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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

May 2017

Reconciliation Training For Peace Workers

A one-week training on conflict transformation for peace workers was held in Colombo under NPC's Religions to Reconcile project, which is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented with a Jordan based partner organization, Generations For Peace.



The 26-month project, which began in October 2016, targets the districts of Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Puttalam, Nuwara Eliya, Galle, Matara and Ampara.

The project focuses on strengthening community networks mentored by religious leaders and engaging them in building consensus for a Transitional Justice (TJ) process and helping communities evolve a pluralistic national identity. The project is based on strengthening inter religious people-to-people community engagement for reconciliation and social cohesion in Sri Lanka.

During the workshop the participants were trained on conflict, peace and peace building, conflict analysis, theory of change, sports and arts for peace, and facilitation roles, techniques and methodologies.

Speaking at the workshop, USAID's Office Director of Program and Support, Elizabeth Davnie-Easton said lasting peace required the support of grassroots communities to succeed, and this support could be garnered through people-to-people reconciliation programmes that bring together people of different backgrounds to address issues, reconcile difference and promote trust and understanding.

"The NPC-established District Inter Religious Committees are the grassroots centre of easing tensions among multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities, building bridges, and coming together to solve common social issues," she said.

"The programme was very successful. I wish to work for the development of my community. My aim is peace, happiness and unity. I learnt how to reach my goals and take action to reduce the Sinhala and Muslim conflict in society, and how to initiate work at the village level."

A workshop participant

NPC Executive Director Jehan Perera said the training was being held at a time when there was a slowdown in the country's reconciliation process and very few people were working for national harmony, integration and peace.

"You have learnt new skills to take difficult messages to diverse groups of people including women, journalists, youth, government workers and the disabled," he told the peace workers. "You have to work with them to enhance ties among the communities."



He said that civil society had a duty to put pressure on the government to move forward and use the window of opportunity to bring about sustainable peace and unity. It would be a long journey ahead.

Settling a Religious Dispute in Badulla

A dispute between Buddhists and Muslims because of a Buddha statue in front of a meat shop belonging to Muslims was discussed at DIRC Badulla's monthly meeting under NPC's project Reconciling Inter Ethnic and Inter Religious Differences (RIID).

The building is owned by the Welimada Pradeshiya Sabha, who also built the statue. A Moulavi who raised the issue pointed out that it was difficult to remove the statue because some extremist groups were involved. He suggested that the Pradeshiya Saba shifted the meat shop to a different building in the town, since the shop owner was willing to leave. DIRC members met the Chief Minister of Uva Province and told him about the matter.

At the meeting, NCP Project Manager Saman Seneviratne spoke to DIRC members on social networking and advocacy. Participants shared their views and experiences.

"I am happy to participate in this meeting. I got many new ideas from the session and I will attend meetings regularly. I appreciate the DIRC as well as NPC because you have done good work," a Buddhist Nun said.

A Peaceful Ramadan in Polonnaruwa

Oonagama, a remote village in the Polonnaruwa district, is home to Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil communities.

After the Buddhist extremist group Bodu Bala Sena's attack on Muslims in Oonagama, there was concern that there would be a disruption of Ramadan, which was to start on May 28. This issue was brought up at the DIRC Polonnaruwa meeting May 20. A sub committee was set up to look into the matter and on the same day, a request letter was prepared for submission to President Maithripala Sirisena asking for security during the Ramadan period in the area. The letter was handed over on May 23 by a DIRC member.

A meeting was organized for community leaders, mosque representatives, police officials, local government officers and DIRC members to raise awareness on the security that was to be provided and how to respond to any disturbance during the Ramadan period.

Vesak With A Difference in Batticaloa

Members of Batticaloa's District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) decided to make it a Vesak with a difference by inviting people of all religions to participate in the celebrations. Although the Batticaloa district is home to Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese, the different communities rarely participate at each other's festivals.



Under NPC's project Promoting Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Sri Lanka, Batticaloa DIRC provided refreshments to some 1,500 people who were visited the town to see Vesak. In the past, Vesak had been celebrated only by the army or people at Buddhist temples and was considered by Tamils and Muslims as an event of Sinhalese. This year, leaders of all religions took part in the festivities. DIRC members wore traditional clothes to show the public that people of different religions had organised the event.

One problem was the lack visibility of the DIRC in Batticaloa. If people were aware about DIRC activities, they would bring any religious tensions or disputes to the attention of the DIRC. At the Vesak event, DIRC members gave a basic introduction to DIRC and its activities to the people who visited the town.

"I am really happy to be part of this event. My Tamil and Muslim friends (DIRC members) came to my home and we had fun while making food and soft drinks. This is the first time such a variety of people has come to my home and shop," said a Sinhala DIRC member.

Also under the same project, DIRC Trincomalee held a workshop for 25 key media personnel. The media plays a key role in community inter religious harmony as well as motivation of communal inter religious violence.

Details of the project were explained to the participants followed by talks by religious leaders on unity, religious harmony, respecting other's religions and non-violence in their respective religions. They also explained misunderstood cultural traditions such as why Muslim women cover their faces, why Hindus wear pottus and what Halal is.

During discussions, the media wanted to know about putting up religious monument in public places. Religious leaders replied that the issue was more complicated than it appeared. However in the religions they represented, there was no promotion of religion by force.

The media personnel said the workshop had been useful to them and welcomed the effort by DIRC.

Diverse Topics Discussed At Colombo Workshop

Thirty two participants from 16 districts, including lawyers, doctors, principals, teachers and young entrepreneurs, attended a workshop in Colombo on Transitional Justice Mechanisms, the New Constitution and the Referendum.

The workshop was held under NPC's project Initiating Multi Level Partnership Action for Conflict Transformation (IMPACT) in district where NPC had set up District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs).

Among the topics discussed were the new Constitution, the Geneva Resolution and its relevance, Constitutional reforms for national reconciliation, Transitional Justice and role of NPC in the current political situation.

Under the IMPACT project, several sessions on pluralism was conducted in Vavuniya, Matara and Galle for DIRC members.

Workshops on Transitional Justice, the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission and Democracy and Good Governance were also conducted in Batticaloa, Puttalam, Nuwara Eliya and Kandy for DIRC members.

"This is a good opportunity for us to learn many new things. Transitional Justice and how it is relevant to Sri Lanka was clearly explained. This workshop should be held at district level for professionals and civil society representatives. All people of this country should have same opportunities and rights whether they live in North, South or East. We must guide our students on the right path towards a reconciled country where all people can live happily."

A workshop participant



Need To Protect Muslims

An alarming number of attacks against Muslim religious places of worship and businesses are being reported countrywide causing economic ruin to many people, hurting their religious sentiment and bringing them dismay and leaving the entire community in fear of life and security. The worsening trend has been going on for several years and has a pattern of repeating after a short lull. It has intensified since April this year with over 20 attacks or attempted attacks being reported from different parts of the country in the past two months. So far no one has been arrested by the police for these crimes. Also, the government has so far failed to take steps to arrest this trend which has been acknowledged by the Minister of Law and Order in Parliament. This is an escalation of the longer-term trend that included the torching of a section of a town in the South of Sri Lanka (Aluthgama) in 2014 in which Muslims live in large numbers.

In most parts of the country the Muslim community lives in a scattered matter which makes them especially vulnerable to all kinds of violence against them and other minority communities living in a similar situation. The failure of the police to protect people who are being subjected to attack and violence is abdication of the government's duty to protect all citizens equally. The rise in verbal and physical violence has been accompanied by public statements that Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese and Buddhist country with the implication that ethnic and religious minorities have a lesser place. In one widely publicized instance a Buddhist monk even went to the office of the Minister of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages and challenged him to a verbal duel on that basis. This is a subversion of a universal and peaceful religion in which there are no chosen people by birth that is being misinterpreted to suit the needs of a group of politically motivated people.

At the elections in 2015 the ethnic and religious minorities overwhelmingly voted for the government parties which promised to protect them from the violence, lawlessness and impunity to which they had been subjected in the past. The Sri Lankan people need to keep in mind the lessons from the past in which the failure to protect minorities from discrimination became a cause for three decades of war. We have seen that when problems are not resolved and are permitted to go on unchecked that they escalate with time. They can lead to catastrophic outcomes in the future – a situation Sri Lanka can ill afford.

The government has to pay attention to the growing anti-Muslim sentiments among segments of majority community and the use of violent means to take their message and action to the ground. This situation needs to be investigated and the root causes need to be addressed through meaningful short-term and long term actions. Countering false propaganda will need to be a central part of the government and civil society agendas. Further, the general public and civil society organizations need to be made aware of the recent negative development from the perspective of rebuilding our country after long years of war and suffering.

The National Peace Council notes that in the past the police took action under the Incitement to Disaffection Act without waiting for permission from the political authority. The police need to take action under the law to exercise the powers given to them to nip such actions in the bud and maintain law and order under the powers given to them in the Criminal Procedure Code, the criminal law and the Police Ordinance. The National Peace Council calls on the government to ensure that all state institutions act in concert to protect and uphold human rights and also insist that the police to uphold the law and put an end to impunity. The Independent Commissions established under the 19th Amendment to strengthen the Rule of Law and good governance could play an effective role at this time in monitoring the performance of the police and in giving them the necessary encouragement.

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.

Memorialisation Is Part Of The Reconciliation Process

The court injunction against a commemoration in Mullivaikkal in the North of those who lost their loved ones in the last battle of the war on May 18 highlights a problem that needs resolution. In the South the government commemorated the security forces personnel who lost their lives in the war. The police sought the court order to block the commemorative event organized by a civil society group led by Fr Elil Rajendram that sought to memorialize those who lost their lives in the last battle of the war by placing stones with the names of those who lost their lives. At present the Mullivaikkal area, where the last battle of the war was fought, is without any monument to remember those who died there.

For the parents and family members of fallen LTTE cadre and others who lost their lives during the war, they would still be their kith and kin whom they wish to remember. All persons and communities have a right to cry and grieve for family and community members killed, to erect monuments, privately and publicly, individually and collectively. For many families and friends whose loved ones were killed, this is a way to heal their painful past and move towards the future.

The government needs to deal with the problem that there is no memorial or monument in Mullivaikkal for those who lost their lives in the last battles. There is a need for such a memorial and the government should not prevent the people who lost their lives from having such a memorial. There are memorials put up by the government to honour the security forces who lost their lives in the North. The National Peace Council calls on the government to take a step forward in the reconciliation process and engage with both elected representatives in the North and East and with civil society groups to jointly design an appropriate memorial.

We also wish to express our concern at the treatment meted out to Fr Elil Rajendram who was one of the main organizers of the commemoration event. Fr Elil received summons from both the Vavuniya and Mullaitivu police stations. This would most likely be to harass and intimidate him and also to send a message to the other activists that the same could happen to them too. Such intimidatory methods were used during the period of the previous government and were rejected by the people at the last elections. We urge the government to be true to its pledges of good governance and protection of human rights even when it deals with politically controversial matters.

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