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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

September
2022

A Walk for Peace in Nuwara Eliya

Almost 200 people including religious leaders, youth, local residents from different ethnic groups and members of the District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCS) participated in a peace walk in Nuwara Eliya under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project. Participants pledged to work for peace by placing their painted right palms on a white cloth and displaying it on the walk.

Senior police officers from the district participated in the inauguration of the peace march. A police officer spoke of the importance of youth adhering to the law.

Discussions were held after the walk at Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Islamic religious places to gain an understanding of the values and teachings of each religion.

A peace camp organized by Nuwara Eliya DIRC under the PACT for 55 young people representing Jaffna, Vavuniya, Batticaloa, Kurunegala, Kandy and Polonnaruwa DIRCs where they were taught about pluralism and participated in team building activities.

"I am the president of the Federation of Nuwara Eliya Youth Clubs. It was after coming to this camp that I went to a mosque for the first time. I got to know about religious rituals and teachings. It is a great opportunity for me," a youth from Nuwara Eliya said.

"I came from Jaffna. I was a little afraid that the people from the south would not treat us in a friendly manner but these few days I felt like I was back in Jaffna; no one treated me differently. I have been to several camps before but I learnt the most from this camp," a youth from Jaffna said.



Promoting Pluralistic Values Among Youth

Three programmes on pluralism to provide knowledge, skills and attitudes to recognize the pluralistic nature of the society were carried out targeting 137 youth wing members in Beruwala, Vavuniya and Trincomalee under NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project.

The intervention envisages that the youth wings will act as leaders in their locations to mobilise and empower communities to bring forward the discourse of pluralism and religious inclusivity. In this context, the intervention has given importance to the trainings on pluralism to direct the community groups to respect and appreciate diversity. The youth wings consist of members belonging to different ethnic and religious communities. They interact with diverse groups and communities through their work.

The training programmes have been developed to enhance these community leaders' skills, knowledge and attitudes to promote cultural, behavioural and attitudinal diversity while focusing on the concept of pluralism, understanding and acceptance and how diversity plays a significant role in society.

Poorna Sathyajith is a member of the National Youth Council. She believed she could contribute to strengthening social cohesion among different ethno-religious groups. "The divisions based on socio-economic status have divided us. It is sad that people only think of themselves. They do not realise the importance of pluralistic values. Lack of understanding of pluralism can lead to negative consequences, which is why we need to educate the general public on the importance of practicing pluralistic values," she said.

M.M.F. Fazeena in Beruwala expressed her gratitude for the establishment of youth wings as a way to develop new relationships with youth from other ethnicities. "I only had Muslim friends. By joining the youth wing, for the first time I made Sinhala friends. Now we talk with each other and share our ideas and values. Through the training, I realised how religious conflicts and tensions can impact on our lives. What we all want is peace. I believe we can inspire others to recognise the need for inclusivity," she said.

Interactive tools and techniques were used during the training based on participatory learning principles to encourage a productive dialogue among participants in different thematic areas.



Tariq Shareefa, a youth wing member in Vavuniya, stated, “The most interesting part was the role play. Through the activity we understood the experiences of marginalised groups who have been excluded by society. I was able to understand others’ problems. For me, that session was emotional and I feel that I have a responsibility to strengthen religious co-existence in our areas.”

Mahendiran Dilaxan pointed out the consequences of war and how it has impacted on the lives of youth. He believed youth had a role in mitigating conflict situations. “We were born in a time of war. Although it ended in 2009, people are not ready to be united or reconciled. We are experiencing a terrible economic crisis. It is time to forget our differences. We should develop a common identity as Sri Lankans so that the strong unity among us will help us to overcome the prevailing challenges as a nation.”

Mohamed Sabrin, an active member of the youth wing in Trincomalee, believed that the political and social marginalisation of some communities had undermined the values of unity. “As a result of existing social divisions, we are still an underdeveloped country. That is why we should try to make an attitudinal change in society. The unity among different ethno-religious groups is crucial in ensuring religious freedom,” he said.

Language Rights in Public Institutions

A Language Audit Training for the Batticaloa District was held for 20 religious leaders, Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members, youth and community leaders under NPC’s Language to Reconciliation (L2R) project in collaboration with its partner, Butterfly Peace Garden.

The two components of the project, language rights promotion and conducting second language classes, are being implemented in Batticaloa, Gampaha and Trincomalee to promote reconciliation for a peaceful and united Sri Lanka.

Participants learnt about language audits and conducted them at the Divisional Secretariat Office, district hospital, Labour Department and police station in Batticaloa. A language audit will also be held at the Eastern University. Language right gaps at these institutions will be identified and recommendations proposed to rectify them for a better service delivery to the public.



Inclusive Delivery Course for Public Officers

A NPC team visited Sabaragamuwa University to assess the progress of its forthcoming project on inclusive service delivery. NPC is planning to offer an advanced certificate course on sustainable peace through inclusive service delivery at the Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa, Jaffna and Eastern universities as a part of a Freedom House funded project, Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery.

The objective of the course is to equip government officers with the knowledge of peace building and pluralism and tools and methodologies that increase effectiveness and efficiency of delivery of inclusive services.

During the visit the NPC team had a series of discussions with academic and administrative teams of the university including Vice Chancellor Prof. Udaya Ratnayaka, who pledged his support and said he would speak to the Government Agent of Ratnapura to ensure participation of relevant government officials in the course. The programme coordinator senior lecturer Ravindra Palliyaguru participated in the meetings.

During the visit the team discussed the course approval process and suggested actions to speed it up, as well as to find solutions for other issues that have impact on demand for the course, with academic and administrative teams of the university. University personnel said they would expedite the process so that Sabaragamuwa University would have the first batch in November. The course will be held in Ratnapura due to the transport difficulties of candidates.



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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.

Government Needs to Prioritise Reform Not Repression

The declaration of High Security Zones in Colombo and the requirement that police should be given prior notice of public protests are indicators that the government is giving priority to quelling public protests. These decisions bolster steps already taken to restrict the protest movement by targeted arrests of its leaders even by the Prevention of Terrorism Act, by seemingly arbitrary arrests of random participants in the protest movement and by strengthening laws that further restrict the right to protest.

The protest movement came into being due to the economic difficulties that the people encountered when the dollar was devalued, imports restricted and prices shot up. It is not an artificial creation to destabilize the country. It arose due to the collapse of the economy in the context of the country's default of its international loan repayment obligations. The protests continue due to the ongoing decline in the economic situation that is severely affecting the lives of poorer sections of the population and the lack of sensitivity on the part of the government to the people's needs.

In this context, the government needs to heed the Human Rights Commission and Bar Association which have called on the government to withdraw its law on setting up high security zones in Colombo in a time of peace. The National Peace Council calls on the government to address the root causes of the protest movement, its call for systems change and non-corruption, and ensure that norms of good governance are strictly adhered to.

Sri Lanka is presently defending its position on human rights and governance before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. It is facing a new resolution on these issues that is stronger than any before. A negative verdict will impact on the country's international reputation and ability to attract international support in the form of economic investments and credit lines. Overcoming these challenges is the statesmanship that was and is expected of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, to remain a democratic country without economic setbacks or international stigma.

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