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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

August
2022

National Campaign to Counter Violent Extremism

Fifty representatives from the Ampara, Batticaloa, Kandy, Kurunegala, Vavuniya and Mannar districts took part in an inter district review meeting to mark the end of NPC's 30-month Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) project.

Participants discussed insights from the programme and the challenges they had identified in implementing project activities, sharing their experiences with people from other districts and learning from each other how to successfully manage situations in future encounters. The participants were representatives of district level partner organizations of the project.

The review meeting included a session where religious leaders representing Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam shared the perspective of each religion's teaching on violent extremism, as well as the views on radicalisation and inclusion. The participants asked questions from the religious leaders, which helped them to clear up their doubts about other religions.

The meeting concluded with the launch of national campaign on evolving counter narratives by NPC Chairman Dr. Joe William, held with the participation of representatives from civil society organizations, religious leaders, youth, state sector officials and community police.

The first video of 30 videos was posted on NPC's Facebook page. The video campaign includes eight narratives from the project districts in Sinhala, Tamil and English. A target audience of one million is expected to be reached by the end of the campaign, which will promote inclusion and fact checking before sharing content to prevent violent extremism.



Opposing Discrimination and Hate in Business

Under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project, meetings to discuss economic discrimination, points of conflict and tension in relation to shared resources were conducted for District Inter Religious Committee (DIRCs) members in the Matara, Badulla, Anuradhapura, Nuwara Eliya, Galle, Ratnapura, Kandy and Batticaloa districts.

DIRC members were able to identify if someone running a business had faced discrimination when obtaining services and materials or when manufacturing or selling products and goods because of his or her caste, class, religion or ethnicity in each district in the forms of killing, threatening, warning not to buy or sell products and goods or damaging or destroying property based by extremism, politics, hate speech, false stories and myths. Participants discussed the negative impact of discrimination on individuals and the economy and how it affected ethnic and religious harmony and development of the country.

Participants identified economic activities that could be undertaken, especially by women and unemployed youth from different communities, and individuals and institutions that could sponsor economic activities in each district.

At each meeting NPC Project Manager, Saman Seneviratne, explained the severity of the economic crisis in the country and how it had been affected by conflict, corrupt politics and incompetent governance. He added that racism and religious discrimination had played a part in destroying the economy during the past two years.

Some participants said the discussion had opened their eyes as to how much ethnic and religious divisions and discrimination had hampered the economy and how important it was for DIRCs to support people to start a business as a means on earning incomes or to rebuild a collapsed business through the collective contribution of members from different communities.

Also under the PACT project, training programmes on human rights, fundamental rights, Right to Information and pluralism were held for government officials and women political leaders and community leaders in several districts.



Promoting Pluralistic Values to Ensure Religious Freedom

Under its Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project, NPC held eight training programmes on pluralism targeting 50 Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRCs) members and 373 Youth Wing members to encourage community leaders to promote pluralism and social responsibility for ensuring religious freedom.

The content of the training programmes has been developed to help community leaders to understand, respect and appreciate diversity while enhancing their skills, knowledge and attitudes to foster cultural, behavioural and attitudinal diversity. Since LIRCs and youth wings consist of members belonging to different ethnic and religious communities, their understanding of pluralistic values will help them to be more effective in addressing localised conflicts.

During the training programmes, interactive tools and techniques were used based on participatory learning principles to encourage a productive dialogue in different thematic areas. While raising awareness of eliminating prejudice and stereotypes and the importance of creating a pluralistic society, the training content focussed on the concept of pluralism and understanding and how acceptance and diversity played a role in society.

Mohamed Thanseef is a committee member in Addalachchenai Youth Wing who is willing to make a change in society. He said the training had enhanced his knowledge of the pluralistic nature of society. He thought that divisions based on culture, ethnicity and religion have hindered the development of the country. Emphasising the importance of developing and promoting a common identity, he said that youth had a greater role in inspiring others to strengthen coexistence.

Ramamoorthi Saranya, another member of Addalachchenai Youth Wing, believed that the country's existing system had excluded minorities, the disabled and aboriginal communities. The political and social marginalisation of these communities had undermined the values of equity, he added.



Delia Arulini of the Batticaloa Youth Wing said, “As a Sri Lankan I can accept others’ identities, religions, race and cultural values. The divisions created by our past should be forgotten. We should give up the conservative ideas that divide us and embrace others who have different identities.”

M.J. Ahamed Musharraf of the Batticaloa Youth Wing highlighted the importance of delivering this knowledge to youth. “As the next generation, we have a greater role in mitigating conflict situations. This initiative will enhance the awareness among youth while creating a common platform to be united and to share our different identities.”

At the Weligama training Ven. Natthewala Nantha Siri Thero, President of Shasanarakshaka Mandalaya, expressed his gratitude for the initiatives taken by NPC to identify and recognise the importance of the role of youth in strengthening religious freedom. “The impact of youth involvement was identified when we were implementing the previous project. It is admirable that this new intervention has taken initiatives to strengthen the role of youth. I am sure we will be able to see good results,” he said.

Representing the Negombo Youth Wing, Jude Anthony said, “We all are humans and no race or religion can separate us but existing racist ideologies create divisions among us. I urge everyone to learn all three languages since proper communication and mutual understanding are necessary to develop strong relations among different ethnic and religious groups.”

Language Rights for Better Service Delivery by the State

A workshop on understanding language rights and language policies was held in the Gampaha District for government officials, journalists, religious leaders, community police officers, community organisations and Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members under NPC’s Language to Reconciliation (L2R) project funded by the Canadian government.

The workshop helped participants to identify issues related to language rights in public and state offices where services were essential for the public to access. Participants were told about the institutions that they could approach to redress language right violations. Through group activities, they learnt how to handle language right violations and issues they may encounter.

The participants highlighted the need to educate the public on laws and rights related to language, which would help in obtaining a better service from the state institutions. The language rights workshop was conducted by Mr. Jagath Liyana Arachchi.

Also under the ARC project, a language audit training was held for 20 religious leaders, LIRC members, youth and community leaders, who were taught how to conduct language audits at four state offices. The group will be conducting audits at the Divisional Secretariat Office, the District Hospital and the Urban Council in Negombo and at the police station in Katunayake.

They will identify language right gaps and issues and make recommendations for solutions for a better service delivery to the public. The language audit training was conducted by Mr. Jagath Liyana Arachchi.

Both the programmes were coordinated by the district partner, Community Brotherhood Organization Gampaha.

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.

Ground Realities Should Correspond to President's Words

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's inaugural address to parliament set forth a vision of good governance and civility that would stand among the most outstanding in the world. His speech comes at a time when several leaders of the protest movement, and youth activists, have been arrested for having violated the law during the public protests that led to the resignations of the former president prime minister and cabinet of ministers of the country.

The National Peace Council congratulates the president on his assumption of office and pledges our support to make his vision a reality. We see the government headed by the president is taking forward several new initiatives to improve the current situation. The system change the protest movement and youth of the country are seeking is a transformation of the existing structures both within and outside the current parliament, which contributed to the collapse of the economic fabric of the country.

We have five specific requests to make of the president at this time.

1. The cabinet has approved the proposed 22nd Amendment to strengthen the system of checks and balances. Three of the ten-member Constitutional Council will represent civil society. However, the discretion is given to the Speaker to pick them, which makes it likely that the choice will be in favour of the government. Therefore, we call for the civil society representatives to be appointed as in the 19th Amendment by both the prime minister and opposition leader together.
2. In his inaugural address which was welcomed by many for its content and delivery, the president repeated his call for an all-party government. Earlier he had written to all parliamentarians regarding this. We urge the president to establish the all-party government in a manner that would give equal weight to each of the political parties in parliament irrespective of their size or numbers. The cabinet needs to be established in such a manner that each party feels that they have a say in the governance otherwise it will be a show only.
3. The significant role that the protest movement has made to the rise of the president to his present position has been recognized by the president who has offered them places in the national policy council which is yet to be established. Additionally, we call for representation of members of the protest movement in the all-party government.
4. We urge the president to recognize the exceptional nature of the public protests that included youth, entire families and spanned the communities as the president noted in his inaugural address. We call on him to grant a blanket amnesty/pardon to those currently being held in custody or being subjected to legal action. Being magnanimous towards the youth and others who contributed to ushering in the change of political leadership needs to be done without resorting to emergency rule.
5. The economic difficulties the country is going through and its present inability to earn more than it spends will require significant restructuring of the economy and livelihoods and living standards of the people. This will require a government that has the people's backing and a fresh mandate. We call for elections to be held within a time frame of a year and that long-postponed provincial elections which are especially important to the minority communities should also be held.

Unfortunately, the spate of arrests of leading members of the protest movement have cast a darkness over the country which the president's inaugural address can dispel if words are the precursor to change on the ground. It is essential that they do or else the hope of political stability and getting out of national economic distress will prove to be elusive. The immediate need is to restore political stability. The route to follow is not emergency rule by cracking down on the protesters and their leaders but to find ways and means of engaging with them in a nonviolent manner and address the root causes that brought tens of thousands of citizens young and old to the streets countrywide. The legitimate demands of people who have seen their living standards crash in a matter of months should be addressed through dialogue with them and not by assuming emergency powers and engaging in witch hunts to silence the dissenting voices.

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