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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

September
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The Power of Testimony for Victims and Perpetrators

A workshop on Writing Truths: The Power of Testimony was presented by Dr Minoli Salgado for NPC staff and other civil society participants to explore key concepts in testimony studies and examine their relationship to the Sri Lankan context with a view to developing a survivor-centred approach in the production and reception of testimonies in the country.

The workshop began with an overview of the role of truth forums and commissions and went on to explore modes of bearing witness to exceptional violence; the role of the listener as an active producer of meaning; how to explore and evaluate different kinds of testimonial writing; and reflections from war journalists who are trying to promote peace and reconciliation.

Dr Minoli Salgado is a Co-Director of the Centre of Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Sussex, UK, and the author of several books including a novel, *A Little Dust on the Eyes* (2014), which focuses on the disappearances in southern Sri Lanka in the late 1980s.

NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera said that collecting testimony was a way of developing empathy in a polarised country. “Often we don’t see the other side or understand the suffering of others. This is a process of listening to victims and recording their stories, a way of saying, never again,” he said.

Dr Salgado pointed out that storytellers were the first people to be targeted by authoritarian regimes. However, marginalised stories should be heard so that concepts and terms such as truth and reconciliation could be seen from a story telling point of view.

When there was public story telling by both victims and perpetrators, the truth was opened up to public scrutiny so it removed the possibility of continued denial and mitigated a culture of impunity. The stories are heard and accepted as truth. The listener was also important. Testimony was witness, proof or demonstration of fact and evidence, Dr Salgado said.

She also spoke about how language was often a polarising factor where terms such as war heroes, war criminal, patriots, traitors, genocide and war of liberation were tossed about.

“We need to develop a culture of listening, to protect spaces for safe listening and address local and culture specific readings of grief, mourning and justice,” she pointed out.

Dr Salgado travelled around Sri Lanka interviewing people who had lost their relatives and suffered other trauma in the war. She found out that victims needed closure so that they could move on with their lives. They were waiting for justice.

Peace and Coexistence Discussed During Exchange Visit

DIRC members and other participants including religious leaders from Puttalam and Mannar travelled to Nuwara Eliya for an inter district exchange visit under NPC's Religions to Reconcile project.



The project is implemented in partnership with Generations for Peace (GFP), an international peace-building organization based in Amman, Jordan, and supported entirely by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which is the U.S. Government's development agency. The overall goal of this project is to strengthen community networks mentored by religious leaders and engage them in building consensus for transitional justice and a pluralistic identity.

During the discussions, Sister Rubrani Joseph from Mannar DIRC, said, "What can you do to ensure religious harmony? We should not criticise the other's religion or culture. We must have the freedom to choose our own religion. We must not say that one religion is superior to the other. Instead, we must learn the other's religious teachings and values and engage in a self-evaluation, believing in our common humanity and spirituality".

Sivasri Nandakumar Kurukkal, from Nuwara Eliya DIRC, said, "Equality is a necessary precondition for peace and if laws are upheld, there will be peace. The general public knows little about the laws and often break them because they do not see it as a wrongdoing. There are deficiencies in the law but the media can play a role in information dissemination to a great extent. However, they show cookery shows and beauty shows and people remain in the dark about the laws."

Dayalan Rajah, member of the Mannar Youth Group, said, "Many issues divide us but we continue to engage with each other. In the youth group we are trying to recreate the time we lived peacefully. We will have a photography exhibition to celebrate this. Peace is not somewhere else, it is where we act together."



Outdoor Bonding for DIRC Leaders

A collective leadership training for 40 members of eight DIRC steering committees was held in Kalutara under NPC's IMPACT project.

Each DIRC has a steering committee of five members to assist its coordinator to organize and implement DIRC activities in keeping with the objectives of the project.

The remaining eight DIRCs will have a similar programme in October.

The outbound training was aimed at improving the leadership capacity of steering committee members to enable them to run the DIRCs more efficiently in preparation for the next two years of work.

There were also sessions on monitoring and evaluation and project follow up activities as well as training on how to use social media, websites and the Internet to promote the reconciliation work done by the DIRCs. The problem of cyber crime was also discussed.

Physical activities involved building a boat from rope and other materials and putting it on the water and swinging across the river on a rope. The participants learnt about leadership, teamwork, building trust, listening to others, time management and collective decision making.

The DIRC members were pleased to take part in outdoor activities, which was a contrast to the usual sit down meetings. They enjoyed being outdoors in a relaxed atmosphere, and they recommitted to leadership of their DIRCs.

"After the training I felt I had the confidence to be a real leader. I have improved my leadership approach, especially decision making and the ability to deal with difficult situations. I have changed my negative attitudes. It was an unforgettable experience."

**U. G. Chandana
Moneragala DIRC**



Youth in North and South Learn About Transitional Justice

A training workshop on Transitional Justice (TJ) was held in Vavuniya for 37 youths in the Vavuniya and Mannar districts under NPC's project Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long-lasting Peace in Sri Lanka.

At the workshop the young people were taught the four pillars of TJ through presentations, discussions and games. There was also a session to show participants how to seek correct information in the print and electronic media.

One issue raised by the young people was that victims in Mannar thought the certificate of absence provided by Office on Missing Persons (OMP) was actually a death certificate. This had created confusion among relatives of the disappeared.

During discussions with the Secretariat for Coordinating Reconciliation Mechanism (SCRM) representatives, participants raised several issues including reparation for war victims, return of seized land, the duties of the OMP, statistics on missing persons, adverse effects of micro loans, and taking the message of reconciliation to the grassroots.

Under the same project, another training workshop on TJ was held for in Matara youth from Galle, Matara and Hambantota.

When asked why they were participating in the training, the young people felt knowledge of TJ was important to improve understanding among all ethnicities and bring about reconciliation. They said that although the war was finished, there was no peace so they wanted to know how to build a united country.

During the discussion, some participants who were from army families explained how they had suffered during the war as children.

A similar workshop was held in Nuwara Eliya for 26 members of youth clubs, vocational training institutes and school students.

The participants were taught the basic principles of TJ and said they could share their knowledge with others after the training.

They also learnt about the new constitution, the International Criminal Court and war crimes, which encouraged them to work for peace and reconciliation while building their leadership skills.

The participants felt that TJ was important because during the war human rights had been violated, so justice should be given to the victims. Truth seeking was needed to know what happened to missing persons, they said.

"One of my university friends from Jaffna uploaded a Facebook status on Prabakaran's birthday that said, 'Happy birthday great leader'. We might see him as a terrorist but he was a leader to my friend. I think there's no problem. He has the right to do that."
Participant from Matara

Peace Walk Highlights Coexistence

A peace walk with the theme of religious coexistence through the strengthening of pluralism and the rule of law was organized by Addalaichchenai Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) to commemorate the International Day of Peace under NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project.

The walk went through Akaraipattu town and ended at the clock tower where religious leaders representing the four religions made a circle and joined hands in a show of unity. During the walk, participants carried slogans and banners and distributed leaflets and stickers carrying the message about the importance of religious coexistence.

LIRC members, religious leaders, students from different religious schools and universities, youth belonging to all four religions, members of Hindu Kovil Consortium and the NGO consortium and human rights activists were among the marchers.

Participants gathered at the Akaraipattu mosque to listen sermons given by Hindu, Buddhist, Catholic and Islamic religious leaders who pointed out that each religion advocated religious and ethnic coexistence and promoted peace and tolerance for those who lived in a multi ethnic and multi religious community.

A similar peace walk was held at Akurana in the Kandy District organized by Akurana LIRC. The walk was the first event held after anti-Muslim violence in the Kandy district, where all religious leaders participated to show solidarity and build communal harmony and coexistence.

Also under the CERF project, an awareness programme on community policing was held in Mahiyanganaya for 170 village leaders, government officers and religious leaders to develop understanding on how community policing could be a strategy for conflict resolution and building community resilience.

Participants learnt how community policing could be used to reduce religious tension and the importance of strengthening village level community policing structures.

“There is often mistrust between the police and citizens, so this kind of training helps to build trust and understanding between them,” a community leader said.



Civil Society Voices Concerns on Sri Lanka's Report to UNHRC

NPC coordinated civil society discussions on Sri Lanka's sixth periodic statement on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The statement will be presented to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

The participants, who included members of NPCs District Inter Religious Committees from 16 districts, discussed the report in five groups covering different topics.

The first group discussed Constitutional, legal framework and independence of judiciary, views under the Optional Protocol and right to life. Some of its recommendations:

- There should be amendments to ensure that deliberations in International Covenants automatically become law in the country
- Right to life should be legalized until the new Constitution is introduced
- The national policy (2016/17) on reconciliation should be legalised immediately
- Measures are needed to improve publicity on Transitional Justice

The second group discussed Non-discrimination, violence against women, abortion and maternal mortality, corporal punishment and the rights of minorities. Some of its recommendations:

- Land rights should be given to women
- Sexual orientation and gender identity should be reformed to include homosexual orientation
- Proposals made on abortions should be implemented soon
- Tri-lingual law should be confirmed
- Strict prohibition on corporal punishment in schools

Group 3 discussed counter-terrorism, former combatants, enforced disappearances, prohibition of torture and ill treatment and detentions.

Some of its recommendations:

- All former combatants should be given security and the space for freedom of movement
- Disabled former combatants should get the assistance given by the government
- The powers of the Office on Missing Persons officers should be increased
- A person arrested for an ordinary offence should be presented at courts within 24 hours instead of 48 hours

Group 4 discussed internally displaced persons, prison overcrowding, trafficking in persons and security sector reforms. Some of its recommendations:

- Data and information should be available on resettled people
- The resettlement policy should be made public
- Instead of prison punishments, a community based Reform Act should be developed

Group 5 discussed freedom of assembly and association, freedom of expression and participation in the political process, good governance and freedom of religion. Some of its recommendations:

- There should be more awareness on the Right to Information Act
- Investigations into attacks on journalists should be speeded up
- The government should practice good governance
- There should be social activities to promote cooperation among religions
- Children should learn about religions other than their own

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.

Accountability Issues Must be Addressed

The transitional justice process agreed upon by the government with the international community in October 2015 with the co-sponsoring of Resolution 30/1 of the UN Human Rights Council continues to be a highly contested one within Sri Lanka. The government is showing sharp internal divisions on the issue of accountability for past human rights violations that the UNHRC resolution requires. There is danger of a regression that will once again bring Sri Lanka into conflict with the international community.

President Maithripala Sirisena has said that he will go before the UN General Assembly to urge in an amicable manner that the resolution on Sri Lanka co-sponsored by the government should be amended as it had led to the perception that the Sri Lankan security forces were being unfairly targeted for punitive action. He has said he will submit these proposals to the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres as well as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet. The President said that the proposals aim at solving issues and providing relief without causing harm to the pride of the security forces or endangering Lanka's independence.

President Sirisena will be addressing the UN General Assembly on September 25. The National Peace Council notes that UN institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council have their own mandates and autonomy. The UN Human Rights Council, which co-sponsored UNHRC Resolution 30/1 is not under the direct control of the UN General Assembly. This explains why even the United States, though arguably the most powerful country in the world, was unable to influence the UNHRC and has withdrawn from that institution while denouncing it. It is not reasonable to believe that the international community, especially those whose mandate is to protect human rights, will be prepared to negotiate down the need for accountability as measured by international standards.

We are gratified that last week the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with the National Peace Council supported a consultation of civil society at which the draft country report on Sri Lanka's adherence to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was discussed in detail. This exercise was done in a spirit of partnership and yet with critical thinking. We urge that more leaders within the government show conviction that the course of transitional justice needs to be followed for Sri Lanka's transition to a reconciled society. We also call on the government leadership to have the courage of their convictions and not yield the public space to those who are seeking mass popularity at the expense of the country's longer term future.

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