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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

October
2018

NPC Joins Civil Society Protest Against Contravening Constitution

NPC staff and about 80 District Inter Religious Committee members from six districts joined a civil society protest outside the Prime Minister's residence to urge a swift end to the Constitutional crisis facing the country.

Under its IMPACT project, NPC produced large banners in three languages demanding the immediate reconvening of Parliament, adherence to the Constitution and return to democracy.

Several thousands of UNP supporters and civil society activists gathered outside Temple Trees and at the Liberty roundabout to protest President Maithripala Sirisena's sacking of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and appointment of Mahinda Rajapakse as Prime Minister and the proroguing of Parliament.

In a strongly worded media release, NPC demanded that the rule of law and respect for the Constitution should prevail. "The dismissal of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe following the withdrawal of the SLFP headed by President Maithripala Sirisena from the government alliance has plunged the country into a political crisis. The president appointed former president Mahinda Rajapaksa as the new prime minister.



“The changing of governments and leaders is part and parcel of democracy. But due process needs to be followed, the constitution must not be violated and the Rule of Law must prevail when such changes take place. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has contested his dismissal, and the appointment of a new Prime Minister, on the grounds that it does not conform to the 19th Amendment to the constitution. The legality of the Prime Minister’s dismissal needs to be resolved by the Supreme Court.

“Despite violent conflicts in the past, Sri Lanka can take pride in the fact that transfer of power to successive administrations was achieved through democratic electoral processes. Parliamentary democracy is a public process not a secret enterprise. The most urgent need is for Parliament to meet and find ways and means to resolve the crisis. Therefore the National Peace Council is not in agreement with the President’s action in proroguing Parliament until November 16. We call on the President and Speaker to immediately convene Parliament to enable the person with majority support to be declared the Prime Minister.

“Even as the political crisis continues the National Peace Council notes the need to maintain discipline in institutions to prevent individuals taking laws into their own hands. Sri Lanka can ill afford unruly takeover of media and other government institutions that can lead to violence between competing political interests. Law enforcement officials need to ensure that the Rule of Law is maintained at all costs despite their own political leanings.

“It is particularly distressing to us that the steady progress that the country was making in the area of post-war reconciliation could be jeopardized as a result of the political instability that has now besets the polity. In the course of this year the government alliance set up the Office of Missing Persons, returned military occupied land to the civilian population in the north and east, passed legislation to establish an Office for Reparations and the cabinet of ministers approved draft legislation for a Truth Commission. We strongly affirm that these are achievements that need to be built upon and not reversed.”



Civil Society Assesses its Situation

Several leaders of civil society organisations met at the Methodist Church Headquarters in Colombo to assess their situation. Bishop Asiri Perera said the situation in the country had deteriorated since they had last met several months ago. The country's leaders were less interested in good governance than in who should rule. There were rumours of snap elections. Those against peace and reconciliation were vociferous.

In the discussion that ensued it was pointed out that:

- When people got back their land from the military, it had been bulldozed. This was a policy and not an isolated event. These were problems where civil society could step in to mitigate.
- In the last month surveillance had increased. Military intelligence agencies that were in the background in the North and East were now doing their surveillance overtly.
- There was an attack on a human rights defender in Jaffna.
- Those who went to Geneva to attend sessions of the Human Rights Council were questioned at the airport on their return.

It was agreed that there were fresh challenges ahead for civil society. It was decided to work together on a number of fronts including brainstorming about the options, identifying a common action plan that could keep groups together and continuing to lobby at the national and international levels.

Leadership Training for DIRCs and Partners

A two day leadership training programme for 35 Steering Committee members of the Badulla, Vavuniya, Jaffna, Batticaloa, Ratnapura, Puttalam and Kurunegala DIRCs and their partner organizations was held in Kalutara under NPC's IMPACT project.

The programme enabled interactive discussions between DIRC members and partners. Topics included monitoring and evaluation, adaptation options, planning strategies, new procedures for operation and management and improvements to collective leadership and personality.

Other sessions were on social media and awareness about cyber crime, financial matters, documentation and building social harmony. Outdoor activities included water rafting and going across a lagoon on a rope.



Programme on Nonviolence for Prisoners in Galle

Galle District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) organized a programme on nonviolence for 60 inmates in the Galle Prison under NPC's project Religions to Reconcile, which is implemented in partnership with Generations for Peace (GFP), an international peace building organization based in Amman, Jordan.



The project is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which is the U.S. Government's development agency. The overall goal is to strengthen community networks mentored by religious leaders and engage them in building consensus for transitional justice and a pluralistic identity.

Galle DIRC invited religious leaders representing each religion to the event. Ven. Milidduwa Sri Sudarshanarama Viharadhipati Thapovanaye Wimala noted that in the Buddha's time, there had been 62 religions but there were no conflicts. "We need to educate people to live in harmony with each other. We should be able to respect one another and build a peaceful society," he said.

Fr. E. H. Palitha Shantha, representing the Galle Baddegama Christian church, said, "During the time that has been given to us to live, we are given an opportunity to do good things. Every religion tells you to do good things. Religion helps to create reconciliation."

The programme was the first one conducted by NPC focusing on prisoners. The idea was brought up by the Galle DIRC where members identified the need to pass the message of reconciliation, nonviolence and coexistence to a wider community.

Human Rights Training for Volunteers

Thirty two participants attended a two-day training programme for volunteers at the Human Rights First Aid Centre in Gampaha under NPC's project, Accountability through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT), which is funded by the European Union.

The participants learnt about human rights, fundamental rights, the Constitution, independent commissions, Transitional Justice (TJ), the Right to Information Act and Office on Missing Persons. They were taught how to prepare an affidavit and a written complaint. Practical sessions demonstrated how to deal with the varied cases coming to the Human Rights First Aid Centre.

Participants said the sessions were interesting and informative and had helped to clear up many misconceptions they had about components of TJ such as justice and reparations.

At the present, 11 Human Rights First Aid Centres are open and receive many human rights violation cases. The project is being implemented in 11 districts of Gampaha, Galle, Matara, Hambantota, Moneragala, Badulla, Nuwara Eliya, Jaffna, Mannar, Batticaloa and Trincomalee over 30 months in partnership with Right to Life Human Rights Centre.

The focus during the first half of the project was setting up the Human Rights First Aid Centres in the 11 districts in order to provide a new mechanism for the public to access at a time of a human rights violation. There are training programmes for two teams to support victims and survivors as well as training programmes on leadership and good governance for marginalised groups, meetings for community leaders, small group meetings with key policymakers at regional and national levels and training on trauma counselling for women police constables at women desks in police stations.

Students Demonstrate TJ Through Visual Arts

Fifty three students from the University of The Visual and Performing Arts were trained on Transitional Justice (TJ) under NPC's project, Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long-lasting Peace in Sri Lanka.

In addition to introducing them to the concepts of TJ, the training made the students aware of the importance of TJ in building sustainable peace and motivated them to produce art-based educating tools to take this concept to the public.

The students said they had attended the workshop to learn about peace and reconciliation, improve their leadership skills and find information for film scripts. They were asked to discuss such statements as "LTTE fought for Tamil people's rights", "We need a new constitution", "We need international support to investigate war crimes", and "TJ means punishing the war heroes."

"Many leaders only talk about the religion and ethnic group to which they belong. The problem begins from there. These leaders divide the people. The war is over but we are still divided by race and ethnicity. Thanks to this workshop we learnt what is true and what is false."

A workshop participant

The students were divided into groups to present their ideas on TJ through drawings and drama. They said that as visual arts students, they could promote the concepts of TJ through films, street drama, concerts, art exhibitions, songs, poems and therapeutic music programmes for victims, as well as helping victims to make memorial statues.

A similar programme was held for 48 students from Wayamba University, which included team building activities, lectures, film screenings and participatory discussions. In Kurunegala and Vauniya, 44 participants, including school students, youth club members and members of the youth parliament attended an information session of TJ.



Youth Parliamentarians Learn About Reconciliation

NPC, under its IMPACT project, held a seminar on Transitional Justice (TJ) mechanisms and the government's reconciliation process for youth parliamentarians in collaboration with the National Youth Services Council (NYSC) in the Gampaha district.

NYSC has a two year programme where it selects 225 youth from all districts around the country to be parliamentarians to follow the debates and procedures of the national parliament and to discuss various issues of relevance to their districts. They are voted in by members of youth clubs in their areas.

The youth, who included university students and working people, were given sessions on pluralism, TJ and the government's mechanisms for reconciliation. Most of them did not know about these issues before they attended the seminar. As aspiring parliamentarians, they were given the knowledge to motivate them to become involved in the reconciliation process.

A five member committee was appointed to coordinate activities through youth clubs and to involve other youth parliamentarians.

Mediation Training for Weligama LIRC

A one day mediation training programme was conducted for 36 members of Weligama Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC). Participants included religious leaders, police officers, Grama Niladharis, NGO and CBO representatives and government officers.

The main objectives of the training were to improve the participants' skills, knowledge and understanding about mediation and to familiarise them on the practical application of mediation to intervene in ethnic and religious conflict situations.

The concepts of mediation and restorative justice were explored in the sessions. Participants said that third party help was important to resolve conflict that occurred between two or more parties and felt that mediation was helpful to restore broken relationships between conflicting parties.



Reconciliation Seminars for Youth in Trincomalee and Batticaloa

An awareness raising seminar was held for 50 senior students in the Trincomalee District and 85 senior students in the Batticaloa district under NPC's project Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Sri Lanka.

The event was organized by the two District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) and supported by the Education Department.

Speaking at the Batticaloa event, Deputy Minister of National Integration, Reconciliation and Official Languages, Ali Zahir Moulana, stressed the importance of reconciliation and asked the students to participate in reconciliation activities.

Mr Moulana said he appreciated NPC's project to promote ethnic and religious harmony in the two districts and pledged his support for future activities.

"This is the first time I have heard other religious perspectives and understood that all religions promote peace, harmony and respect for others. We are divided by religion and fear hearing about other religious ideas but now I realise that all religions have good values and I will take this message to my friends and family."

**A student from
Trincomalee**

At their discussions, DIRC members felt there was mistrust among communities because young people did not respect the culture and rituals of religions other than their own. Therefore it was necessary to promote inter faith dialogue on religious perspectives of reconciliation.

In Batticaloa, a student committee was formed to continue reconciliation activities.



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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.

Increased Care For Victims Now Possible

The passage of legislation establishing an Office for Reparations is another significant step forward in the transitional justice process aimed at healing the wounds of war and bringing a lasting solution to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. In October 2015 the Government of Sri Lanka committed itself before the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva to embark upon a path of national reconciliation while meeting international standards. The government pledges included setting up an Office of Missing Persons, a Truth Commission, an Office for Reparations and a Special Court. The time period given to Sri Lanka comes to an end in March 2019.

The three-decade long war led to immense human suffering amongst all the ethnic communities. The National Peace Council welcomes the governmental initiative to establish the Office for Reparations. We are disappointed however, at the relatively low parliamentary turn out to ratify the law with it being ratified by a margin of only 59- 43 in a parliament of 225 members. It is a cause for regret that less than one half of the parliamentarians saw it as their duty to attend the parliamentary sitting and to cast their own vote. This lack of conviction amongst the parliamentarians, and their failure to vote in favour of the new institution may have been prompted by the campaign to falsely describe the Office for Reparations as a mechanism to give succour to the LTTE and thereby pave the way again for the division of the country. This is a false allegation and the people in general and victim population in particular need to be educated on this score.

The National Peace Council calls on the government, media and civil society to take special measures in this regard. This is an opportunity for the government, political parties and public and civic institutions that failed in the past to make amends for our failures. We believe that the Office for Reparations can provide a strong message of care to the conflict affected populations living in all parts of the country due to the several conflicts that have taken place during the country's post-independent history. These include the recent anti Muslim riots and the two JVP insurrections that took place in 1971 and again in 1988-89 in which much violence was perpetrated on innocent people.

The legislation establishing the Office for Reparations leaves it to the new institution to set out the criteria regarding those who are eligible for reparations. As the four mechanisms incorporated in the transitional justice process are related to each other, the findings of the Office of Missing Persons which has already been established will provide one basis for reparations. There will also be a need to have consultation with the people who have been affected by conflict to identify eligibility criteria. We call on the government and international community to fully resource the Office for Reparations so that it may have the capacity to deliver the material and non-material dues to those affected by conflicts that successive governments failed to resolve through peaceful means.

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