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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

April
2022

Youth Wings to Foster Unity and Coexistence

Youth wings have been formed in Mannar, Batticaloa and Addalachenai to advocate for pluralism and religious freedom under NPC's project intervention, Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC). The project team identified and selected the youth from targeted localities. As the youth wings and Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) will be involved in the project, three orientation sessions were carried out to inform them of the three year action plan.

ARC commenced in August 2021 to expand the Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project that ended in February 2022. The new intervention will engage religious leaders, state officials, community policing units and youth to sustain the space for religious freedom within the framework of pluralism and rule of law.

The project will create and strengthen sub-national platforms in targeted areas and state structures that contribute to pluralism-based coexistence. Through the capacitation of religious leaders, community, state administration and community police units, these groups will collectively counter challenges in their communities and advocate for pluralism, equity and justice as the foundation for coexistence.

Project staff said they had received support from LIRCs during the CERF project to sustain the discourse of pluralism. LIRC members appreciated the contribution of state institutions, partner organizations, donor agency, religious institutions, religious leaders and journalists in carrying out various activities in different circumstances.



Religious extremism, violence and misunderstandings among ethnic and religious communities, hate speech and the influence of media have weakened coexistence; these problems were addressed by LIRCs through their different initiatives. The youth could be intermediaries in their communities while taking the lead in advocating for establishing an inclusive society.

During the orientation programme in Batticaloa, a member of the youth group, Amelia Nixi, pointed out the need to create a platform to share pluralistic values. “We have lots of friends belonging to other faiths and religions but we do not have a proper platform to collectively work towards a common goal. Creating such a platform will be a good initiative to strengthen our relations with other religious groups because we are all working together,” she said.

Sinnath Thambi Mohamed Thanseef is a committee member of the Addalachenai youth group. He believed youth had a greater responsibility in sustaining the discourse on religious coexistence, creating a value-based society.

In Mannar, Inbarasa Sarachandran said the orientation programme had enlightened him on his role as a youth leader for the next three years. “We understood that we have a great task to carry out in our communities. We have to be very committed to reaching this goal. Mutual understanding and respect should be our fundamental values in working with the youth leaders from different ethnic and religious groups,” he said.

Ways to Prevent Violent Extremism

Under its Prevention of Violent Extremism Capacity Building in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh project, NPC held meetings in Vavuniya, Kandy, Kurunegala, Ampara and Batticaloa with 120 members of District Inter Religious Committees, Local Inter Religious Committees, civil society trainers, government officials and Community Police Officers on Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) training in the district.

Discussions were held to identify lessons learned through the PVE training and incorporate ideas with issues of violent extremism that were leading to disrupting religious and ethnic community harmony. Participants made recommendations to prevent violent extremism through interventions.

They recommended introducing PVE concepts to the education system and also to local politicians, victims’ groups and locally identified fundamentalist individuals.

Other ideas included a digital video campaign, awareness session for school prefects, an interfaith dialogue and posting hand bills in the community halls.



Engaging Youth in Peace Building and Preventing Hate Speech

Two youth friendship camps called Youth Peace Park were conducted in Monaragala and Galle under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project. They were part of a series of activities targeting youth including workshops on countering false narratives and hate speech and effective use of social media and friendship camps.

Today's youth are more interested in issues relating to good governance, democracy and financial corruption than ever before. Racism and religious extremism are rejected by them. They play a major role in building peace and reconciliation.

Events at the camps included sports and arts towards building reconciliation and discussions on democracy, good governance and inclusion as well as a cultural event featuring a variety of performances.

The youth who participated in the camps initiated a social media campaign to condemn hate speech and false statements. They also created different peace messages for building reconciliation. These were uploaded on their Facebook page along with the hashtag #YouthPeaceParkLK, which was created under the PACT project.

"We are eight young people with disabilities who attended the camp and we were anxious because this is the first time we had attended a camp with young people with no disabilities. We thought we could not interact with young people who were not disabled and that they would not accept us. But they behaved well and helped us to participate in the games," a participant said.

"Four others and I came from Batticaloa. We cannot speak Sinhala. We thought the Sinhalese would not care about us but that did not happen. I met a Sinhalese friend. My Sinhala friend had to learn 10 Tamil words from me and I had to learn 10 Sinhala words from her. Language was not a big obstacle to our relationship. We are organizing a camp in Batticaloa with Sinhalese youth with the support of NPC," a participant said.



Digital Media for Young Journalists

Under NPC's Freedom House Project, in collaboration with Voice Our Talent (VOT Matara), a workshop was conducted by digital media specialist Mr. Kapila Ramanayake in Weligama for 50 young Sinhala and Muslim journalists on how make effective use of social media.

A practical training session was conducted on the King Master App that is used by digital media journalists. Participants developed an understanding of how to create and edit video clips for social media using a smartphone, which will help them to master the skills needed to work as community journalists.

Discussions were held on the need to build a young journalists' forum and a WhatsApp group was formed to explore various issues. Five video conversations on pluralism were posted on social media.

Many of the young people said that they had not received skills training before and the workshop gave them an opportunity to use their smartphones to contribute to the peace building process. They were also grateful for being able to develop their journalistic skills.

Protection of the Protesting Youth

The thousands of people, mostly youth, protesting peacefully at Galle Face in front of the presidential secretariat has captured the national imagination. Now all over the country similar protests are taking place. There have been a few incidents of violence reported, in which the protestors either got violent or the security forces used violence to intimidate the protestors.

Most of the protestors in the vicinity of the Presidential Secretariat who have stayed the duration of the one month long protests have come from around the country. Many of them appear to be university students who represent the educated intelligentsia of the country. Their conduct so far, by and large, has been peaceful, non-violent and in good spirits. By and large what is observed is good behavior and no harassment of any kind, which is a positive feature in a country where women complain that bus travel is a problem for them due to harassment. The races, religions and sexes intermingle in the unity of purpose to see the government leadership go. Whether the ongoing protest campaign ends in the manner that the protestors want is not a given at the present time.

The Sri Lankan tendency so far has been to see youth as a volatile and disruptive element that can be mobilized to act violently. The two Sinhala youth insurrections of 1971 and 1988-89, and the Tamil separatist movement that held sway from the late 1970s till the end of the war in 2009 have left scarred memories all around about the role and treatment of youth. However, the present protests signal a break with that divisive past. Today's youth protestors appear to have made non-violence and democratic ideals a part of their ethos. There is also unprecedented sympathy and support for them from the older generations who join them and bring them material support to continue with the struggle.

The presence of the older generations at the protest sites acts as a deterrence to the use of violence on any side on account of the deference given in the Sri Lankan culture to age. Several members of NPC's volunteer governing council went to Galle Face to show their solidarity with the ongoing campaign to cleanse up national politics and to find an answer to the country's pressing problems.

Present Credible Plan for Economic and Moral Revival

The declaration of a state of emergency by the president in the context of the ongoing public protests against the government cannot be the answer to the ongoing campaign of public protests against the government. These are a culmination of over many months of extreme economic hardship that have resulted in power cuts of up to 13 hours per day, steep increases in prices of essential commodities and shortages that have resulted in long queues on the roads.

The incident in which several hundreds of protesters converged on the President's private residence in the afternoon without warning, and swelled into thousands at night is an indication of their grievance and the trend towards the escalation of the protests. The government initially accused "extremist" elements affiliated with opposition parties of hijacking the protest and turning it violent. But the evidence is otherwise.

Among the silver linings in the dark clouds has been the direct engagement of the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka which made a public statement that the use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act to detain protestors is not permissible. The National Peace Council commends both the Human Rights Commission and the hundreds of lawyers who volunteered their services and bailed out those detained by the police. We hope that the investigations will be swift and without any political interference in respect of all detainees and uphold the Rule of Law at all times.

There is an urgent need for the government to accept moral and political responsibility for the plight of the people and ameliorate their suffering and present a credible plan that the people can have confidence in. So far the government has failed to meet these minimum standards of accountability. The call for going to the IMF is a year old which was rejected by the Central Bank and government, for reasons unknown. The irrational decisions leading to reduction in corporate and personal income taxes, the ban on chemical fertilizers, and refusal to get IMF support are ones for which the government alone needs to take responsibility.

The failure of the government to present a rational analysis of the crisis to the people, alleviate the hardships being experienced by the people and present a credible plan to deal with the crisis is counterproductive. There is demand and rightful expectation that the government should prioritise using the scarce dollars to meet the needs of the people rather than foreign creditors. Instead, some government leaders have attempted to downplay the severity of the crisis, and others have been acting as if there is no such crisis and have been seen having parties and festivities too. This has increased the sense of frustration of the general public.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to immediately seek long term institutional assistance that reputed international institutions can provide rather than make ad hoc and temporary arrangements to obtain more and short term loans. We also call on the government leaders to show greater empathy with the suffering of people and all parliamentarians to visit their constituencies ahead of the holiday season, experience the ground realities and share in the sufferings of the people who voted for them.

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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.

Quick Resolution of Crisis Necessary for National Recovery

The government's decision to temporarily default on sovereign debt repayments, akin to a declaration of bankruptcy, will deal another major blow to the country's economy and credibility. It comes at a time when mass protests are spontaneously taking place in all parts of the country on account of the economic hardships that the people are being put through. The resignation of the cabinet nearly two weeks ago and the failure to appoint a new one is indicative of government paralysis which is injurious to the country.

The mass protests have continued non-stop, and continued even on New Year days traditionally devoted to the family and to religious observances. They are a popular expression of the withdrawal of the people's mandate from the government. The slogans both written and articulated in all demonstration sites in Colombo and elsewhere convey that the President and government have lost their mandate to govern and need to resign. This sentiment has generated a mass movement coming together irrespective of their religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The National Peace Council believes it is the responsibility of the president and parliamentarians who function under the provisions of our Constitution to find modalities to come together to pull the country out of the plight we are in. The focus of the mass protests has been the corruption and lack of accountability within the government. We call on the government leadership in particular to heed the will of the people which is getting stronger by the day and restore their credibility and dignity. We endorse the spirit of the demands currently being articulated.

Accordingly, we call on the government to repeal the 20th Amendment that concentrates powers in the presidency and erodes the independence of state institutions that ensure accountability and transparency. A downsized presidency and an interim government with a new prime minister acceptable to both the government and opposition is the most urgent necessity. Such an interim government with new faces could also appeal to the international community for the necessary bridging finance to enable the economy to get restarted. Immediate attention should be given to supply fuel, cooking gas, electricity, medicines and essential goods to the general public.

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