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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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Transitional Justice Essential For Reconciliation Says Prime Minister

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe stressed the importance of Transitional Justice (TJ) in Sri Lanka's reconciliation process and pointed out that each country had its own unique course to follow. He praised NPC's efforts towards furthering awareness of TJ and added that the government was taking steps to establish an inter faith reconciliation council made up of religious leaders.

"We have the strength and you have the strength to do it," Mr Wickremesinghe said, referring to implementing the TJ process in the country.

The Prime Minister was addressing an event to showcase the positive outcomes of NPC's project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions, which is implemented in cooperation with Legal Action Worldwide (LAW). Project members, including religious leaders and community leaders, from Hambantota, Galle, Matara, Ratnapura, Kalutara, Badulla, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Kandy and Polonnaruwa attended the event in Colombo.

Mr Wickremesinghe added that each community, with its own experiences of war, had its own concerns about the way TJ would affect its interests. He stated that the new situation after the Easter Sunday's violence should be approached systematically without leaving room for further extremism to breed.



The objective of the project is to enhance popular understanding and support for TJ concepts and processes in Sri Lanka across all ethnicities and religions through community-based information sessions, information material development and dissemination, and other media-driven strategies, in coordination with civil society and government partners.

Through the project, NPC was raising awareness about the importance of the TJ concept and addressing the most common misunderstandings surrounding it. The project has capacitated 35 master trainers, who in turn have taught the concept to more than 200 leaders of community-based organizations.

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya said that all major political parties should work together without politicizing efforts aimed at addressing post war issues, so that the problems would not be passed down to the next generation.

“While other countries have moved forward, we are lagging behind due to racial and ethnic violence. We all have a responsibility to look past ethnic differences and take the country towards success,” he said, while praising NPC’s work towards reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

NPC Chairman Joe William pointed out that it would be a mistake to think that past events would not have consequences. “Ethno religious intolerance, economic hardships, corruption, unemployment and feelings of injustice create conditions for renewed conflict, which could be reignited by even a minor disagreement,” he said.

Hambantota MP Mahinda Amaraweera, Sarvodaya leader Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, actor, Kamal Addararachchi, Rupavahini Chairperson Inoka Sathyangani and musician Ishaq Baig attended the event.

A document collating the master trainers’ recommendations for the effective implementation of TJ at grassroots level was handed over to Mr Wickremesinghe, Mr Jayasuriya and Mr Amaraweera.



Recommendations Of Master Trainers

The 35 master trainers compiled a list of recommendations based on their expertise gained through training and in conducting training and sharing their knowledge among community leaders. Responses and concerns of community leaders were included in the list to make implementation of the national Transitional Justice (TJ) process effective.

The group identified key barriers to TJ as being limited political commitment, circulation of misconceptions among the public, lack of understanding of TJ and lack of awareness of government efforts. The master trainers' recommendations to overcome these barriers were categorised under the areas of criminal prosecution, reparation, institutional reforms, and establishing a truth commission.

Under criminal prosecution, the trainers' recommendations included setting up of an independent court to adjudicate crimes committed during conflict period; government passing laws to set up the special court to ensure a legal framework for witness protection; and all members of judiciary on the special court to be given capacity development assistance.

Recommendations for reparation included expediting the establishment of the Office for Reparations; devising a programme for sustainable solutions and security for victims; establishing regional offices under the Office of Reparations; raising public awareness on the functions of the Office of Reparations; and obtaining assistance from civil society organizations.

Institutional reforms related recommendations included Constitutional reforms; reforms in the education sector; ensuring the presence of bi-lingual staff in key public service institutions; and media reforms.

In proposing the establishment of a truth-seeking commission, the group recommended that all commissioners should be well recognised by all communities; measures should be arranged to ensure that anyone could testify before the commission without hindrance; and a broad media campaign should be conducted to raise public awareness on the functions of the commission.

Among the general recommendations listed were raising public awareness on all steps initiated by the government for TJ; ensuring public participation and obtaining feedback; ensuring the participation of members of the opposition; and providing swift and firm answers when opposing ideologies are brought forward.

Kandy Truth Commission Report Presented to PM

Members of Kandy District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) handed over the report of its Truth Finding Citizen's Commission on the Kandy anti-Muslim riots that took place in Digana in March last year to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

DIRC implemented the Commission as a citizens' response to the riots to find out the root causes of the violence. The proceedings of the hearing were conducted in public with the news media in attendance.

The members appointed as commissioners included retired judge Justice W.M.P.B. Waravewa, Professor S.A. Kulasooriya, Professor Milton Rajaratne, lawyer Chrimal Warnasooriya, Professor Amarakeerthi Liyanage, and former Kandy Government Agent A.M.L.B. Polgolla.

The commissioners assigned two expert committees to collect the evidence from the victims as well as from the other people in the areas where the most serious incidents had taken place.

Diverse Efforts to Combat Religious Hostility Around the Country

Several activities including peace walks, advocacy and poster campaigns and meetings with Muslim religious leaders were held in many areas around the country under NPC's project, Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF). The activities were carried out by Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) formed under the project.

Three poster campaigns along with peace walks were held in Akkaraipattu, Vavuniya and Mannar with the participation of religious leaders, police officers, government officers and civil society leaders. The campaigns sought to counter religious extremism and tensions that arose in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks.

LIRC members, in collaboration with Divisional Secretariats, facilitated discussions with Muslim religious leaders and community leaders in Mannar, Vavuniya, Negombo, Weligama, Mahiyangana and Akurana to identify the root causes of the Easter Sunday attacks and to plan future interventions to defuse religious tensions.

The religious leaders and the representatives of the Muslim community raised concerns about the harassment faced by the Muslim community after Easter bombings. They condemned the attacks.

Addalaichenai LIRC conducted an inter faith awareness session for 55 participants including religious leaders, government officials, police officers and community leaders. The event was organized to counter misconceptions about the Muslim community such as the possession of weapons, underage marriages and Islamic extremism.

LIRC members met Minister of Primary Industries and Social Empowerment, Daya Gamage, and Acting Minister of Highways, Road Development and Petroleum Resources Development, Anoma Gamage, to inform them about LIRC activities and its future plans. The discussion centered on the recent communal violence in the wake of the Easter Sunday attacks. The ministers praised the LIRC for its efforts and extended their support towards future activities.

Beruwela LIRC facilitated a dialogue with 100 members of community policing committees at the Divisional Secretariat of Beruwala, which focused on conflict mitigation and sensitivity. The meeting was aimed at capacitating members of community policing units at the village level to defuse tension in the area after the Easter Sunday attacks.



Drama Depicts the Value of TJ in Strengthening Reconciliation

An activity to promote community engagement and strengthen reconciliation to enhance knowledge on Transitional Justice (TJ) was carried by members of Kilinochchi DIRC, sub group members and peace delegates under NPC's project Religions to Reconcile: Strengthening Inter-Religious People-to-People Community Engagement for Reconciliation and Social Cohesion in Post-Conflict Sri Lanka (R2R).

The project is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which is the U.S. Government's development agency.

The aim was to share knowledge on TJ through an actual event rather than a typical training programme.

The activity went beyond traditional knowledge sharing approaches on TJ and focused on practically applying the theories that had been learnt. Events included celebrating religious occasions, memorialisation programmes, cultural events, and an activity to acknowledge loss and share sympathy. In Kilinochchi, a street drama combined elements of creativity with empathy building to promote TJ.

The event was held in the seaside town of Nachchikuda, about 30 kilometers from Kilinochchi town, which was known for on going conflicts between Muslims and Catholics. Violence had risen recently due to the Easter Sunday attacks.

The four pillars of TJ and institutions supporting the TJ framework in Sri Lanka were presented in verse by the singers in the drama troupe. The drama presented the general lack of attention given to war victims and the misconceptions propagated, which were presented in the form of the devil.

In the end, the general public defeated the misconceptions on TJ and accepted that TJ was the only way forward. The drama ended with the nation being united as one, addressing a serious concept through a simple presentation, which enabled the audience to understand the issues presented.



Kandy DIRC Supports Muslim Women

Kandy District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) moved swiftly to diffuse tension caused by a dispute over the wearing of the hijab by teachers in a Kandy girls' school.

The principal and the parents of the school had prohibited seven Muslim teachers from wearing the hijab, although it had been their attire for many years and despite the law stating that only faces could not be covered. The teachers were told to wear saris instead.

The reason given was that children were afraid of seeing their teachers in that attire after the Easter Sunday attacks around the country.

The teachers, who were not allowed to come to the school, made a complaint to the DIRC, which took immediate steps to resolve the problem before it escalated.

DIRC members raised the issue with senior police officers and Provincial Education Ministry officials as well as the Governor of the Central Province and the Kandy office of the Human Rights Commission.

The Human Rights Commission had a meeting with Education Ministry officials, the school principal, parents, the Muslim teachers and DIRC members to investigate the issue.

The Commission rejected the decision made by the principal and parents to ban the hijab and advised them to allow the teachers to return wearing their preferred attire. The Commission sent its ruling to relevant government institutions and the police for implementation but the ban was not reversed due to interference from extremist groups. Instead, the Provincial Education Ministry transferred the teachers to a Muslim school in the area, saying it was a temporary measure until a new circular was released by the government on Muslim teachers' dress code in schools.

Kandy DIRC was planning to file a fundamental rights case about the matter.

Students Learn the Value of Books

Several training programmes were conducted for government officers, local government representatives and Grama Niladharis under NPC's project the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation Activity (SCORE), which is funded by USAID and conducted in partnership with Global Communities.

Another project activity was the distribution of books to Mahagodayaya Jansanka Kanishta Vidyalaya, commemorating the World Book Day. The programme included an awareness session for the students to encourage them to read books on developing national cohesion and reconciliation.

Mr Sirikumara Senarathne and Mr K. Jayasena, the resource personnel, used innovative methods to show the students the correlation between critical thinking and cohesion.

"Students should read these books to improve their knowledge. Reading should be a habit in their lives. These books will help them to understand the different cultures and languages in the country as well as the importance of peace, social cohesion, reconciliation and social understanding. This has been one of the most very valuable events in my teaching life," said Mr M. A. Rathnayaka, the principal of the school.

The SCORE Team has been focusing on developing the critical thinking of participants in its training and activities because ignorance has been found to be the main factor in conflict.

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.

Ethnic Conflict Must Never Recur

Sri Lanka is still trying to emerge out of the darkness of its three decade long ethnic war that ended in 2009. Unfortunately, the Easter Sunday bombings linked to the Islamic State (IS), and the damaging reaction to it by those who ought to be responsible political leaders are taking our country once again in the direction of another ethnic conflict. The bombing is being used to create a great rift in Sri Lankan society. Prejudice, hatred and hate speech are at an all-time high. Many politicians and other opinion formers at high levels of the polity have publicly been asserting that the larger Muslim community is complicit in the bombings and discovery of hidden arms that have taken place. The barbaric bombings by extremists cannot and must not be attributed to the larger Muslim community who have been part and parcel of our country.

The National Peace Council condemns those who insidiously and openly promote the targeting of an entire community on suspicion. This type of attitude has given rise to economic boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses and to wild allegations being made against Muslims, including those who are doctors. We deplore the sequence of events that have now prompted all Muslim members of the government to resign from their ministerial positions. The Muslim leaders have said that their resignation is to enable the law enforcement agencies to find out the truth about the various allegations against the community without any charge of interference being leveled against them. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has noted that this is the first post-independent government not to have members of the Muslim community in the Cabinet of Ministers.

In the political darkness that has been enshrouding the country in the past several weeks, we have seen bursts of light that can illuminate our path to a shared future based on values of trust, non-violence, rule of law and respect for diversity. The leadership in non-violence and non-hatred given by Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith was exemplary in restraining the Christian community that had been the chief victims of the Easter Sunday bombings. We note that for three weeks there was no retaliatory violence until political actors intervened to cause anti-Muslim riots to take place far from the site of the Easter Sunday bombings. We also want to draw attention to the vital role played by the highest level of venerable Buddhist clergy in keeping the people calm during the fast unto death of the Venerable Athuraliye Ratana which might otherwise have led to catastrophic outcomes and hampered the efforts of the government and the law enforcement agencies to maintain the Rule of Law.

We are also appreciative of the manner in which the leadership of the security forces, in particular the Army Commander, Mahesh Senanayake, have dealt with the crisis of terrorist and mob violence without letting it get a grip on society as a whole. The rapid arrest and disabling of the terrorist network has been supported by the larger Muslim community who have been trying hard to demonstrate their rejection of terrorist violence and extremism, and their regret for it, in both their words and actions. We urge the political leaders of both government and opposition in particular to consider the Muslim community to be citizens with equal claim to protection of their human rights and dignity, even as the country battles against extremism in all its manifestations. We urge our political leaders to rise above their divisive politics to give leadership to the country with regard to the current crisis irrespective of the political party they belong to.

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