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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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Kandy DIRC Sets Up Citizens' Truth Commission

In a citizens' response to the riots that took place in Kandy in March this year, a Citizens' Truth Commission was set up by the Kandy District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) to find the root causes of the violence.

The members appointed as commissioners were retired judge Justice W.M.P.B. Warawewa, Professor S.A. Kulasooriya, Professor Milton Rajaratne, lawyer Chrismal Warnasooriya, Professor Amarakeerthi Liyanage, former Kandy Government Agent A.M.L.B. Polgolla, former Director General Mahaweli Authority Dr. M.B. Adikaram, Dr. Kanchana Kohombange, lawyer M.K.M. Shahin Hasan, former Director General Agriculture Department S.L. Weerasena, and university lecturer R. Ramesh.

The commissioners assigned two expert committees to collect the evidence from the victims as well as from other people in areas where the most serious incidents had taken place.

The investigation conducted by the commission was preceded by a public notice in the national newspapers announcing the setting up of the Citizens' Truth Commission, its terms of reference and the names of its commissioners.



The proceedings of the hearing were conducted in public with the news media in attendance. Most of those who attended the final meeting in Kandy were those who believed in the values of pluralism and people's participation in governance and represented a cross section of society, which demonstrated the essentially democratic, pluralistic and human rights respecting nature of the Sri Lankan intelligentsia.

Explaining the rationale for the setting up of the commission coordinator of the Kandy DIRC, Gamini Jayaweera, said that shortly after the anti Muslim riots the government had announced that it would set up a commission of inquiry to ascertain the truth of what happened, whether it was spontaneous, or organized, and if so who was behind the riots. But the government's inquiry has yet to happen. The police investigations also appeared to be at a standstill. Although several ground level perpetrators had been arrested by the police, the masterminds behind the scenes still remained at liberty.

The setting up of the Citizens' Truth Commission can be seen as a civil society response to the failure of the government to find and publicise the truth of what lay behind the anti Muslim riots. It is also evidence of the silent majority who could be won over to the cause of peace building and national reconciliation if there were sufficient political champions of those concepts as opposed to champions of crude ethnic nationalism.

Last year another civil society initiative led by NPC in partnership with the DIRC took place in Kandy in the form of a Truth Forum, which looked into the human rights violations that had taken place in the past. It was well received by those who participated and provided the inspiration for the present Citizens' Truth Commission process.

Trincomalee and Batticaloa DIRCs Take Steps to Ease Ethnic and Religious Tension

Under NPC's project Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic dialogue in Sri Lanka, members of the District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in Batticaloa and Trincomalee discussed several issues that were contributing to religious and ethnic tension in their districts, and planned activities to alleviate the tension.

In Trincomalee, four issues were identified for immediate action. These were business competition between different ethnic groups, religious leaders dividing the communities by preaching fundamentalism for political purposes, inability to pay back loans from finance companies and high drug and alcohol use resulting in domestic violence, poverty and robbery.

The new issues identified were clashing prayer times during Ramadan, wearing of the covered dress for Muslim girls in schools, building religious statues in public places, the lack of Tamil speaking policemen and neglected children of women working overseas.

The DIRC agreed to discuss the problems and come up with suitable solutions including improving skills, sharing knowledge and cooperation among DIRC members, workshops and awareness programmes of religion and culture and networking with other DIRCs.

In Batticaloa, the issues causing concern included the ignorance of youth about other cultures and religions, a dispute over a cemetery and unfair allocation of state land. Some solutions included awareness campaigns on religion and culture, celebrating festivals together and meeting relevant government officials to settle the matter of the allocation of state land.

Motivating Local Communities to Tackle Religious Tension

A peace march to promote religious freedom and pluralism was organized by the Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) in Weligama and NPC's local partner Voice of South under the NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF). The message of the march was creating coexistence through multi religious values, teachings and celebrations.

About 300 religious leaders and school children participated as well as government officials and police officers. Archbishop of Galle Raymond Kingsley Wickramasinghe was a special guest.

After the march, a lecture on religious freedom was delivered by Dr. Kumbalgoda Dhammaloka Thero, who has translated the Bible into Sinhala. Dr. Kumbalgoda Dhammaloka Thero highlighted the importance of using religion as a connecting factor rather than a dividing factor. "Religious leaders coming together to build peace at a time like this will ensure that their followers will also do so," he said.

Also under the CERF project, the first bimonthly meeting of Akurana LIRC was held after the violence in Kandy.

Madawa Warnakulasooriya, Divisional Secretary of Akurana, said that it was necessary to rebuild trust in the law in the area while Inspector of Police of Alawatugoda called for more legal awareness programmes.

The participants shared ideas on preventing further violence. Lack of understanding of other religions, misuse of social media and language barriers were cited as causes of religious tension. Participants stressed the importance of creating more advocacy groups and youth groups so that young people could learn about different cultures. It was agreed the business community should also be involved in peace building activities.

An action plan was formulated to address the issues. The Officer In Charge of Alawatugoda Police thanked NPC for motivating the community and promised to provide necessary support to implement the action plan successfully.



Transitional Justice Training For Youth

A series of training workshops on Transitional Justice (TJ) was held for university students and youth under NPC's project Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka, which is funded by the UN Peace Building Fund. The programme for universities was held at the Eastern University for 53 undergraduates and was supported by the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms (SCRM).

Mr. M. A. M Hakeem, Senior Law Faculty Lecturer at the University of Colombo, explained International Humanitarian Law (IHL) including Right to Protect, the Geneva Convention, International Criminal Court and United Nations protocols. He explained the terms and the concepts of Transitional Justice (TJ) such as impunity, amnesty, criminal responsibility, command responsibility and diplomatic immunity.

On the second day Mr. Hakeem focused on changing the attitudes of the youth. At the beginning of the training, the students had fixed ideas and their opinions differed according to whether they were Sinhala or Tamil but after the training their questions were more neutral and they all agreed that TJ should be implemented as a process for reconciliation.

At the training workshop in Anuradhapura, the participants were youth parliamentarians, Youth Council members and vocational training students. Some came from border villages in the Polonnaruwa district. They were all Sinhalese and said they had never heard of TJ.

Activities included role playing, making posters, writing and story telling designed to bring out their thoughts on war, victims and truth and to empathize with the difficulties of others such as relatives of the disappeared and ex combatants.

Most of the participants at another workshop in Batticaloa had been affected by the war. They included former military men, schoolteachers and youth parliamentarians. Being in the minority in the district, the Sinhala youth were more attuned to the ethnic problem and were ready to listen to the stories of Tamil people.

One war survivor from Batticaloa asked how it was possible to move forward without knowing past while another youth from Ampara said memorialisation was a way to heal wounds of war. A Sinhala youth said the government's communication on the process of reconciliation was poor. Mr. Rashi Chandranath, Acting Director of Communication at SCRM, said steps were being taken to address this problem.



A Collective Voice for Peace in Ampara

The Ampara District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC), local politicians and community leaders organized a Peace Conference in Kalmunai under NPC's Religions to Reconcile (R2R) Project. Over 200 community members from Kalmunai, Irakkamam, Digavapi and Higurana, including differently abled people, attended the conference.



The project is being implemented by NPC supported by the U.S. Government's development agency USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and is implemented with a Jordan-based partner organization, Generations For Peace (GFP).

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

A team of religious leaders from the Ampara DIRC led by Moulavi A. A. Azwar and Ven Ranmuthugala Sangaratna Thero, chief incumbent of the Kalmunai Buddhist temple, worked with other religious leaders and community members to organize the conference, which was attended by 10 religious leaders representing all faiths.

Other speakers included journalist A.L.M. Saleem and Principal of Wesley College in Kalmunai V. Pirabakaran, who shared their aspirations for a peaceful Ampara District and Sri Lanka. Ms. Manoja Priyadarshani, representing the Sinhala community, spoke on the importance of having one voice for peace and Ms. K.L. Shaheela read a poem on peace. Ven Ranmuthugala Sangaratna spoke in the Tamil language and said that one of the biggest stumbling blocks for peace in Sri Lanka was not knowing the language of the other.



Bringing Reconciliation to Matara

Under the IMPACT project, NPC conducted two Transitional Justice (TJ) workshops for students of Nilwala College of Education in the Matara District. Resource persons were lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi and NPC Project Manager Saman Seneviratne. Two hundred participants attended both training programmes.

Another training programme was held for 150 student and lecturers of Ocean University situated in Tangalle, with Mr. Seneviratne as resource person.

Participants said a discussion on TJ was relevant because students were the responsible citizens of the future and they needed to know about the political situation in the country and the reconciliation process undertaken by the government.

The staff at both institutions thanked NPC for carrying out the training, which they said had helped the students to gain an objective and realistic view of the situation in the country and the reconciliation process while getting rid of misconceptions and extremist views. The head of the Nilwala College of Education asked NPC to conduct a training session on TJ for new students.

Reconciliation Workshop for CMC

Newly elected Municipal Council members from the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) and selected municipal staff members participated in three day workshop that was organized with support from USAID's Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability Project and NPC. NPC resource persons provided inputs on the reconciliation process for councillors.

In discussions with NPC during the planning stage, Mayor of Colombo Rosy Senanayake said that she had three objectives in mind. These were to familiarize the councillors with their duties and the laws that govern them, to help them to understand the importance of the national reconciliation process and the government's roadmap in that regard and to promote good relationships between the councillors.

At the end of the workshop, participating council members obtained an overview of the local government system and democratic process of Sri Lanka with special reference to the role and obligations of the council members. They gained an initial understanding of the complexity of democratic process and the local government system. In addition they learnt about the national reconciliation process in relation to the provision of services to a plural and multi ethnic society.



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.

Need to Defend the Space for Reconciliation

The political space opened up by the government over the past three years has enabled political parties and civil society to engage in public activities without restriction. The National Peace Council is concerned that this political space is being utilized most fully by ethnic nationalists. This has increased the divisions in society, as manifested in the public activities that commemorated the last day of the war on May 18.

At the main public event that took place in the North the demand was made that May 18 be declared a Day of Genocide. In the South there was criticism of the government for not celebrating the Day of Victory as in the past. We believe that these two positions constitute extremes that will divide and not reconcile the polity.

The end of a civil war is a time for healing and reconciliation. We appreciate the statement of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe who said that all civilians who lost their lives from the day the war began should also be remembered during that day. He said “Today is an important day for Sri Lanka as the country is commemorating the end of the war and the emergence of peace. We will also remember the security forces personnel who sacrificed their lives and the civilians who died during the armed conflict.”

We also appreciate the defense of the government’s position on the commemoration of the war by government spokesperson Rajitha Senaratne who compared the commemoration of the northern dead to the commemoration of the southern dead in the JVP insurrections of the past, which have been taking place regularly in the South. The government and Minister Senaratne in particular have been denounced by opposition politicians for having permitted the northern commemoration to take place and for justifying the right of the Tamil people to commemorate those who died that day and in the course of the war.

We wish to remind those who are today in the political opposition of the position on commemoration taken by the Lessons Leant and Reconciliation Commission appointed by former President Mahinda Rajapaksa. “Seeds of reconciliation can take root only if there is forgiveness and compassion. Leaders of all sides should reach out to each other in humility and make a joint declaration, extending an apology to innocent citizens who fell victim to this conflict, as a result of the collective failure of the political leadership on all sides to prevent such a conflict from emerging.” We affirm that reconciliation requires changes of heart and spirit, as well as social and economic change.

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