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கிளங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

December 2017

NPC To Promote Gender and Youth Inclusive Peace Building

The UN Peace Building Fund, under its Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative (GYPI), has awarded a grant to NPC for a project to promote gender-responsive and youth-inclusive peace building in Sri Lanka.

The project is titled “Empowering and mentoring youth volunteers to engage with transitional justice to promote reconciliation.”

In a statement, the Fund said the GYPI is aimed at increasing gender-responsive and youth-inclusive peace building and contributing to the strengthening of these under-recognised areas of peace building.

Youth have traditionally been a volatile sector of Sri Lankan society engaging in two Marxist insurrections and in the civil war that lasted three decades. A part of the reason has been the lack of inclusion of youth in dialogue processes, which can make them susceptible to nationalist propaganda. Opportunities to harness the positive role that young men and women can play in social change and in the promotion of peace have not, to date, been properly utilised, in particular the power of young women as a driving force.

Under the project, law students will be trained and mentored to use transitional justice mechanisms as an effective and non-violent way to address past abuses. University students will be empowered and capacity built to become engaged in positive dialogue, including with policy-makers on transitional justice and reconciliation activities. Young grassroots activists will be supported to understand and address key youth concerns and transmit them to policy-makers.

The three strategies undertaken by the project aimed at various groups of young women and men are:

- Empowerment of young lawyers, focusing on a conflict hotspot in a minority Tamil area, to access the transitional justice system as professionals;
- The increase in knowledge of transitional justice processes, particularly amongst the student population in majority Sinhalese areas, and subsequent positive engagement in the process including through interfacing with the government’s transitional justice policy-makers;
- The creation of youth grassroots insider mediators who understand and tackle youth concerns regarding the transitional justice process and enter a two-way dialogue with the government’s transitional justice policy-makers.



War-Affected Women Voice Concerns

A small group of war-affected women activists from the districts of Puttalam, Trincomalee and Hambantota who are working with NPC came to Colombo to meet with the government's Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms, which has been established under the Prime Minister's Office.

Prior to coming to Colombo they had met several times on their own and presented their grievances to the government authorities in the areas in which they lived. But in keeping with the general belief that Colombo is the place to come to get things done, they insisted on meeting central government authorities in Colombo.

At the meeting the women made several points. One was that they were keen to have their grievances heard by those in positions of authority. But what they usually encounter is the reverse. Instead of listening to what they had to say, and to what they wanted, those in authority came to tell them had been planned for them and what they should do. They were angry about the slow pace of change and the non-addressing of their pressing issues, such as that of missing persons.

The second politically significant point they made was to appreciate the freedom they had to travel to Colombo to voice their grievances to the government. They compared the present to the past, and compared it favorably. They said that in the past they could not have travelled from North to South with such freedom.

The third point that the women activists made was that the people they interacted with in the south of the country were sympathetic to their problems. They found there was an openness to learn about what had happened in the past, to make amends and to ensure that this did not happen again.

The sharing of sorrows and experiences was proof that engagement in itself is a healing exercise. It is not as if the people of the south have been spared the human rights violations of the past either. They also suffered during the time of the JVP insurrections both at the hands of the militants and security forces and again during the period of the LTTE. The women victims of war who came to Colombo appreciated that officials of the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanisms listened to what they had to say. Now they expect them to act.

DIRCs Discuss Constitutional Reform

District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in Trincomalee and Batticaloa discussed Constitutional reform under NPC's project Promoting Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic Dialogue in Sri Lanka funded by the British High Commission.

DIRC members discussed topics such as nature of the state, power sharing, devolution, affirmative action and reconciliation. The discussion was facilitated by lawyer Aingaran Kugadasan.

During the discussions in both districts, DIRC members were interested in learning about the merger of Northern and Eastern Provisional Councils. They had some misconceptions such as believing that the proposed new Constitution would offer more power and influence to a merged Northern and Eastern Provisional Council while some Sinhalese DIRC members from Trincomalee feared that giving the Northern Provisional Council more power would lead to a demand for a separate state. These misunderstandings were clarified by the facilitator.

During sessions on possible inter ethnic and religious tensions, upcoming local government elections were identified as a cause in both districts.

Unity in Diversity: The Message in Ampara

The introductory activity of NPC's new project "Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF)" in the Ampara district was conducted with the Social Organizations Networking for Development (SOND) at the Social Welfare and Development (SWOD) district head office, Addalachennai.



The project is designed to accelerate religious freedom in the eight hotspot areas, within the framework of pluralism and rule of law, employing the structure of Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs). These encompass the state-level law enforcement authorities (police) and other relevant officials as well as inter religious and civic leaders in the area.

The objectives are to strengthen collective local commitment to necessary environment for the practice of religious beliefs, and to promote inter faith dialogue for inter ethnic coexistence and non-discrimination.

The orientation meeting in the Addalachennai Divisional Secretary Division aimed to set up the LIRC in the area and to provide members with an opportunity to gain an overview of the project including its concept, objective, background and scope.

There were 38 members present who represented government offices, police, local NGOs and schools, as well as religious leaders of Islam, Hindu and Christianity.

LIRC members showed that they had a strong sense of ownership of the project. According to the evaluation, 89 per cent of the members said they were very satisfied to be selected to the LIRC in the area and 95 per cent were fully committed to future participation and contribution to the project.

One of the members said that the project should encompass the majority in the country and involved them instead of focusing only on the minorities, in order to eradicate the root of the issues.

Mr. Wimalasena, Sub Inspector of Addalachennai Police Station, said the police would support the project by sharing the knowledge and skills that they have gained through their experience of settling past issues in the area.

Chief Kurukkal, Vishwapamma Shree Thangavel, pointed out that it would be impossible to solve problems in a united and cooperative way as long as politicians continued dividing the people. In order to promote an on-the-ground peace process, it was essential that the members from different backgrounds worked together on the project.

Healing Religious Divisions in Mahiyangana

NPC recently launched a project titled “Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF)” to ensure religious freedom of all citizens by strengthening Rule of Law and pluralistic values. The project aims to establish Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRC) in eight identified conflict prone Divisional Secretary Divisions: Akurana, Addalaichchenei, Beruwala, Mannar, Mahiyanganaya, Negombo, Vauniya and Weligama.

A Project Orientation meeting was held in Mahiyangana to establish the LIRC and introduce the project to the members. Swashakthi Development Forum, a Community Based Organization, joined NPC as the implementing partner of the area. Mahiyanganaya is a sacred place for Buddhists as they believe that Lord Buddha once visited the area. It is the home of the Vedda community.

“I see this effort of NPC as timely because religious tension is emerging in the country. Widespread hate campaigns and vandalising of religious places carried out by extremist groups have caused tension. The inclusion of Police officers in this preventive mechanism is important as they are the ones directly involved in conflict prevention at community level.”

Mr. C.C. Wijesekara
OIC, Mahiyanganaya

The chief of the Vedda community, the Assistant Divisional Secretary and the Officer in Charge of the Mahiyanganaya Police Station were the special guests.

The main causes for the religious tension in the area were identified as illegal cattle slaughtering, misconduct of fundamentalist evangelical groups, and hate speeches and physical violence used by Buddhist hardline groups such as Bodhu Bala Sena.



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.

New Impetus For Human Rights Should Continue

Sri Lanka has recently acceded to the Optional Protocol on the Convention against Torture that allows for greater international scrutiny of a country's detention facilities and the Ottawa Treaty to ban landmines. Previous Sri Lankan governments had resisted acceding to these international instruments on the grounds of national security even while agreeing to their content in principle. The National Peace Council welcomes the government decision to accept the challenge of governance in the future according to international standards.

The main feature of the mine ban treaty is that it bans anti-personnel landmines, requires destruction of stockpiles and the clearance of mined areas, and assistance to victims who have suffered landmine injuries. The mine ban treaty is forward looking in that it prohibits the future use of antipersonnel land mines. It does not deal with the past except to provide assistance to those who have become victims. The Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture permits visits by independent international and national bodies to places of detention in order to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. This too is a forward looking commitment as it seeks to ensure that present practices do not permit torture and the violation of human rights.

The focus on the future has also made it easier for both the government and security forces to accept. The progressive attitude of the Sri Lankan security forces in regard to international standards has been facilitated by the end of the war. It is the past that is troubling, in which human rights violations and war crimes occurred. The challenge for the government and for the security forces would be to accept the commitments to deal with issues that continue from the past. The commitments made by the government in Geneva before the UN Human Rights Council in October 2015 are about dealing with the past. The transitional justice mechanisms pertaining to truth seeking, finding missing persons, reparations and accountability are important to the victims.

The slowness with which the government is implementing promises made in regard to human rights and justice issues that arose in the course of the war and post-war period have led to doubts about the government's intentions in regard to the implementation of those commitments. The delay has been protracted even when it comes to setting up the Office of Missing Persons. The legislation was passed over a year and a half ago. But the institution has still to get off the ground and the commissioners have yet to be appointed. The National Peace Council urges expedited implementation of these mechanisms. The government's paradigm shift in acceding to the international agreements that previous governments failed to suggest that this is now possible and will be done.

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