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இலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

June  
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## Kandy DIRC Shares Anti-Violence Experiences Across the Country

Kandy District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members travelled to 14 districts across the country sharing their experiences of how they dealt with the anti-Muslim violence that erupted in their district earlier this year.

During their visits to the districts, Kandy DIRC members showed videos, photographs and interviews from victims and explained how they were conducting a fact finding mission to gather information as well as suggestions on how to prevent future violence. They planned to launch a website to gain wider understanding of their efforts.

Kandy DIRC organized a press conference on the evening of the riots to request all communities and their leaders not to promote racism or resort to further violence and DIRC members engaged with religious leaders to reduce the tension since the beginning of the crisis.

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



The DIRCs said they had learnt from the experiences of Kandy DIRC. Jaffna DIRC decided it would begin a dialogue among the people on how to build reconciliation and achieve a sustainable peace in the district.

Kandy DIRC members emphasised that strong DIRC leadership was vital for the process to succeed. They advised other DIRC members to be alert for situations and issues that could cause ethnic and religious tension and violence. They said DIRC members should know about rule of law mechanisms and to link up with relevant government authorities using their contacts.

Galle DIRC members visited Kandy and met victims of the violence to understand the situation and feelings of people while Kurunegala DIRC decided to have a dialogue among religious leaders and government authorities to achieve sustainable peace in the district.

## DIRCs Coordinate with Government Authorities to Prevent Violence

Two meetings were held in the Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts under NPC's project, Inter-faith and Inter-ethnic dialogue in Sri Lanka, for DIRC members, local politicians, police officers and government officials to discuss common concerns and issues causing religious and ethnic tension in the areas.

DIRC members shared their experiences of early warning and early response mechanisms, which led to an exchange of ideas and opinions. A total of 168 participants attended the meetings.

Since government officials and local politicians were responsible for maintaining law and order and protecting civilians, NPC recommended that DIRC members liaised with the relevant authorities to solve identified issues.

In the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts, where the three major ethnic groups - Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims - lived in close proximity, there was a high risk of ethnic and religious conflicts, which occur both within and among communities. While inter community tension arises due to issues relating to religious beliefs, cultures and tradition, intra community conflict occurs due land issues, sharing of resources, political affiliation and employment opportunities.

Batticaloa District Secretary Mr. M. Uthayakumar welcomed DIRC's attempts to bring religious harmony to the district and pledged his full support for its activities.

Three main issues were identified as potentially dangerous - land disputes over illegal ownership and encroachment, repaying micro finance loans given by finance companies and high alcohol and drug use resulting in domestic violence, school dropout, poverty and robbery.

Trincomalee Additional District Secretary Mr. N. Pratheepan stressed the importance of DIRC's efforts in the reconciliation process and pledged his support for its activities.

The main issues identified in the Trincomalee district were missing persons and what the Office of Missing Persons could do for victims, Transitional Justice education for students and how to support the police to reduce ethnic and religious tension.

Among the recommendations put forward during the meetings were that DIRCs should work jointly with other committees such as District Reconciliation Committees and Mediation Boards, invite the committees to DIRC monthly meetings, refer certain issues to relevant authorities and train newly elected local government representative on conflict sensitivity.

# Exchange Visit Promotes Religious Understanding

DIRC members and other participants from Ampara, Nuwara Eliya and Galle took part in the second inter district exchange visit and experience sharing forum of the USAID Religions to Reconcile Project in Hikkaduwa.



A group of 76 participants (47 males and 29 females) took part in the exchange including 10 religious leaders and seven people with disabilities. They discussed the role played by religious and lay leaders in creating harmony among communities.

The project entitled “Religions to Reconcile: Strengthening Inter-Religious People-to-People Community Engagement for Reconciliation and Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka” is implemented by NPC in partnership with Generations for Peace (GFP), an international peace-building organization based in Amman, Jordan. It is supported entirely 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.

NPC Chairman Dr Joe William and Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera took part in the discussion where several leaders commented on the need for greater understanding and tolerance among different ethnic and religious groups. Dr William explained the reasoning behind NPC’s founding and thanked the participants for their commitment towards peace building while Dr Perera spoke on the need for tolerance when working with different communities.

Venerable Ranmuthugala Sangarathana Thero, representing Ampara DIRC, pointed out that one way to address intolerance among communities was to know the language of the other. Kurukkal Kathiravel from Nuwara Eliya said that he was happy that he could be part of the exchange because there was no better way to bring people from different ethnic and religious communities together.



# Police Officers Trained on International Rule of Law

Two training sessions were held in Colombo for 83 police officers under NPC's project, Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF). At the first session, NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera explained the objectives of the training to the participants.

Lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi spoke on religious co-existence and religious freedom through establishing rule of law. The police officers learnt about the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act and its use.

Director of Community Policing Unit, Priyankara de Silva, spoke on how community policing could be used to reduce religious tension while lawyer Nilukshi Munasinghe described the evolution and protection human rights.

At the second session Mr de Silva explained the objectives of community policing and how to use it to achieve conflict resolution. Ms Munasinghe spoke on human rights citing practical examples. NPC Chairman Dr Joe Williams emphasised the importance of being a friendly face to the community.

Lawyer Gehan Gunatilleke narrated the history of the ICCPR Act and its relation to the legal framework while lawyer Yasas de Silva explained the practical use of the ICCPR Act by using examples.

Former Human Rights Commissioner, Dr. Prathiba Mahanamahewa, led a discussion on religious co-existence and protection of human rights. Dr Mahanamahewa recommended that NPC inform the IGP of the suggestions and proposals made by the participants, who said they could serve the community better with their new knowledge.



# Providing for People's Basic Needs

Despite a plethora of development projects initiated in different parts of the country, there are many small communities that fall between the cracks. One such community is in Deniyaya. It is a Tamil community whose members work on tea plantations.

Galle District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC), with the participation of Buddhist and other religious clergy who are its members, intervened to secure a pipe borne water supply to the plantation workers.

The community, which is a mixed one of Tamils and Sinhalese, was in conflict due to people laying temporary plastic pipes to their homes, which others intercepted and diverted the water to their own homes. The DIRC assisted the community to get a permanent pipe-borne water system that provided for a tap in every home.

NPC Chairman Dr Joe William and Programme Adviser Sumadhu Weerwarne attended the opening ceremony of the water project. They appreciated the work that had been done and noted that the DIRC was fostering a spirit of coexistence and reconciliation in the community.

A Buddhist nun said that her concern was the wellbeing of the people among whom she lived. It mattered to her that the local community did not have access to decent roads and to clean water supply.

She said that the former government had promised a water supply to the people but before they could deliver it, they lost the elections and the plans were not implemented. The new government had not provided the basic facilities for her community.



# Responsibility to Take Up Challenge

Executive Director of the National Peace Council, Dr Jehan Perera, was invited to Europe to meet with EU and German parliamentarians, European Commission officials and NGOs.

The visit was organized by Misereor and Bread for the World Germany, who also invited other key members of groups they support in Sri Lanka to participate in the meetings. The visit gave the participants an opportunity to assess the international climate at the present time.

During the discussions it was noted that in March 2019 the period of international monitoring of the UNHRC resolution 30/1 of October 2015 would come to an end. Government members and opposition leaders have gone on record as saying that the US departure from the UNHRC will weaken that body and permit Sri Lanka to get out of the obligations of the co-sponsored resolution.



The possibility of continuation of international monitoring of UNHRC resolution 30/1 of October 2015 that seeks accountability and human rights for Sri Lanka, along with good governance, was discussed. It was also proposed to give a wider interpretation to accountability, as not being only war crimes, but also economic crimes such as corruption.

The visit took place at a time when Sri Lanka is no longer in focus at the European level. The EU has to face the migrants' issue, the looming trade war with the US and China's expansion. In addition, the EU will be losing the British presence when they exit due to Brexit. This will mean less money for the EU. The UK was most interested in taking a strong stand on Sri Lanka. In these circumstances it will be unlikely that the EU will fill the void left. Sri Lankans need to step forward to fill the breach.

## Ifthar for All Communities in Weligama

Matara DIRC organized an Ifthar activity during Ramadan in Weligama, in collaboration with the Weligama Municipal Council, to raise awareness in the community about respecting other cultures and religions and to strengthen unity between the Muslim and Sinhala communities.

Fifty participants including Buddhist monks, Christian priests and people from the Sinhala Buddhist community participated, including youth and students.

Several religious leaders spoke at the event. Professor Idigama Soratha, Chief Incumbent of the Matara Temple, said it was important to study the values of other religions. He said there were many similarities in both religions, including the practice of fasting. The Moulavis appreciated the participation of monks and priests at the Ifthar. One Moulavi promised to conduct a dhansala for next poya day for Buddhists.

Although Buddhists and Muslims had been living together in Weligama for many years, it was the first time that Buddhist people had experienced an Ifthar event. They wanted to continue the practice next year and to invite the Muslim community for Buddhist ceremonies.

# Youth Perform Play to Explain TJ Concepts

Several activities for youth were held under NPC's project, Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka, including a training workshop on Transitional Justice (TJ) for 46 participants in Ratnapura, a stage drama on TJ for 650 new students at the Eastern University students and information sessions in Trincomalee and Batticaloa.



The stage drama was organized by workshop participants as a follow up of the university training programme. The information sessions were also project follow ups.

Forty six participants including youth parliamentarians, Red Cross volunteers and war affected people attended the workshop in Ratnapura. The young people were critical of the country's politics and pointed out that they were not represented in Parliament. They were hearing about TJ for the first time and expressed enthusiasm to change the situation. Activities included a stage drama and group sessions.

After the TJ workshop conducted at the Eastern University, participants organized an introduction course on TJ for 650 new students.

Students trained by NPC on TJ performed a stage drama in Tamil about TJ, a different approach to the usual lecture format. The drama was written and performed by students themselves. In the play, students represented the four pillars of TJ and answered questions. The new students were asked to fill out a survey on what they had learnt.

The students said that this was the first they had heard about TJ and they wanted to learn more.

School, university and vocational training students in Batticaloa and Trincomalee had follow up information sessions to raise awareness on TJ led by the youth who had been selected at a previous training programme.

Each session used different methods such as question and answer sessions, discussions and lectures. Games and activities were used to make the sessions interactive and to build team cohesion. The participants said they had gained knowledge on TJ and understood why it was important.

Youth leaders felt their knowledge and leadership qualities had improved. They wanted to continue raising awareness through social media platforms and, for a start, they created a WhatsApp group and Facebook page.

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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.*

## **Sri Lanka's Commitments Should Stand Despite US Pullout from UNHRC**

The departure of the United States from the UN Human Rights Council is a regrettable blow to a global institution which has been mandated to protect and uphold human rights throughout the world including Sri Lanka. In 2015, Sri Lanka together with the US and several other member countries of the UNHRC, co-sponsored a resolution that called upon Sri Lanka to enter into a process of transitional justice. Despite the US pullout from the UNHRC, the US embassy in Sri Lanka has assured that it will continue to assist Sri Lanka to fulfil its international commitments to advance the cause of reconciliation and lasting peace for all Sri Lankans.

The National Peace Council notes that the government has been steadily returning military-occupied land to the civilian population, providing housing and livelihood assistance to war victims, rehabilitating ex-LTTE cadres, and has recently passed a law that criminalises enforced disappearances, set up an Office of Missing Persons, and is in the process of establishing an Office of Reparations. The US departure from the UNHRC may weaken that global institution, but it must not weaken our own commitment to ensure the protection of human rights and achieve reconciliation within our own country. The US action should not be seen as an opportunity to evade our commitments or a lessening of international pressure on Sri Lanka to do what it ought to do.

NPC calls on the government to be steadfast in also holding to its remaining commitments made in the UNHRC resolution, which include reducing the military presence in the former war zones of the north and east, and engaging in constitutional reform that would devolve more power to those areas. We also call on the government to be more focused, and of one mind, in communicating the truths about the need for reform and for change to the larger population so that they understand them to be part of the process of national integration and unification of hearts and minds in the aftermath of decades of war and conflict.

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