to address the problem of diminishing space for liberal and plural values.

Another focus was to foster discourse on the process of conflict transformation with national level religious leaders, professionals, academics and journalists. These are preliminary interventions aimed at using the space that has opened up to discuss the reconciliation from a pluralistic perspective.

Two meetings were also held in Anuradhapura and Puttalam. In Anuradhapura the DIRC formed a Civil Society and Trade Unions Collective with activists and trade union representatives while in Puttalam, a District Civil Society Collective was initiated to organize activities to promote Constitutional reform at the grassroots level.

Village Officials Assist in Preventing Conflict

Village level officials and DIRC members in Trincomalee and Batticaloa attended meetings to discuss early warning and early response practices to avoid ethnic and religious conflict in their areas under NPC's project, Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic dialogue in Sri Lanka.

Village level officials, or Grama Niladaris, were recognised as people who would be aware of what was happening at the village level and would be able to sound warnings about potential conflicts.

The Grama Niladaris in the two districts identified land issues, sharing of natural resources, religious conversion, political affiliation, social structure and employment opportunities as causes of tension between different communities.

Two mitigation activities were also organized by the DIRCs in both districts under the project. In Trincomalee, one of the issues raised was about Kinniya where there was a Muslim majority and a Tamil village adjoined Kinniya town. Tamil youth came to Kinniya town for their education and tuition classes. DIRC members reported that Muslim boys were insulting Tamil girls returning home after classes. To respond to the situation, DIRC organized a meeting with the police, religious leaders, teachers and students and discussed the problem.

The police officer of the area said he could not take action without an official complaint being lodged. The Muslim religious leader said he would speak about the problem during his Friday talk at the mosque.

Community-based Approach to Reconciliation

NPC organized a seven day training on Community-based Social Cohesion and Reconciliation for Community Facilitators under its project Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) for 34 participants from the Jaffna, Trincomalee, Vavuniya and Moneragala districts.

SCORE is funded by USAID and implemented by Global Communities, in partnership with the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka (NPC), the Association of Women Affected by War (AWAW) and Shanthiham: Association for Health and Counselling and aims to strengthen efforts to advance social cohesion and reconciliation.

Most of the participants represented the government sector while some came from civil society organizations. The training, which was conducted by Partners in Alternative Training (PALTRA), focused on participatory tools on a community-based approach to implement social cohesion and reconciliation related activities in grass root level communities.

M.Surenthar, Grama Niladhari of Pattikudiyiruppu and Aanandapuliyankulam of Vavuniya North Division said, “This knowledge will definitely help me to keep my community away from conflicts. I am working in a border village where different ethnic and religious people live together. I can lead these people to find solutions for the conflicts between them. In the other village I work, there is a caste problem. The low caste people working as labourers feel that they are being suppressed. In future it might become a big issue. I hope I can find solutions for these issues with the knowledge I gained from this training.”

Inoka Sanjeevani, Counselling officer of the Buttala DS Division said, “Before we had the training, we didn’t realise we should deeply analyse conflicts in our area. Today we understood that we can identify the conflicts from the beginning itself. We definitely need this knowledge to strengthen reconciliation in the grassroots communities.”



DIRCs Defend Democracy and the Constitution

NPC's District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) have conducted several seminars and awareness raising activities around the country since October in the wake of the Constitutional crisis triggered by President Maithripala Sirisena's sacking of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe.

Nuwara Eliya DIRC organized a public seminar in Hatton on the role of citizens to protect democracy, which was attended by 60 people representing different civil society groups. Participants were told about the court verdict against dissolving the parliament and provisions of the Constitution.

In Colombo, NPC participated in a meeting organized by the National Civil Society and Trade Union Forum with civil society and trade union leaders to discuss what actions could be taken and what events could be organized during next 12 month to strengthen democracy and good governance. An action plan to make the public aware about the current political issues was prepared.

Around 100 civic society activists representing several civil society organizations and trade unions, including 22 DIRC members, participated in the event.

It was decided to conduct a larger conference in Colombo in March with 5,000 people. In preparation a series of seminars in 15 districts will be held.

Speaker Commends NPC Staff

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya praised civil society members, including three NPC staff members, for opposing the Constitutional coup of October last year when President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and appointed former president Mahinda Rajapakse in his place, at a felicitation ceremony organized by the Puttalam District Development Foundation.

The NPC staff recognised by the Speaker were Dr. Jehan Perera, Saman Seneviratne and Rasika Seneviratne.

Other civil society members mentioned by the Speaker were Ven. Dambara Amila, Professor Sarath Wijesuriya (Convenor, National Movement for Social Justice), Saman Ratnapriya (Convener of the Trade Union Movement for Social Justice), Jayatilleke Bandara (Sadhu Janarawa) and Philip Dissanayake (Right to Life).

Recalling the pioneering role played by the late Ven Maduluwawe Sobitha Thera in the events leading to the change of government in 2015, Mr Jayasuriya praised the civil society organizations for following the monk's vision.

Mr Jayasuriya said that in spite of the Constitutional coup threatening parliamentary democracy, the issue was resolved democratically. Declaring that the peaceful resolution of the crisis was a victory for the country, Mr Jayasuriya asserted that Sri Lanka had retained its place in the world as a mature democracy.

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.

International Scrutiny Necessary to Ensure Justice For War Victims

In March this year Sri Lanka will report back to the UN Human Rights Council on its implementation of Resolution 30/1 which it co-sponsored in October 2015. This report back will be important as it will determine whether or not international scrutiny of the country on human rights issues will continue or come to an end.

During the past three and a half years the government has implemented several of the commitments it made in terms of the resolution it co-sponsored. These include establishing an office of missing persons, legalizing the international conventions against torture and enforced disappearances and returning military occupied land to the civilian population.

By co-sponsoring this UNHRC resolution the government gave the international community the opportunity to formally scrutinize the government's implementation of its commitments. Some of these commitments, such as to set up a judicial mechanism with the participation of international judges and investigators to ensure accountability in war crimes cases have been especially controversial.

In March 2017 at the request of the Sri Lankan government the UNHRC adopted Resolution 34/1 that extended for a further two years the monitoring mandate of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, with a request for a comprehensive report in March 2019. Some of the commitments made in October 2015 are difficult ones for any government, but they are necessary if there is to be justice in terms of dealing with the past and in creating a better future for all in the country.

Unfortunately, the constitutional crisis of October 2018 and the subsequent political configuration is likely to lead to a resurgence of earlier legacies of our difficult and contested past. The government will require more time to chart its course to deliver on its commitment of March 2017. With crucial elections around the corner the government would want to show the electorate that its strategy of co-sponsoring the resolution has not been damaging to the country's national interests or sovereignty.

We note that countries such as the UK have stated that they are committed to supporting the Sri Lankan government's efforts to improve the human rights situation in the country and support Sri Lanka's commitments to the UNHRC through Resolutions 30/1 and 34/1, as the best way to establish truth, and to achieve justice, restitution and reconciliation.

The National Peace Council believes that the extension of the resolution by a further time period is necessary for good governance in the future which will necessarily include correcting the violations of the past.

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