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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

March
2018

DIRCs Take Urgent Action to Counter Anti-Muslim Violence

In the wake of the anti-Muslim violence that erupted in Digana and earlier in Ampara, District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in several districts took immediate steps to ease the conflict situation.

Kandy DIRC, headed by coordinator Gamini Jayaweera, organized a press conference in the evening of the riots to request all communities and their leaders not to promote racism or resort to further violence. Several TV stations and print journalists attended the conference.

DIRC members engaged with religious leaders to reduce the tension since the beginning of the crisis. Along with film director Padmasiri Kodikara and actor Vishva Kodikara, they visited Digana and Teldeniya to ask people not to resort to violence and to care for victims.

They have planned a fact finding mission and a truth commission to collect information about the conflict in collaboration with Peradeniya University. They will submit a report to the committee investigating the conflict appointed by President Maithripala Sirisena.

Kandy DIRC provided information on the situation to government authorities including the police, the Presidential Media Unit and the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms.



Ratnapura DIRC also held a press conference in collaboration with several civil society organisations to condemn the anti-Muslim attacks in Kandy and inform the public in order to prevent conflicts in the Ratnapura District. Several religious leaders participated in the press conference. Ratnapura DIRC members visited several mosques in the area to meet Moulavis and Muslim people who were afraid due to the violence.

Puttalam DIRC, along with Puttalam police, organized a dialogue with religious leaders and community leaders in order to minimize the tensions that arose because attacks on Muslims in Ampara and Digana.

The dialogue took place with the participation of about 200 people including 40 religious leaders of all faiths, high ranking police officers and officials from government institutions. They stressed the importance of maintaining peace in the district.

“We should not forget that many people lost their lives during the past three decades because of the war. I am happy that all the communities have come together to condemn what happened in Kandy and Ampara to communicate the importance of living in harmony to avoid another war. It is important to solve problems through talks. No religion tells us to indulge in violence,” said the Superintendent of Police in Puttalam.

Ven. Kudaweva Seelarathane Nayake Thero, Reverend Eranga, Sendararama Kurukkal and Moulavi Abdullah Alim pointed out the core values of their religions and the importance of living in coexistence. DIRC displayed by banner in front of the bus stand to communicate the significance of religious harmony.

Badulla DIRC met the District Secretary and agreed to support several activities including a dialogue with students on ethnic and religious harmony and distributing leaflets and displaying posters that opposed separation based on race and religion.

Hambantota DIRC met religious leaders and agreed to establish religious leaders' committees in collaboration with the police and the government officials. An awareness raising programs will be organized for Dhamma school students.

A meeting was held at NPC office in Colombo on the current political crisis and future of the reconciliation process, which was attended by DIRC members and partners from 16 districts. NPC Chairman Joe William presented an award to Kandy DIRC for its work to mitigate violence in Kandy.



All Religious Leaders Join Tribute To Buddhist Monk in Jaffna

Leaders from all religions attended an almsgiving ceremony at the Sri Nagavihara Temple in Jaffna in memory of Ven. Meegahajandure Gnanaratane Thero, the former Chief Incumbent of the temple.

Jaffna DIRC members including Kurukkals, Moulavis and Christian priests joined about 60 Buddhist monks from around the country at the temple, where they were welcomed by Ven. Meegahajandure Siriwimala Thero, a member of the DIRC.

President Maithripala Sirisena was also present and joined Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith in offering gifts to the monks.

The decision to invite other religious leaders was an initiative taken by Ven. Siriwimala Thero to strengthen unity among religious leaders of all faiths. The practice of respect and equality for all religious leaders is a positive step towards building reconciliation.

Although there was some opposition in Jaffna to conducting a public funeral for Ven. Gnanaratane Thero, with the government's permission it was conducted as planned. Ven. Siriwimala Thero invited religious leaders of the DIRC to the almsgiving as a gesture to show his keen interest to work with them to build harmony.

Community Leaders Trained as Trainers

A workshop for community leaders on Training of Trainers on Transitional Justice (TJ) was held in Colombo in cooperation with Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) under the project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka.

The workshop, which was attended by 27 participants from 10 districts, was addressed by lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi, M.A.M. Hakeem from the Law faculty of the University of Colombo and Sanjeeva Wimalagunaratne from the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms.

The purpose of the training was to enhance understanding and support for the TJ concept among community level leaders who disseminated understanding on TJ through community-based information sessions in coordination with civil society and government partners.

The training commenced with an overview of the present political context by NPC Executive Director Jehan Perera, which gave the participants an understanding how TJ mechanisms played a significant role in the reconciliation process.

Mr Hakeem gave a summary on International Humanitarian Law while Mr Liyana Arachchi spoke about the four pillars of TJ and emphasized the importance of taking a holistic approach. Mr Wimalagunaratna explained the government's progress towards implementing TJ mechanisms.

Participants asked about a special judicial mechanism for trying war related crimes and the importance of investigating human rights violations. They discussed the government's commitment to implement TJ mechanisms with the support of civil society and the international community. Participants concluded that creating opportunities for grassroots leadership was important to disseminate understanding on TJ.

Exchange Visit Creates Empathy



Matara DIRC hosted DIRC members and others from Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi during an exchange visit to build empathy and understanding among communities in different districts under NPC's Religions to Reconcile project. The 89 participants included DIRC members, religious leaders, youth, the differently abled, media, local politicians and community leaders.



This was the first inter district exchange visit of the project, which is supported entirely by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.S. Government's development agency, and implemented by NPC in partnership with Generations for Peace (GFP), an international peace-building organization based in Amman, Jordan.

The overall goal of the project is to strengthen community networks mentored by religious leaders and engage them in building consensus for Transitional Justice and a pluralistic identity.

During their visit, the group participated in an experience sharing forum where war victims from the South, mainly parents of soldiers who lost their lives in the war and bomb blast victims, shared their stories. This was a first-time experience for many participants from the North. After the session, where six victims shared their traumatizing experiences, members of the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu groups expressed their sadness about what had happened and said that they often identified themselves as the only victims of the war but would not do so now.

The group visited popular destinations in Matara including the Devundara Temple and the lighthouse and swam at Polhena Beach. Dinner was followed by a multi cultural show, with the different districts showcasing their talents and included dancing sessions, group songs and skits. A dance troupe presented traditional dances from the South.

Transitional Justice for Youth

An orientation meeting for NPC's partners from 21 districts was held under the project Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka. The project is funded by United Nations Peace Building Fund and implemented with the support of Legal Action World Wide and Harvard Law School.

At the orientation meeting partners were told of project objectives, how to select people for training and how to handle logistics. As a first step, a perception survey will be conducted among young people on Transitional Justice (TJ) in Sri Lanka.

This is NPC's first TJ project with young people. War victims, youth parliamentarians, members of youth clubs and vocational students will be given priority to ensure the best results from the project.

Proposed NGO Law Would Have Restricted Freedom Of Association

The National Peace Council welcomes the decision of Minister of National Coexistence, Dialogue and Official Languages Mano Ganesan to withdraw proposed amendments to the Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act, No. 31 of 1980 following representations made to him by over 130 civil society organizations. The Minister took this decision at a meeting held with representatives of these CSOs presided over by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

At this meeting the Prime Minister reassured those present that the government's intention was not to control NGO work or make civil society dependent on the government. He requested the CSOs present to nominate seven members who could meet with the government and develop a sustainable solution that would protect national interests and the independence of civil society.

Compulsory registration of civil society is present only in fascist totalitarian countries. Democracy guarantees freedom of association and assembly. Nonetheless, previous Sri Lankan governments too have sought to restrict the freedom of civil society organizations. Draft legislation to this end was prepared by the previous government in 2011 when the National NGO Secretariat was under the Ministry of Defence.

In this context the cabinet decision to approve the draft amendments to the Voluntary Social Service Organizations (Registration and Supervision) Act, No. 31 of 1980 generated widespread opposition within civil society. The amendments sought to expand the scope of the law to bring all voluntary associations, even village-based ones, within the direct supervisory purview of the government.

Minister Ganesan explained that the government's intention was to strengthen the National NGO Secretariat which would be a focal point for all civil society organizations. He said that provision of legal personality to CSOs by registration with the NGO Secretariat could enhance their capacities to mobilize resources. Minister Ganesan also said that Sri Lanka had obligations under international law to ensure that terrorist financing did not take place within the shores of the country.

According to the draft amendments all voluntary associations, even those legally registered elsewhere would have had to register themselves with the National NGO Secretariat. The proposed amendments would have empowered the National NGO Secretariat to launch investigations into CSO activities without any judicial oversight and to enter the premises of an organisation without advance notice to conduct inspections. It also sought to prohibit them from changing their registered address without the approval of the National NGO Secretariat or giving financial support to other CSOs without such approval.

The targeting of the entirety of civil society with a special laws is both overbroad and discriminatory and is democratically unacceptable. In a democracy the people are free to organize themselves for any purpose as long as it is not in pursuit of illegal activities.

The National Peace Council affirms that civil society organizations be subjected to the legal structure of the country in the same manner as the business and public sectors without also being subjected to special surveillance and monitoring by any specialized government agency. We also affirm that compulsory registration is not acceptable in a free and democratic society which enjoys the freedom of association as a constitutional right and the decision whether or not to register with a particular government agency should be left to their members.

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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.

Country Must Avoid Another Cycle Of Violence

Sri Lanka is still in a post-war phase in which the wounds and traumas of the past three decades of violence and war have still not been healed. The violence directed against Muslim-owned shops, mosques and vehicles in Ampara is a continuation of a process of fueling tension, suspicion and hatred between communities. The anti-Muslim propaganda focuses on the growth of the Muslim population and its expansion into areas inhabited primarily by members of other communities. Those who foment violence against the Muslim community are citing unfounded allegations of introducing birth control and other drugs into food packets.

Incidents of violence against the Muslim and other minority communities are both political and systemic. These are often engineered citing fear, distrust and insecurities and the building of enemy images of the victim communities. Until the national political leadership takes firm and determined action at this time there is an increasing likelihood of Sri Lanka a new cycle of communal violence that will become uncontrollable. A similar phenomenon was seen, with dreadful consequences, in the early 1980s when communal sentiment was directed against the Tamil which culminated in the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983.

After enduring three decades of civil strife and internal war, and now having to answer to the international community at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Sri Lanka must not go through another cycle of violence which targets Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims. In particular we need to remember the Muslim community has international support in many parts of the world including the Middle East, North Africa, South and South East Asia. This has been a source of strength to our country in many forms, including the provision of employment. It is the responsibility of the government and opposition to be aware of these realities and take immediate action prevent false propaganda and violence against the Muslim community spiraling out of control.

The National Peace Council calls on the national political leadership, both in government and opposition, to come out in unanimity against the present polarizing process and not to seek to politicize it for their own advantage. We note that the leaders of the Muslim and Tamil political parties have already condemned these incidents and made calls to the government to take deterrent action. However, the paucity of government and opposition leaders making similar calls is most disturbing. We fear that unchecked this type of activity will gather momentum, and due to lack of adequate response, will become entrenched.

We call on the government and state institutions, especially the police, to take immediate deterrent and punitive measures against the miscreants and those giving them political and ideological backing. The false propaganda which is spread through word of mouth and on the social media needs to be countered by the government and civil society in a systematic manner. We affirm the role of civil society in addressing these systemic failures with the support of government and in promoting reconciliation initiatives with religious leaders from all communities.

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National Peace Council, 12/14 Balapokuna Vihara Road, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka

Website: www.peace-srilanka.org, Email: info@peace-srilanka.org

Tel: 2818344, 2854127, Fax: 2819064