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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

February
2020

Protecting the 19th Amendment

The Civil Society Platform (CSP), founded by NPC in collaboration with other civil society organizations, will conduct a campaign to prevent the 19th Amendment of the Constitution from being abolished, it was decided at a meeting to prepare the CSP's strategic plan.

The members of the platform will create awareness about the importance of protecting the 19th Amendment. Representatives of the CSP will meet political leaders to lobby for their support for the campaign.

The inaugural meeting of the CSP was held in October last year, where the topics discussed included civil society and global trends, women's role in civil society, issues faced by the hill country plantation population, the media's role and civil society organizations.

Among the panelists at the second meeting were Mr. Brito Fernando, NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera, PAFFREL Head Rohana Hettiarachchi and lawyer Namal Rajapaksha.

The participants were divided into groups where they discussed the challenges that the CSP would have to face and the opportunities they would have to seize to strengthen the platform. The groups analysed the threats they would encounter and the specific areas that they would need to focus on.

The meeting also finalised criteria for membership including being a civil society organization, not working for a politician or political party and working for disadvantaged people and minority rights.

The forum will develop a common mandate that all civil society organizations could follow in order to strengthen their role in the country's peace and reconciliation process.



Practical Training to Avoid Conflict

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A two day training workshop on conflict sensitivity and conflict analysis was conducted under NPC's project Religions to Reconcile: Strengthening Inter-Religious People-to-People Community Engagement for Reconciliation and Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka, which is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. government's development agency.

Thirty six District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members and Sub Group members took part in the training, which included topics such as defining conflict, violence and peace, approach to positive peace, introduction to conflict analysis tools, introduction to do no harm and applied conflict sensitivity.

Each DIRC identified an issue affecting religious and ethnic harmony in their areas and applied the tools they had learnt. Each group presented its case study and the trainers analysed and discussed each case.

Mannar DIRC members looked at the tension between Hindu and Roman Catholic communities at the Tirukethiswaram Temple. Ampara DIRC spoke about how the DIRC worked with state officials to release land taken over by security forces to build a car park.

Galle DIRC members identified the issues in tensions between Sinhala and Muslim communities in Samagiwattagama while Puttalam DIRC discussed how they had intervened to settle a problem related to the unlawful takeover of community land by a church. Matara DIRC analysed the dispute between a Hindu kovil and a neighbouring sports club, who were up in arms over a noise complaint.

"This is a practical training based on real issues. It is only when we actually do work based on a real situation that we are able to understand what the training is about and apply it in our daily life," said K. S. Lankathileka from Deniyaya.

"Very often we go for training programmes where we learn many things but there is no practical application of the skill. Here we were able to actually apply what we learnt; that is an important aspect in any training," Peter Sinclair from Mannar.



Solidarity Visits to Dispel Mistrust and Suspicion

Two solidarity visits were conducted to Nuwara Eliya and Jaffna under the Actively Countering Extremism (ACE) project funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) to promote religious and ethnic understanding and harmony.

The visit to Nuwara Eliya was organized by the District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) in collaboration with civil society and government organizations.

At a Hindu kovil, participants engaged in various team building and trust building games, which enabled them to interact with people of different religions and ethnicities. Children from the Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil schools from nearby villages gathered at the kovil along with their families.

Most participants said it was the first time they had met and talked with someone who did not belong to their own religion and ethnicity.

The visit ended with a musical session by musician Jayathilaka Bandara, who sang songs on the importance of living in ethnic and religious harmony.

The second solidarity visit was organized by the Jaffna DIRC and other stakeholders and supported by the Community Policing Unit and the District Secretariat.

Songs and dances were performed to showcase different cultural aspects. Games to build team spirit and trust were held so that participants interacted with people from different ethnicities and religions.

Some participants explained that they had been skeptical about the visit and were even afraid to come because of the presence of other religious leaders and people from different communities but after getting to know each other, they realised that they were the same.

They were happy to get the chance to meet and interact with people from other communities and decided to continue the new friendships.



Solving Conflict Without Violence

A training workshop on Non Violent Communication (NVC) was held for community members of the Navakkenikadu and Sumedankarapura villages in Seruwila in the Trincomalee district under NPC's project Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity.

Navakkenikadu village borders Sumedankarapura village, which consists of Sinhala and Muslim families. At the initial stage, NPC conducted a series of dialogues for both communities separately. The mixed community dialogue was a result of an agreement between the communities to come onto one platform to discuss their issues.

During the second phase of the mixed community dialogue, the participants identified the root causes which had led to the situation. Both parties accepted the fact that the wrongdoings were done by a small group while emphasising the fact that the others were honest and respectable people.

As the third and last phase, the NVC training strengthened understanding between the two villages and reduced the threat of violent communication in future. During the session leading members of community were trained in the main aspects of NVC with the support of a trainer from the Centre for Communication Training to guide them on how they express themselves.

Top Diplomats Commend DIRCs

Canadian High Commissioner David Mckinnon and US Ambassador Alaina Teplitz paid separate visits to the Matara District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) and the Puttalam DIRC to learn about their work.

Mr. Mckinnon, whose country funds the Actively Countering Extremism project, was interested to knowing about the peace building activities of the DIRC and asked about the social and economic situation in Matara, especially after the Easter Sunday attacks.

Matara was the first district to hold a meeting with relevant stakeholders to identify issues that originated as a result of the attacks in 2019. A committee was appointed to organize a solidarity visit to a Muslim village in the district to ease the fear and mistrust that arose. DIRC members spoke of the many challenges they had faced and overcome to make the solidarity visit a success.

Ms. Teplitz visited Puttalam DIRC where the group spoke about their efforts to improve peace and harmony in the area. She commended their work and remarked on the close relationship the DIRC had with the community and other stakeholders such as government officials, which had helped to uphold peace in the district.

DIRC members told Ms Teplitz that an Office on Missing Persons had not been established in the district and that war displaced people were unable to receive compensation because they were not registered.

Ms. Teplitz said that it was important to educate people about the Right to Information Act and basic human rights in order to protect democracy. She pledged to help the peace building process with the collaboration of NPC and its partner organizations.

Master Trainers Take Pluralism to the Grassroots

A two day workshop on Training the Trainers (TOT) on pluralism and conflict management for 39 master trainers was held under NPC's project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka supported by the US State Department. The partner is Legal Action Worldwide (LAW).

The objective was to contribute to an effective pluralism and conflict management framework for master trainers in 10 districts. Mr. Aruna Jayathilake, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Political Science at the University of Sabaragamuwa conducted workshop.

In first session Mr. Jayathilake outlined the concepts of conflict, basic human needs and identity and gave participants practical exercises that enabled them to value different cultures. The next session focused on conflict analysis tools where participants analysed the main conflicts in their communities. The third session was on pluralism where topics such as cultural diversity, tolerance and judging were explored.

The final activity was to develop a master trainer's session plan to use for community training. The plan was made for five categories - women, youth, government officers, local level politicians and religious leaders.

"We were able to learn new tools and topics related to conflict management and pluralism, and it will help us to deliver efficient and effective training to the community," one participant said.

"It was good for us to participate in the training. We had the opportunity to meet and discuss issues with the master trainers who are actually working at the grassroot level," said a representative from LAW.



Three New LIRCs Set Up

Three new Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) were established in Kuliypitiya, Batticaloa and Panduwasnuwara under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Coexistence (CERF).

At the project orientation meeting to set up the Kuliypitiya LIRC, participants emphasised the need to avoid racism and mentioned that extremist religious groups were trying to convert people, posing a threat to religious harmony and freedom in the area. They believed that the LIRC could seek solutions collectively for these issues to create a peaceful society.

The orientation meeting for Batticaloa LIRC was attended by religious leaders, Grama Niladharis, civil society leaders and police officers.

At the orientation for the Panduwasnuwara LIRC, Buddhist, Catholic and Islam religious leaders explained the importance of maintaining long lasting peace among the different religious communities.

Also under the CERF project, a three day exchange visit was held between Mannar and Beruwala LIRCs to promote understanding and coexistence between different ethnic and religious communities.

On the way to Beruwala, Mannar LIRC members visited the Periyamulla grand mosque for Jumma prayer and a sermon on Islamic teachings on unity and reconciliation.

“The word coexistence has been in the Sinhalese vocabulary for a long time but it was not used often. This was because coexistence was already there in our society. Now we use this word often because true coexistence is not evident in our country. We must work together to change this,” the Head Moulavi said.

Maithree Moorthi Thero pointed out that there had been many initiatives in Beruwala similar to the LIRC but none had made the same impact. “This is due to the commitment of the committee members and the organizers,” he said.

Divisional Secretary of Beruwala, Chathura Malraj, commended the work of the Beruwala LIRC saying it had promoted the idea of an united Sri Lanka. “I hope the LIRC will continue the good work it has been doing in the future,” he said.



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.

Spell Out Alternate Roadmap For Reconciliation

Sri Lanka's government is presently facing a major challenge with the US government designating army commander General Shavendra Silva for alleged gross violations of human rights and imposing a travel ban on him and his family. This is a continuation of a regime of international sanctions against Sri Lanka on the grounds of its unwillingness to deal with unresolved issues of the last phase of the war, including those of missing persons and accountability for human rights violations. In September last year the UN suspended Sri Lankan Army deployments in its peacekeeping operations after President Maithripala Sirisena appointed General Silva as army commander accusing him of command responsibility for serious human rights violations.

The decision of the US is argued to be on the basis of information found in UN and other reports available as far back as 2014. In October 2015, the Sri Lanka government agreed to address these concerns by co-sponsoring UNHRC resolution 30/1 which set out a roadmap to reconciliation. On the other hand, the withdrawal of the US from the UNHRC in 2018 was seen as debilitating those commitments. It needs to be noted that the sanctions are being implemented only after there are indications of backsliding from governmental commitments made in the 2015-19 period. With Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa's announcement of the government decision to withdraw from Sri Lanka's co-sponsorship of the UNHRC resolution, the National Peace Council is concerned about further sanctions that could potentially be injurious to the country.

The National Peace Council believes that the appropriate path for Sri Lanka to take at the present time would be that of restorative justice where the state would acknowledge the human rights violations and crimes of the past that occurred on all sides and focus its priority attention to restore the lives of those who survived to the maximum level possible. Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative to the UN, Kshenuka Senewiratne, recently said Sri Lanka is committed to find innovative and pragmatic solutions driven by the domestic context to protect the country's national interest guided by the provisions of the Constitution, and the will of the citizens expressed through democratic means. Following the announcement of the government's decision to withdraw from co-sponsorship of UNHRC Resolution 30/1, the National Peace Council calls on the government to demonstrate its continuing commitment to national reconciliation by spelling out its alternative roadmap which will address the concerns of all Sri Lankans.

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