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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

February
2023

Exposure Visits Share Experiences and Build National Network

A three day exchange visit was organized under NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project for 114 Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) members in Rakwana, Batticaloa and Addalachchenai to facilitate understanding through experience sharing and interaction.

The visit enhanced the understanding of committee members about each other's values, opinions and culture and enabled a dialogue on the pluralistic nature of the society while paving the way for a national network connecting LIRCs across the country to make an impact on sustaining religious freedom.

Since communities in the South do not know much about people living in the East, LIRC members from Rakwana were taken to visit sacred places that reflected the culture and religion of Batticaloa and Addalachchenai. The participants explored the history of Buddhism during a visit to a temple. Chief incumbent Ven. Sri Rathnapala Podidiwela Chandrananda, is committed to strengthening religious freedom in Sri Lanka. He explained the need for sustaining and accepting pluralism. "I participate in Tamil weddings because the Tamil community sees me as a person who belongs to their community. I have supported many people without considering their ethnicity or religion. Consequently, the different ethnic and religious communities in my area accept me and respect me although we have different religious beliefs. It takes time to heal our souls and to build trust but I believe it is possible to build trust among divided communities," he said.



During visits to kovils in Batticaloa, participants learnt about the values and religious practices of Hindus and at mosques they experienced the Jumma prayer. They went to an Arabic college to experience the Madrasa school system about which misconceptions emerged after the Easter Sunday attacks. They also went to the Zion church that was bombed and saw the consequences of extremism as well as methods to prevent the recurrence of these incidents.

Participants shared their values and beliefs with members from other committees as well as the challenges and the achievements they have encountered as LIRC members. They discussed the significance of collective efforts in promoting religious freedom.

Rakwana LIRC member A.R.A. Begham said, “As a woman, I believe we can make a greater impact on society but there is no platform for us to contribute. NPC gave us the opportunity to be part of the local reconciliation mechanism. As LIRC members we should sustain religious freedom in our area. That is why these types of initiatives are needed to enhance our understanding of other people’s cultural and religious values. The exchange visit enabled us to learn by exploring different cultures and religions. I am sure it will motivate our team to contribute to sustaining religious coexistence in our society.”

Nalika Damayanthi, a Social Service Officer from Godakawela, said, “I believe practical learning methods such as exposure visits are crucial. This is the first time I was able to make friends from Batticaloa and Ampara. It is great opportunity for us to strengthen the national network of LIRCs. We were able to go inside a mosque, which is a rare opportunity. Visiting the Zion church reminded us to be more empathetic and compassionate towards the grievances of victims of the Easter a Sunday attacks. I realised the importance of our role as community leaders in ensuring peaceful coexistence in our society.”

Rev. T.R. Chelven, a pastor from Rakwana, said, “Rakwana is a multi-religious area where there are controversies over religious conversions. As members of LIRCs, we need to have a better understanding of the root causes that have created conflict situations when deciding initiatives to mitigate them. These types of initiatives will pave the way for enhancing mutual understanding and collaborative engagement in safeguarding religious freedom.”

Kurukkal Sivasiri Eingarana from Rakwana said religious conflicts could be solved through a better understanding of other religions. “We had not visited a mosque before. Learning about other religious practices and beliefs is a great approach to building relations among different communities.”



Sabaragamuwa University Course Commences

The inauguration ceremony of the course on inclusive service delivery for sustainable peace at the University of Sabaragamuwa was conducted with the participation of academic staff, students and NPC members. Last month the same course began at the Eastern University in Batticaloa.

Vice Chancellor of the Sabaragamuwa University, Professor Udaya Rathnayaka, said that the course would develop the capacity of government officers in peaceful communication when engaging with citizens. Peaceful communication was paramount in providing inclusive service delivery as it would enable one to empathise with the beneficiary and to look at things from the perspective of the other. This in turn would enable government officers to connect with the community at a deeper level and foster better relations between the state and its citizens, he pointed out.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera said the course was unique in that it bridged the gaps between the state and its citizens to ensure inter religious, inter racial and inter communal peace and harmony. Inclusive service delivery prevented exclusion and division as all citizens were treated as belonging to the nation.

Additional District Secretary of Ratnapura, Ms. Gayani Karunaratne, said that the District Secretariat recognised the importance of the course. It would play a crucial role in development of the capacity of frontline government officers as it would enable them to engage with meaningful service delivery with beneficiaries and thus enabling cordial relations between the state and its citizens. She pledged her support and coordination for the development and implementation of the course.

In the ensuing discussion, frontline government officers said they hoped their participation in the course would allow them to perform their duties in a manner that would foster cordial relations with beneficiaries. They highlighted the difficulties that they faced in dealing with vulnerable communities in providing services and communicating with these communities.



NPC Receives Certificate of Appreciation

NPC was awarded a certificate of appreciation for training senior government officials on pluralism and fundamental rights in the Galle District.

The concept and importance of pluralism was discussed at workshops attended by senior government officials. Another workshop was also conducted for staff of the District Secretariat under the Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project.

Two other workshops were held for senior government officials from Kegalle and Kurunegala Districts. NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera spoke about current situation in the country and the role of NGOs. Prof. Upul Abeyratne explained the concepts of pluralism and inclusion while NPC Project Manager Saman Seneviratne discussed the challenges and opportunities encountered in building a pluralistic society. Games and activities were conducted for participants.

Some participants said they had not been able to understand the meaning of pluralism but during the workshop they learnt what it meant and how important it was for a country such as Sri Lanka where diverse communities lived. They said they would practice pluralistic values at their work places and beyond. Another suggestion was to conduct pluralism sessions for school children.

Training for OMP Staff

NPC concluded a residential workshop on improving the capacity of the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) staff under the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives project for staff at offices in Jaffna, Mannar, Kilinochchi, Batticaloa and Matara and Colombo.

The sessions addressed the training needs of the OMP staff and were based on the results of a need assessment survey. Participants were given theoretical and practical knowledge about pluralism, transitional justice, psychosocial support, active listening, nonviolent communication and the OMP Act. They learnt how to apply these concepts to real life situations to improve their services and to make the services of the OMP more user friendly.

Some sessions highlighted real life situations faced by family members of missing persons. Participants learnt about the diversity of needs and wants of victim families and, in turn, explained the obstacles they faced in delivering their services. They were taught how to address situations diplomatically and shown the importance of their role in providing remedies to victim families.



Our Vision: A just and peaceful Sri Lanka, in which the freedom, human rights and democratic rights of all peoples are assured.

February
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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.

Implementing Constitutional Provisions Key to Stability and Sustainable Peace

Government leaders have taken the consistent position that the country requires stability if there is to be economic recovery. In his Independence Day speech and during the course of his presidential address to parliament, President Ranil Wickremesinghe gave special attention to the need to strengthen the national reconciliation process to resolve the country's national problem. The president has reaffirmed this commitment both in the north of the country and before national and international audiences. He has taken public stands on these issues and spelt out his position in a manner other national political leaders are yet to do clearly and without ambiguity on the matter of the 13th Amendment with an understanding and level of courage that is exemplary.

The National Peace Council regrets the manner in which the president's commitment to implement the 13th Amendment to the constitution, and especially to devolve land and police powers to them, is being portrayed as a step to divide the country. We see the need for dispelling the misapprehensions and fallacies relating to the devolution of power under the 13th Amendment through a countrywide programme of education and discussion. The South African and Northern Ireland experiences of resolving their conflicts through political solutions which were discussed at length amongst the people and accepted by them needs to be emulated.

The devolution of power is about respecting the equal rights of individuals and communities to participate in democracy and governance at both the provincial and local government levels. Local government elections are scheduled to take place on March 9. Accordingly, the National Peace Council calls on the government to facilitate the conduct of free and fair local government elections. In a vibrant democracy, which Sri Lanka is, political stability is best ensured by upholding the democratic processes. We also call on the opposition parties to desist from divisive and racist politics during the election campaign.

The conduct of free and fair elections when they fall due is a central feature of the democratic process. We welcome the decision of the Supreme Court that recognizes the authority of the Election Commission to proceed with the local government elections as mandated by the constitution. We find the Government Printer's refusal to print ballot papers until the Election Commission makes a payment to be absurd. Both are state institutions and there could be no greater priority than sustaining the democratic process. We urge the government to resolve this problem, respect the observations of the Supreme Court and take the necessary measures to ensure that free and fair elections take place on March 9 as declared by the Election Commission. Blocking the scheduled March 9 local government election will erode the legitimacy of the government and its commitment to democratic governance.

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