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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

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## Bridging the Ethnic and Religious Divide Through Awareness

High level government officials, religious leaders, representatives from NGOs and Community Based Organizations, members of the Community Policing Unit, media personnel and DIRC members attended facilitative meetings in six districts under NPC's most recent project, Actively Countering Extremism, implemented with funding and guidance from the Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI).

The purpose of the meetings was to discuss the prevailing tense situation in local communities and to plan activities to promote solidarity among Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils towards building reconciliation.

The meetings were conducted under the guidance of NPC Project Manager Saman Seneviratne, who initiated the discussions by highlighting how inter community conflict could have an adverse effect on the country.

The project originated after the deadly Easter Sunday attacks in April, which caused a backlash against the Muslim community with businesses being boycotted, Muslim women being discriminated at supermarkets and hospitals and the Muslim community as a whole being pushed into a corner.



Under the project, the NPC has been working in 10 selected districts where the tension between the religious communities has been high as a direct result of the April 21 attacks.

Ms. Maziyya Hillmy, an active Galle DIRC member, spoke about the issues faced by the Muslim community, especially by the Muslim woman, after the attacks. She praised her Sinhalese neighbours and friends who reached out to ensure her safety and encouraged her not to hide at home.

As a result of the meetings in the Galle, Ratnapura, Hambantota, Kegalle, Moneragala districts, special committees were appointed to organize visits to Muslim villages to conduct a series of activities to build solidarity among the different communities.

*“The Muslim community was afraid to seek treatment because they thought they might be mistreated. We need to reassure them of their security and give them a sense of belonging in their own country. It is not an easy task but it is vital to build trust among the communities. At the same time, the importance of reconciliation and integration needs to be taught in schools so that children have a proper understanding of the different cultural and religious values and practices that exist around them.” H.P. Karunawathi, Director, Galle Ayurvedic Centre.*

*“My Muslim colleagues lived and worked in fear during the first few days after the attacks. But since my secretariat took quick action and alerted the security forces, I was able to protect the vulnerable communities in my area. It is vital to have respect for each other. One of the main reasons for disrespect and disharmony is the misunderstanding that occurs as a result of the language barrier, so it is important to implement language learning programmes in schools, universities and other relevant agencies to close the existing language gap.” Himali Rathnaweera, District Secretariat, Galle.*

*“It is vital to get the youth groups involved in the reconciliation process. To stop extremist and racist ideas from spreading among the youth, they need to be properly educated about the different cultures and religions. Youth skill and capacity development programmes should be organized and implemented as well.” Sugath Chandrasena, National Youth Service Council, Ratnapura.*

*“Since there are multiple ethnicities living in Ruwanwella, it is important that all communities have a proper understanding of each other’s different cultural and religious values and practices. I suggest conducting a cultural exchange programme between Sinhala and Muslim women where they visit each other to have discussions on their different cultural practices, allowing them to have a better understanding about each other as women.” Janaki Ihalagoda, District Reconciliation Officer, Kegalle.*

*“Certain groups don’t have much confidence in the reconciliation process carried out by the government but each citizen has a responsibility to the country to do their part in helping the process. It could start with something small such as sharing a positive message on Facebook about peace building and condemning extremism.” Sujith Wedamulla, Superintendent of Police, Moneragala.*

*“Children do not carry racist and religious differences. It is only instilled in them by adults. So after the April 21 attacks, there was no disharmony among the students in the schools. All racist and extreme religious ideologies exist because of people’s attitudes, which are fed by misunderstandings. But since these school children are given a proper education about different cultural and religious values and practices, they are not so narrow minded.” D.W. Susil Kumara, Principal, Samodhagama Junior School, Hambantota.*

# Local Government Representatives Learn About Transitional Justice

NPC organized workshops on pluralism, Transitional Justice (TJ), good governance and missing persons for the Local Government officials from the Anuradhapura, Badulla, Moneragala and Matara districts under its project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT).

The objective of the workshops was to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues to local government representatives so that they could be involved in reconciliation building projects with effective outcomes.

A member of the Matara Pradeshiya Saba said that although she had been a member of the Pradeshiya Saba for 25 years, she had never had a proper understanding of good governance or the other topics that were discussed at the workshop. She believed that she would be able to incorporate her knowledge when planning reconciliation-building programmes for a better outcome.

A member of the Moneragala Pradeshiya Saba said after taking part in the workshop, she had a proper understanding on what pluralism, TJ and good governance were. It made her realise how ineffective and wrong the current political system was, especially the party politics system where people were more concerned about voting for a specific party instead of voting for the good of the country. This system and attitude needed to change, people should be more involved with the politics of the country and try to make collective decisions through discussions, she said.

Participants from the Matara workshop suggested conducting the workshop for Buddhist religious leaders who were insensitive to the reconciliation process. Many participants emphasised the need for changes to different structures of society to bring about reconciliation in the country.



# Cementing Ties and Building Understanding for Peace

Under the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity, a group of 46 community members from Trincomalee visited Jaffna to celebrate International Peace Day and share their experiences.

Addressing the participants Divisional Secretary of Thellippalai Division, Shanmugarasa Sivashri, said, “Sri Lanka is a small country but because of 30 years of civil war, people have become distant from each other. Due to the language barrier, people could not communicate and that led to the distance between different religious and ethnic groups. People left the Thellippalai area due to the war and under the resettlement process, people gradually settled in these areas. Those people have gone through traumatising experiences and I hope you will meet these people. It is important to share your experiences with them. I believe that these types of programmes are much needed.”

Reverend R. Stalin, Visiting Lecturer at University of Jaffna, spoke on the importance of reconciliation focusing on what had been said by all religions with regard to peace and unity. “Just having inner peace in your hearts cannot make peace in your minds. Therefore all of us have to question ourselves. You need to ask yourself whether you can respect other religions and ethnicities, whether you feel that your language is superior to other languages. First you need to create peace within yourself. Then you should build peace in your family and in your community. Through this you can build a path for sustainable peace.”

The Seruwila team visited the Grand Mosque in Jaffna where the Moulavi explained about Muslim religious rituals and other facts found in the Quran. The team also visited the Nagadeepa Rajamaha Viharaya and Nagapooshani Amman Kovil.

The community members said that the visit had given them an opportunity to meet a new community in Jaffna and to visit religious and cultural places that they had never been to before.



# Creating Awareness to Assist Victims Of Human Rights Abuses

A series of information sessions for police officers, security forces personnel and government sector officers on ethics, human rights and the Right To Information Act (RTI), Office on Missing Persons (OMP) and other independent commissions were completed under an European Union (EU) funded project being implemented in 11 districts.

Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT) is implemented with support from the Right to Life Human Rights Centre (R2L) and supports the protection of rights by mobilising civil society to use new and existing mechanisms, to hold the state accountable and vindicate victim rights through 11 Human Rights First Aid Centres (HRFACs) functioning under the project.

The intervention also targets state institutions and actors by advocating change in their ethos and their support for continued responsive state action on accountability.

At the information session for police, military and state officers in Trincomalee, many participants stated that they were not fully aware of the available national mechanisms in relation to the Transitional Justice (TJ) framework. While they knew of the important work carried out by the Human Rights Commission (HRC), the participants did not know about the functions of the OMP, the RTI or the Office of Reparations.

An introduction to the OMP was presented by Commissioner S. I. Liyanage from the Colombo office. He was able to answer questions from the participants on the functions of the OMP and to correct wrong information being circulated on the OMP.

Investigation Officer Arun Sivagnanam from the Trincomalee Regional Office of the HRC spoke on the functions of the HRC and how it works with the police and other state institutions to safeguard victims' rights.

The session began with an introduction to ethics by counsellor Sr. Canice Fernando, the former Principal of Holy Family Convent Bambalapitiya. The participants said that the session helped them to understand that listening was an important part of victim support.

Before the training, most of the participants believed that the HRC was only condemning the police and security forces but now they realised that it was actually helping them as well as the victims. They also thought that the OMP was only for Tamil people and addressed disappearances during the war but now they understood that the OMP served all Sri Lankans and was also investigating disappearances from the south.

The ACE-IT project has completed all training programmes for women police officers on counselling, information sessions for police, military and state officers, training on befriending for HRFAC volunteers, skills building sessions for marginalised communities and sessions with key community leaders to identify area specific issues affecting human rights.

A total of 55 training programmes, five per each district, have been completed. In total 1,621 persons including 281 women police officers, 159 higher level police officers, 110 state officers, 434 marginalised community members including women from female headed households and people with disabilities, 165 key community leaders and 472 persons including HRFAC volunteers and representatives from community based organizations have received training through the project.

# Sharing Experiences; Creating Bonds

An exposure visit for the Vavuniya and Akurana Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) was conducted under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) with the support of Sarvodaya and the Rural Development Foundation Vavuniya.

Members of the Vavuniya LIRC went to Akurana, where both groups were made aware of the need for initiating interfaith cohesion activities to reinvigorate the reconciliation process following the rift created after the Easter Sunday attacks.

An entertainment session was conducted to welcome the participants, which included a Kandyan traditional dance routine. During the opening session, participants were given the opportunity to express their thoughts on the LIRC initiative. Many believed that it was a fruitful effort in the right direction and that the committees' activities must continue.

The second day started with an experience sharing session where the participants were given an opportunity to get to know each other. They were able to identify, appreciate, learn and comment on LIRC activities, community interventions, challenges and successes and broaden their understanding on propelling the discourse on religious freedom through community level collective interventions.

Evening activities included a visit to St. Paul's church and the Temple of the Tooth where briefings were provided on the religious and cultural significance of the sites. Participants visited the Asna Mosque where they witnessed Friday prayers and listened to the Chief Moulvi's talk where he highlighted the importance of coexistence, drawing examples from the Quran.

The final session was conducted at the mosque conference hall with the participation of Muslim, Hindu and Catholic religious leaders, who addressed the gathering and praised the committees for their enthusiasm for creating coexistence among religious communities. They emphasised the importance of initiating and broadening the reach of the initiatives.

During a discussion conducted to obtain feedback from the participants on the success of the event, two thirds said that the visit was highly successful while the rest stated that it was successful. Participants commended NPC and the CERF project for their efforts in promoting and protecting religious freedom.



# Young Leaders Counter Hate Speech

A workshop for 53 youth leaders involving games and discussions under NPC's project Crossing Boundaries - Youth Groups in Sri Lanka, funded by Helvetas Sri Lanka, was held in Trincomalee.

The project is being implemented from July to December 2019 in Matara and Trincomalee with the support of NPC's district partner, Community Development Centre. The objective is to foster social cohesion through empowering youth and creating unity between different generations, religious and ethnic groups in Matara and Trincomalee.

Several topics were discussed including leadership skills, marginalised communities, conflict sensitivity, the current political context and the role of youth activists. Young leaders have been provided with skills and knowledge to identify problems that youth face in their respective communities and to lead small scale youth projects to address the issues.

Helvetas Sri Lanka also partnered with NPC to conduct a six day youth leadership training for 91 young leaders from the Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Kilinochchi, Matara and Galle districts in Thulhiriya. The topics discussed included democracy, pluralism, advocacy, youth activism, leadership, women in politics and sensible use of social media for positive change.

Youth activists have been provided skills and knowledge to engage in society and government through e-activism and by providing a digital platform for the projection of youth voices and for countering disinformation and hate speech.

"We need this knowledge and experience to serve society. I was able to gain new experiences such as identifying leadership qualities and how to work with people from different parts of the country. Because of the training, I will be able to contribute to improving society as a young person," said a female participant from Galle.

"Through this workshop I was able to build up the confidence to take decisions in different situations and for different issues. I identified leadership qualities hidden in me. That was most important thing for me," said a female participant from Matara.



*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.*

## Undermining Rule Of Law Is Detrimental To All Sri Lankans

Large numbers of lawyers and civil society activists along with the general public in the north and east have come out publicly in protest against the flouting of a judicial decision in the north by Buddhist monks and their associates in relation to the final rites of a Buddhist monk. The media reported that over 2,000 protestors demonstrated in Mullaitivu in relation to the controversy in which emotions have run high and people's sentiments have been hurt. The dispute over the cremation site of the Buddhist monk in the northern district of Mullaitivu, which took place in defiance of a judicial order, has implications for the rule of law and confidence in the judiciary that needs to be resolved without delay.

Prior to his demise the Venerable Colomba Medhalankarakitti Thera had established a Buddhist temple on disputed land in front of an army camp in the former northern war zone. The ownership of the land on which the temple was located has been claimed by both a Hindu temple, the Nerayawadi Pillaiyar Temple and the department of archaeology. There is anger that the Sri Lankan military and government departments claim dominion over land in the north and then vest it with people from outside to the detriment of the Tamil inhabitants of those areas. When this is done in respect of Buddhist temples in areas without a Buddhist civilian population, it is a cause for heartburn and misgivings in the north.

In the Hindu tradition cremations are not permissible within temple grounds. Accordingly, the judiciary to whom the dispute was taken decided that the monk's mortal remains should be cremated elsewhere in an identified public area. However, Buddhist monks from outside belonging to a nationalist organization were instrumental in ignoring the court order and conducting the cremation within the temple premises. One of the monks involved in this action, Venerable Galagoda Aththe Ganasara Thera, General Secretary of the Bodu Bala Sena, had previously been convicted by another court for contempt of court and been sentenced to imprisonment, but was released through a presidential pardon.

The undersigned civil society organisations condemn the flouting of judicial orders and the disrespect shown to the judiciary. We call on other civil society organisations, Buddhist and other religious leaders and political parties to do likewise. We believe that the upholding of judicial decisions, the rule of law and the separation of powers between the presidency and other institutions of state are important. The open defiance of the judiciary, and its facilitation by the executive branch of government will undermine confidence in the Sri Lankan legal system. In particular the state needs to be sensitive to the minority cultures and to their perceptions. Unless people trust in the system of law and order as having finality rather than the actions of the military and nationalist clergy, peace with justice will be a mirage.

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**National Peace Council, 12/14 Balapokuna Vihara Road, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka**

**Website: [www.peace-srilanka.org](http://www.peace-srilanka.org), Email: [info@peace-srilanka.org](mailto:info@peace-srilanka.org)**

**Tel: 2818344, 2854127, Fax: 2819064**