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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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DIRCs Raise Religious Freedom Issues with UN Special Rapporteur

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, met Kandy, Vavuniya, Puttalam and Batticaloa District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members during his 12-day visit to Sri Lanka. Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders raised several issues of concern with Mr Shaheed.

The Muslim leaders said that one of main complaints brought before the DIRCs was that Muslim teachers in government schools have been prohibited from wearing headscarves after the April 21 attacks on churches and hotels, despite that fact that it has been an accepted practice and was not against the law.

Girls sitting for exams were not allowed inside the examination hall wearing headscarves. Muslim women visiting hospitals and other government institutions were being discriminated against and refused admission for wearing headscarves.

Another grievance was that the police were slow to react to complaints of discrimination and harassment. Muslim leaders also told Mr Shaheed about the economic impacts felt by their community after people stopped patronising their shops as fallout from the April 21 attacks.

Muslim religious leaders said that there were misconceptions and ignorance about Islam among the public.

DIRC members explained the impact of the violence against Muslims in the Kandy and Digana areas that occurred in March 2018 and described the measures taken by DIRCs to diffuse tension and promote harmony between the two communities. The Citizen's Truth Commission report commissioned by Kandy DIRC was handed over to Mr Shaheed at the meeting.

Other religious leaders also expressed their concerns over various situations. An Evangelical church leader said the government had denied him permission to build a church while a Hindu leader was worried about conversions of Hindus to Islam and Christianity. Buddhist monks felt that there should be one law for all instead of separate laws for Muslims.

All religious leaders were concerned about the fact that although there were provisions in the Constitution against religious discrimination, ordinary people could not take any action against such discrimination due to unequal access to the justice system.

Mr Shaheed asked DIRC members to seek redress through the UN complaints system if their issues were not addressed. The UN would then press the government to take action.

In a report at the end of his visit to Sri Lanka, Mr Shaheed said that simmering ethno-religious tensions required urgent action by the authorities to strengthen respect for freedom of religion or belief.

“There is a serious deficit of trust among ethno-religious communities in Sri Lanka following the deadly Easter Sunday bomb blasts and subsequent mob violence this year, and these tensions must not be ignored,” he said.

He added that the long-standing traditions of religious harmony and co-existence in Sri Lanka, as well as tolerance and sustainable peace, were at risk from religious and political violence, lack of accountability, distrust of institutions and resentment against perceived majoritarian privilege.

Mr Shaheed will present a report with his conclusions and recommendations to the Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2020.

DIRCs Discuss 19th Amendment

Several discussions were held on the 19th amendment to the Constitution and its benefits at the monthly meetings of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) of Kurunegala, Galle, Matara, Hambantota, Monaragala, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura and Ratnapura under NPC’s project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) funded by MISEREOR and CAFOD.

Around 300 people representing the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities attended the sessions, along with religious leaders of all faiths.

DIRC members had requested the workshops so that they could educate people on the amendment and counter criticism of it by various political parties. At the workshops, the 19th amendment was compared with the 18th amendment that was passed when President Mahinda Rajapaksa was in power and the negative and positive aspects of the 19th amendment were discussed.

Participants agreed that the amendment was a very important political reform that would improve democracy and good governance in the country because it reduced the power of the executive president. They also emphasised the need to put pressure on the government to go beyond the 19th amendment.



Creating Unity Among Youth

The first district stakeholder meeting under NPC's project Crossing Boundaries – Youth Groups in Sri Lanka was held in Matara with the participation of 35 government officials including officers from the Divisional Secretariat, civil activists, entrepreneurs and youth.

The project is being implemented from July to December 2019 in Matara and Trincomalee with the support of NPC's district partner, Community Development Centre. The objective is to foster social cohesion through empowering youth and creating unity between different generations, religious and ethnic groups in Matara and Trincomalee.

The aim of the stakeholder meeting was to inform relevant officers about the project objective, the selection criteria of youth and implementation modalities of the project.

The discussion with stakeholders focused on issues related to youth within the district, which were identified as, among others, drug abuse, leaving school early on, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, mothers working abroad, lack of vocational training, suicide, misuse of the internet and social media, sexual abuse due to tourism, gambling, parental neglect and political interference in getting jobs.

The stakeholders pointed out that to resolve these problems, decisions makers and community leaders must listen to young people and understand them. Youth should receive facilities and support to develop personality and leadership skills.

One young participant said that there were many organizations conducting languages classes but a Sinhala youth was not able to have a simple conversation with a friend in Tamil because the classes focused on grammar rather than practical work.

Government officers emphasised need for the right policies to address the issues youth faced in their communities.

Countering Extremism in the Community

A facilitation meeting was held in Matara with representatives of community policing units, state officials and community leaders under NPC's project Actively Countering Extremism funded by Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives.

There were 30 participants including religious leaders, police officers, high level government officials, Prison Department officials, Matara District Secretariat representatives, Youth Services Council representatives and members of the Human Rights Commission as well as NGOs and the media.

The participants expressed their opposition to religious extremism and discussed some incidents that had happened after the April 21 attacks on churches and hotels. Muslim women, in particular, faced harassment and discrimination for wearing headscarves, although it was not against the law.

The participants decided to visit a Muslim village to hold several activities at a later date. Government departments and NGOs will help to organize the event and agreed to include the names of their institutions and organizations on a banner.

There was strong support for activities to counter extremism by promoting mutual understanding.

The villagers and businessmen will provide meals for 100 participants. The Youth Council Services will send a youth group and the police will send community police for the event.

Empowering Marginalised Communities in Nuwara Eliya

A leadership training workshop for marginalised communities from the Nuwara Eliya District was held under NPC's project Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT) funded by the European Union. The project is being implemented in 11 districts with support from the Right to Life Human Rights Centre.

“Issues related to people with disabilities are seldom discussed in the news. It only becomes important when there is an impending election. We want our voices to be heard because we believe our vote matters,” said Thushari Lasanthi Wickramasinghe, who is blind.

The project works with victims of human rights abuses and encourages and supports them to seek help from existing state institutions and mechanisms, and those set up under the Transitional Justice framework. Marginalised communities, including members of Female Headed Households and People With Disabilities (PWDs), are part of the direct project beneficiaries who are made aware of their rights and how to use available state mechanism. They are given leadership training and character building and practical skills development knowledge as part of social upliftment.

In Nuwara Eliya, 33 marginalised community members were part of the workshop in Hatton. Resources shared included knowledge on how to apply for special benefits afforded to PWDs from the Department of Social Services and available skills development programmes attached to the Divisional Secretariat office.

As common issues affecting the community, participants identified the lack of land ownership, poor sanitation, bad garbage disposal mechanisms, lack of Samurdhi benefits, long waiting lists to receive benefits, closure of estate hospitals, lack of infrastructure facilities, poverty and lack of strong political leadership from the estates.

As specific issues affecting PWDs and marginalised groups that needed to be addressed by election candidates, participants identified the lack of social benefits for PWDs, lack of identification and resultant non recognition at government institutions, inability to apply for bank loans, lack of skills development programmes, media silence on disability related issues and the lack of political leaders who speak on behalf of marginalised groups from the estate sector.



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.

Essential to Deal with Allegations of War Time Violations

The elevation of General Shavendra Silva to the position of commander of the Sri Lanka army has become a matter of national and international controversy. The Tamil National Alliance has protested against this decision as has the UN Human Rights High Commissioner and the diplomatic missions of the United States, Canada and the European Union.

The controversy swirling around this matter brings into focus the need for a process to bring the allegations of what happened in the last phase of the war to a rest. Until this is done, there will be a cloud hanging over the country internationally, which can suddenly manifest itself as a thunderstorm as this appointment has done.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to revive the process of dealing with the past in a manner that meets the concerns of the Tamil polity, the international community and the victims of all communities who trusted the process and had hoped that an effective and impartial inquiry into the allegations would take place and bring a closure to the allegations in the interest of everyone concerned.

Until the question of the past is settled, the Tamil polity will remain separate from the rest of the country and this will be festering sore in the body politic. The government has acknowledged these concerns and agreed to probe the truth of these matters and hold those found guilty accountable through UN Human Rights Council resolution 30/1 of 2015. This inquiry can and should include earlier phases of the war and not only the last phase.

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