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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

May
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Countering Impact of Easter Sunday Attacks at Grassroots Level

Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) formed under NPC's project, Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF), held a range of activities in six districts across the country to defuse tensions in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks.

Mannar LIRC conducted an interfaith discussion on religious freedom, which brought together 50 participants including Christian and Islamic religious leaders, government and police officers and members of the media.

The discussion was organized as an effort to promote understanding about the shared values of the two faiths, emphasising the similarities in religious doctrines.

SSP Mannar, Priyantha Peris, stressed the importance of civic responsibility. "We should not point fingers at the whole Muslim community. It is only a few people who are extremists. We should be careful to identify the real threats. I have informed my officers not to apprehend any civilian without probable cause or to disturb their daily life," he said.

During the meeting, the Moulavis explained to Christian leaders the Islamic teachings on the treatment of other religions and religious attire as well as about the rise of extremist factions within Muslim communities. Leaders of both faiths shared their experiences and knowledge on tolerance and inter faith harmony.



Many participants stressed the need for frank communication to spread the message of coexistence across all religious and ethnic communities.

Participants discussed possible interventions that could be initiated through the support of the LIRC to prevent the incitement of violence between the Christian and Muslim communities in the area consequent to incidents of communal violence in other parts of the country. Police officers as well as the religious leaders commended the LIRC for its efforts in preserving harmony.

Addalaichchenai LIRC held a special meeting to discuss the current situation and to design future interventions to be implemented for the communal conflict mitigation.

In Negombo, LIRC members discussed future interventions to be implemented in order to ease the tense situation. They put up posters that said “Say No To Violence! Let’s rebuild as a Sri Lankan Nation”.

Weligama Divisional Secretariat in collaboration with the LIRC organized an awareness programme on social cohesion, conflict sensitivity and conflict mitigation with the participation of 60 religious leaders and 800 community members. LIRC members planned to hold a discussion with religious leaders of all faiths to rebuild trust. Community awareness programmes on social cohesion will also be organized.

In Beruwala, the LIRC will facilitate a community awareness programme on conflict sensitivity, conflict mitigation and social cohesion. Members of Community Policing Committees are expected to attend.

Vavuniya LIRC members facilitated a special meeting with religious leaders, civil society representatives, police officers and government officials to discuss the current situation and provide an avenue to cultivate trust and understanding between the two faiths. Participants decided to have an awareness session for the public to remove misconceptions and to tell them about the steps taken to ensure their safety.



Remembering Easter Sunday Attack Victims in Hambantota and Tangalle

Hambantota DIRC organised two public events in Hambantota and Tangalle to remember those who had died in the Easter Sunday attacks one month earlier. Government officials and community police helped to organize the event, where religious leaders prayed for the victims.

The candle lit vigil in Hambantota, a mainly Sinhala district but where many Muslims lived in the town, was held in a temple. Moulavis, Christian priests and Buddhist monks participated along with members of the Sinhala and Muslim communities.

A senior police officer said that because of false information, it was difficult to manage security issues because some people were taking the law into their own hands. He gave the example of where the law said a person could not cover his or her face but Muslim women were sometimes being forced to remove their headscarves. He urged people to provide information to the police.

The Divisional Secretary said he appreciated the support given by people to reduce tension in the district. He pointed out that discussions and activities should also be held at the village level, adding that the LIRC's vigil was the only such activity being held to commemorate the victims of the attacks.

Members of the Muslim community said they appreciated the opportunity to participate, as they were feeling isolated and fearful of a backlash since the attacks. The Moulavis pointed out that Islam did not condone the killing of human beings. They promised to rehabilitate those who had been radicalised and had a wrong view of the religion.

The Christian priests stressed that discussions on reconciliation should be on going and urged DIRC members to act to prevent any harassment of Muslims.

The Buddhist monks wanted to reduce tension and prevent any violence against Muslims. They said the attacks had disrupted the coexistence that had existed and which now had to be rebuilt.



A similar vigil was held in Tangalle with the Buddhist monks and Sinhala people. Three Community Police officers facilitated the session, which was also attended by a psychologist.

The Community Police urged people not to take part in violence against Muslims while the psychologist explained the behaviour of violent people and gave advice on how to avoid contributing to tension.

Rule of Law Training for Government Officers

NPC conducted a one-day training session on the rule of law for Government officers under NPC's project, the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Activity (SCORE), which is funded by USAID and conducted in partnership with Global Communities.

To improve the local and national government institutions' processes to promote social cohesion and reconciliation, NPC held the first training for the same government officers in January. Both training programmes were conducted by lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi.

There were 30 government officers representing all ethnic groups.

Mr Liyana Arachchi discussed various topics such as the concept of rule of law, fundamental rights and the citizen's responsibility under the emergency law. There were group discussions to analyse case studies.

Most of the participants said it was a relevant training session as emergency law was currently prevailing in the country and getting to know the emergency regulations was useful.

"All of us were able to learn a lot from the training session conducted by NPC. One of the main aspects was that if the citizens of the country are nurtured by rule of law, then they naturally become lawful citizens. Therefore, if the law enforcement is strict, people will at least try to remain lawful," said E.P. Jayasena, Grama Niladari officer of Samagipura Grama Niladhari Division.



Enhancing Knowledge on Human Rights and the OMP

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A meeting to enhance the knowledge of Human Rights First Aid Coordinators (HRFACs) on human rights, Transitional Justice and the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) was held in Colombo under NPC's project, Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT). Thirty two participants from 11 districts attended the meeting, which was organized in partnership with Right to Life Human Centre (R2L).

Project Manager Venuri De Silva said that the lack of knowledge on enforced disappearances and the OMP had weakened the process of truth seeking, so HRFACs should empower victims by enhancing their knowledge to enable them to obtain their rightful benefits from the OMP.

During the meeting HRFACs explained practical difficulties of assisting in solving cases of enforced disappearances, including obtaining death certificates. It was explained to participants that the OMP mandate included investigating enforced disappearances prior to the civil war.

R2L Executive Director, Philip Dissanayake, explained the current situation in the country and the impact of the Easter Sunday attack. He pointed out that ISIS was a global terrorist threat and stressed the importance of the eradicating misconceptions about the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

NPC Executive Director, Dr Jehan Perera, spoke on the importance of a united country to fight against global terrorism. He condemned discrimination against the Muslim community who did not support terrorism. He warned that marginalizing the Muslim community based on false rumours would push the country into another civil war. He criticized those who were trying to take political advantage of the situation.

Coordinator of Sri Lanka College of Journalism, Milroy Anthony, described the influence of social media in spreading violence. OMP Commissioner, Dr Nimalka Fernando, outlined the functions and powers of the OMP and explained the four pillars of Transitional Justice. Acting Director of Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, Menaka Herath, clarified the human rights provisions in the Constitution and answered questions raised by the HRFACs. Project Media Officer, Sudesh de Silva, spoke of the importance of a strategic approach in reporting news while R2L representative Vinoth Anthony explained the ethics of journalism.



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.

The State Must Not Fail in Its Duty to Protect

The anti-Muslim riots in different parts of the country have led to at least two killings and wrecked the lives of thousands of innocent people. These riots have taken place more than three weeks after the Easter Sunday bombings for which the Islamic State took responsibility. They have taken place at locations far from where those innocent people lost their lives. The government was compelled to deploy the army and to declare night time curfew all over the country to contain the rioting due to the initial failure of local police to control the mobs.

The world mourned with Sri Lanka when the Easter Sunday bombings took place in churches and hotels and condemned the suicide bombings that caused much loss of life and damage to property. There was appreciation at the conduct of the Sri Lankan people's restraint in the aftermath of the bombings and the leadership given by religious clergy who ensured no acts of retaliation took place. With the recent riots global and national attention has shifted onto the failures of governance and breakdown of civilized norms in Sri Lanka.

The National Peace Council condemns the rioters and those who organized them oblivious of the larger national interest and humanitarian considerations. People living in the vicinity of the riots have confirmed that the outsiders led the attack. The victims have also stated that some of the mob attacks were reported after curfew was imposed. The police have arrested many suspects. The truth about the organization of the riots can be ascertained from them. We demand that the culprits and masterminds behind the recent riots be apprehended, exposed and held to account swiftly by applying the Rule of Law without any political or other influence.

We extend our sympathies to those who lost their loved ones and their properties, we appreciate the role of religious clergy and civil organisations in caring for the victims and call on the government to compensate the victims who are directly and indirectly affected by the violence.

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