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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

October 2017

NPC To Address Rising Religious Tensions

NPC has commenced a new project entitled Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF), aimed at promoting religious freedom within the framework of pluralism and the rule of law, to be implemented in the Vavuniya, Mannar, Kandy, Badulla, Kalutara, Gampaha, Matara and Ampara districts.

Despite the end Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war more than eight years ago, the underlying causes of tension have not been addressed. While seen mainly as a conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, religion has also been used by politicians and others with vested interests to stoke up communal fears and create insecurity and mistrust.

The latest target of radical Buddhist priests and hard line Sinhala Buddhists has been the Muslim community, which is being subject to violent attacks on people and property, including mosques. In many instances, the police have stood by and watched instead of protecting the victims, in response to orders from high level government officials. In addition, allegations of conversions by Christian groups have led to violence at the local level against small Christian churches. Again, police failed to act because local people were in support of the attacks.

During the 24-month project, local inter religious groups will engage with police officials to ensure that people are able to practice their religion freely in areas identified as possible sites of tension. The lessons learnt will be taken to national and local levels for replication.



A project orientation meeting for the staff and partners was held in Colombo to introduce the project and explain its objectives.

As a start, research will be carried out to find out hot spots where religious conflict could break out, to analyse the underlying causes of religious tension and to measure the extent of religious freedom by formulating a religious freedom index.

Once the hotspot areas are identified, the project will set up Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) modelled on NPC's experience with its District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), which promote religious harmony and coexistence at the district level.

The members of these groups will be trained in religious freedom, pluralism, transitional justice, gender, non-violent communication, conflict sensitivity, conflict analysis, early warning and mediation.

The project will train police officers on their role in upholding rule of law to prevent violence and enable religious freedom. The message will be given that regardless of community sentiment, the police need to uphold the law.

The religious leaders will advocate at the national level for religious pluralism with policy makers, religious leaders, and opinion makers including media, promoting the idea that religious freedom is a right and not a privilege. Advocacy campaigns in hotspots will be devised by LIRCs, NGOs and police involving local media and targeting the public.

Walk for Peace in Batticaloa

DIRC Batticaloa organised a peace walk through Batticaloa town to urge the government to focus on several important issues facing the country including the abolition of the Executive Presidency, Constitutional reform, finding missing persons, releasing of political prisoners and punishment for corruption.

Around 300 religious leaders, civil rights activists and community leaders carried slogans in three languages calling for peace and harmony among the ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. The participants at the walk also distributed leaflets containing quotes about peace and the values of all religions.

At the end of the walk, religious leaders from the Batticaloa district spoke on the threats to democracy and religious harmony and urged the government to address these issues as soon as possible.



Bridging the Ethnic Divide with Culture in Galle

The village of Divithurawatta in the Galle district is home to Tamils and Sinhalese. The Tamil people are mainly estate workers living on tea estates in the area.

Despite many generations of living together, the different communities do not interact and have little to do with each other. This schism has led to misunderstanding and tension - especially as the Tamils feel that the Sinhalese do not respect their culture - demonstrated in the form of sporadic incidents.

Children are divided into Sinhala and Tamil schools and have no opportunity to understand each other's cultural traditions.

"I advise the young people not to put emphasis on religion but to concentrate on the values and teachings of religions. People have gone away from the teachings of religion. If these teachings were followed, there would be no problems."

A Moulavi

After this lack of harmony was discussed at Galle District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) meetings, members decided to hold interactive sessions to bring about awareness of various cultures and religions found in the country, especially among young people.

At the sessions dances, songs and dramas were performed with explanations of the four religions while religious leaders spoke to the young people about how to build coexistence. A painting competition was also held.

Galle DIRC had special participatory discussions about the values of the religions and the benefits of pluralism.



Interaction and Dialogue Dispel Misunderstanding and Distrust

Monaragala District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) organized a dialogue on building trust and fellowship among a group of Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese from different areas of the district. The event took place in Bakinigahawela village in the Monaragala district, which is a Muslim village.

The objective of the visit by Sinhalese and Tamil people to the village was to rebuild trust by understanding Islamic cultural and religious customs and to remove various misconceptions about the religion and its people.

Conflicts had arisen between Muslims and Sinhalese in the area over misunderstandings about Muslims killing cows and allegations that they control the Sinhala population growth through devious means.

The visitors participated in a clean up of the school premises. Then they went to three mosques in the village to have a dialogue with the Moulavis. They returned to the school and discussed their experiences during the visit. Many referred to the fact that Muslims and Sinhalese had lived in harmony in the past. Some people sang peace songs. The visitors and the villagers asked and answered questions, told stories and gave opinions.

Special guests included police officers, school principals, government officials and religious leaders.

A young Sinhala mother from Wellawaya said, “My husband has Muslims friends. I have spoken to some of them. One of my children is having tuition from a Muslim teacher so I go there and sit outside the house until the class is finished. I came for this visit even though I did not like Muslims because they kill cows for meat.

“I am glad I came because I learnt about the good aspects of Islam. The people in the house where I stayed treated me very kindly and gave me tasty food. I was welcomed warmly. We have exchanged phone numbers and decided to visit each other soon. We are all human beings. We are all citizens of this country and have to be treated equally.”



Ensuring People's Participation in Constitutional Reform

Batticaloa District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) had a discussion on the Constitutional reform process as one of the activities to ensure that members are aware of the current Constitutional reforms and participate in the reform process.



With the financial support of the British High Commission, The Asia Foundation and NPC are implementing an initiative on inter faith and inter religious dialogue to reduce ethnic and religious tension in the Batticaloa and Trincomalee Districts.

At the meeting, DIRC members were separated into groups and requested to present chapters of the Report on Public Representations on Constitutional Reform. The report has been simplified into a five-booklet package through the project and was presented to members for their reference.

Each group gave their presentations on chapters related to citizenship and fundamental rights and language rights.

Mr. Aingaran Kugadasan, attorney-at-law, facilitated the discussion, which was centred around what DIRC members thought about the report and whether they felt that their ideas and visions had been included in the report.

Among the topics discussed by the group were the inclusion of disability rights in the Constitution, the singing of the national anthem in the two languages and the meaning of the colours and symbols in the national flag.

Values Based Education to be Promoted

The Asia Foundation will collaborate with NPC on a circulating a values based education curriculum that aimed to address some of the fundamental misperceptions associated with religious intolerance. The curriculum is available in Sinhala, Tamil and English, and covers seven values that are essential to promote social cohesion: active listening, peace, respect, tolerance, compassion, honesty and sincerity and cooperation.

To encourage unity and reconciliation among youth in a context where technology and social media present unique opportunities, the Foundation wants to develop a mobile application that is based on the values curriculum. Prior to this, the curriculum will be updated to ensure greater relevance to the target audience as well as the current context.

The Foundation will hold discussions in six locations - Vavuniya, Mannar, Trincomalee, Ampara, Kurunegala and Kalutara - with representatives of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), the National Youth Services Council and Sri Lanka Unites to gain insight that is required to ensure greater relevance of the digitized curriculum.

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.

Consistency In Prosecuting War Time Cases

Public protests have been continuing in the North against a decision by the Attorney General's department to transfer three Prevention of Terrorism (PTA) cases from Vavuniya High Court to Anuradhapura. Students at the University of Jaffna have launched a university-wide boycott of classes until further notice as student leaders are scheduled to discuss future course of protest action. Earlier in the month protests in Jaffna led to the closure of commercial establishments and schools in Jaffna and transport services came to a halt.

The three prisoners in the Anuradhapura prison are reported to have gone on hunger strike and been admitted to the Anuradhapura hospital due to deterioration in their health condition. Among the main demands is that the government should take back the cases to Vavuniya and also take steps to release over a hundred other LTTE suspects being detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) on the grounds that they are political prisoners. In the aftermath of the JVP insurrection in which large numbers of Sinhalese militants were imprisoned, the government took steps to pardon and release them.

The transfer of the cases involving LTTE suspects is that the Sinhalese witnesses feel unsafe in the Vavuniya. However, the transfer from a court in a Tamil majority area to another court in a Sinhalese majority area has implications of ethnic bias. As justice needs to be done, as well as seen to be done, it is important that the governmental authorities should be more sensitive to the ethnic perceptions of justice and be consistent in their practices.

The National Peace Council notes that there needs to be consistency in policy on the transfer of cases and the protection of witnesses. There have been instances when cases against Sri Lankan military personnel have been transferred from Tamil majority areas to Sinhalese majority areas despite possible security risks imposed on the Tamil civilian witnesses. We call on the government to provide security to the witnesses of the three cases so that it can continue to be heard at the Vavuniya High Court.

The National Peace Council also believes that the larger and complex issue of pardon and release of those held for crimes committed for political reasons could be brought within the framework of the UN Human Rights Council resolution on accountability which the government has promised to implement and ensure there is no ethnic bias. Past practices such as the pardoning and release of those involved in the intense violence of the past JVP insurrections needs to be also considered.

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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