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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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Youth Survey Highlights Need For More Awareness Programmes

The need to increase awareness among youth about the reconciliation process was a key finding of a research forum in Colombo to discuss issues related to the Transitional Justice (TJ) process that concern young men and women and their opinions on security, freedom and co-existence after the Easter Sunday attacks.

The research forum, attended by youth from 21 districts, was aimed at understanding the extent to which youth knew about TJ and the related issues, concerns, misconceptions and questions.

The discussions at the forum were based on a survey commissioned by NPC on youth's knowledge, attitudes and perceptions on TJ in Sri Lanka with youth aged between 18 to 29 years and university students under its project Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long-Lasting Peace in Sri Lanka, which is implemented with the support of United Nations Peace Building Fund.

The survey, which was conducted by Dr Pradeep Peiris, Senior Lecturer Department of Political Science and Public Policy at the Colombo University, was carried out among 11,000 youth in 21 districts and also captured the views of 400 adults in order to obtain a comparative understanding of the youths' views on reconciliation and peace building.



Addressing the participants NPC Chairman Dr Joe William urged the young people to vote responsibly at the forthcoming Presidential election by analyzing statements made by candidates and assessing whether they were true or false, justified and contributed to sustainable peace.

He pointed out that it was the youth who had fallen victim to political manipulations that had resulted in the JVP and LTTE uprisings. “We must make sure the experiences of the past are not repeated,” he said.

Before summarising the results of the survey, Dr Peiris pointed out that what Sri Lankan society lacked the most were leaders who could take decisions.

“Who is trying to bring about change? No one is coming forward for peace. If it is peace based on politics, we won’t have peace. That is why we have to find people from among the youth to bring about change,” he said.

Some questions and views of the participants:

- A lot of money has been set out for reconciliation but people do not know about the processes.
- Constitutional reforms should be discussed with people at the grass roots. How can we bring reconciliation? Most youth do not examine these problems.
- What about the security of the country? There are different ideas about how to safeguard national security.
- Tamil people do not give priority to strengthening the armed forces. They do not believe that this will bring peace.
- We have doubts about punishment for perpetrators under the TJ process. How can this be done?
- During the war human rights were violated. Through TJ we will be able to give some relief. We have to look into matter properly.
- I learnt about TJ at the training. There are practical challenges in supporting TJ. Politicians have no will to see the process through. How can we get politicians on board?
- We have to discuss these matters in rural areas. Tamil people think they have a problem with the armed forces but the problem was between LTTE and the armed forces. If their attitudes change, we can have peace.



Some of the findings of the survey:

- Close to two-thirds of the youth who participated in the survey exhibit only little awareness about reconciliation initiatives that were initiated over the past years. In terms of ethnicity, the upcountry community shows comparatively low awareness. The Tamil community shows a relatively higher level of awareness with a little over half of the Tamil youth reporting to have some or high awareness about reconciliation initiatives. Sinhalese youth demonstrate the second highest awareness.
- Among the Tamil and Upcountry Tamil communities particularly, young women exhibit slightly higher levels of awareness than their male counterparts. Young men of the Sinhala and Muslim communities show higher levels of awareness of reconciliation initiatives compared to their women counterparts.
- Except youth from the Tamil community, all other youths, especially Sinhalese and Upcountry Tamil youth, think that strengthening the security forces is important to prevent the recurrence of conflict. The full implementation of the 13th Amendment is perceived as the least important proposal to youth across all ethnic categories.
- For Sinhalese youth, the most popular negative view of reconciliation is that ‘reconciliation is something imposed by the West on Sri Lanka’. For minorities, ‘reconciliation will perpetuate ethnic divides’ is the most popular negative opinion of reconciliation. However, the support for such negative views is significantly low across the board.
- According to the findings, endorsement of extreme forms of intolerance such as the use of violence and boycotting businesses are low among all ethnic groups irrespective of age.
- Minority communities, not just the Tamil community but also the Muslim and Upcountry Tamil communities, believe that their respective communities suffered the most because of the war. Although one quarter of the Sinhalese youth also claim that they suffered from the war the most, the percentages are low compared to the minorities.
- Youth were asked to indicate who and what they think of as the main blockade to the realisation of peace in Sri Lanka. A significant majority of youth points their finger at political parties as the main culprit obstructing peace. Religious clergy, corruption, and insular attitudes of certain communities were named as second, third, and fourth highest voted hindrances to peace in the country respectively.
- Prosecuting the perpetrators responsible for rape and sexual violence during the war is considered an important proposal across all ethnic groups. When looking at the level of importance given by each ethnic group to these proposals, prosecuting the perpetrators responsible for attacking religious places during the war seems to be the most important proposal for Sinhalese youth. For Tamil youth, finding out what happened to the people who went missing during the war is of top priority.
- Appointing a special court with local and international judges to investigate into the alleged occurrence of human rights violations during the war is the least important proposal for the Sinhalese and Upcountry Tamil youth. This proposal is listed as the third priority even for Tamil and Muslim youth.

DIRC Members Break New Ground in the East During Exchange Visit

Religious leaders and representatives of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) belonging to District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) from 16 districts participated in a four-day exchange visit to Batticaloa and Kattankudy.

A variety of activities and discussions with farming and fishing communities, religious leaders, media personnel and war victims allowed participants to experience the Eastern province and the lives of its people.

The first stop of the visit was Polonnaruwa where the group met members of Polonnaruwa DIRC and exchanged views about the situation after the April Easter Sunday attacks and discussed how DIRCs had helped to ease tense situations with the help of the government officials and the police.

In Vakarai participants met a farming community in a rural village who had suffered during the war and were still looking for missing relatives and listened to their difficulties. An urgent issue they raised was the spread of drugs in the village and how it was adversely affecting the youth. DIRC members promised to bring these problems to the attention of relevant authorities to find solutions.

In Batticaloa, the group visited a Buddhist temple, which had a kovil on its premises. The chief monk said that the kovil was built on temple land to foster unity and harmony among Buddhist and Hindu people who lived in the area. This proved to be a success as devotees of both religions visited both the temple and the kovil.

During a visit to a fishing community, the group discussed problems faced by villagers who had minimal resources. DIRC members gave them advice on the best ways to solve their difficulties and suggested that they joined Batticaloa DIRC.



On the final day, 122 religious leaders and CBO leaders attended an Inter Religious Peace Conference organized by NPC with the collaboration of the Jamiyyathul Uluma branch of Kattankudy.

The religious leaders spoke about the values in their respective religions that promoted peace and harmony while exchanging experiences about different DIRC best practices from each district.

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The inter religious conference in Kattankudy that followed the exchange visit involved members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) set up in 22 districts in the country as civil society formations with organic links to the larger community. The main area of the exchange was the volatile Eastern Province in which each of the three main communities is almost equally represented with consequent rivalries and tensions.

The choice of Kattankudy for the conference was especially significant as it was the hometown of the leader of the now-banned National Thowheed Jamaat, Zahran Hashim, who led the suicide bombers on Easter Sunday that claimed the lives of over 250 persons and targeted Christian churches and luxury hotels.

As the conference was to share experiences, it was scheduled from 6 to 9 pm at the conclusion of the exchange visit, where the members of DIRCs from the other districts met with fishing communities, women headed households and families of missing persons, among others. However, there were two factors that delayed the conference that the organizers from Colombo had not foreseen. The first was the need of the participants from Kattankudy to take a prayer break shortly after the conference began, in which they went to a nearby mosque. Getting the more than hundred participants back into their seats after the prayer break took up some time.

Second, a further delay arose over the issue of musical accompaniment to the peace songs of Jayatilaka Bandara of Saadu Janaravaya. There were some from Kattankudy who were apprehensive that the controversy over whether music should accompany the songs would derail the harmony of the inter religious conference. However, the intervention of Abdullah Alim, a moulavi from Puttalam, was useful in resolving the problem. He said that Saadu Janaravaya was not the music of a rock band, but more akin to the sweetness of a rose that is accompanied by thorns. The songs and music of Jayatilaka Bandara thereafter provided a welcome interlude to the many speeches that followed.

Providing Leadership; Building Solidarity

District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) Matara, in collaboration with a number of Community Based Organizations, organized a visit to build solidarity among the Muslim and Sinhala villagers in the village of Gandara. The visit was facilitated by the NPC under its Actively Countering Extremism (ACE) project, funded by Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI).

Children, villagers, government officials and religious leaders began the day with a cultural show where Sinhala and Muslim children performed traditional dances.

An art competition was held with the theme of peace and harmony. The children were divided into five groups and worked together regardless of different ethnicities, religions and languages to come up with a piece of artwork. The children presented their artwork and explained the concept behind it, showcasing positive reconciliation thoughts. In the evening, renowned musician Jayathilaka Bandara sang songs on peace and solidarity that has been evident throughout Sri Lanka's history for more than 250 villagers.

The event had not been easy to organize. The DIRC had invited Buddhist monks from five temples to the event, which was to take place at the Al-Asar Muslim school, but monks from only one temple turned up. Other monks had chided the organizers for their choice of venue.

The build up of mistrust between the communities in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks, and the election campaign which emphasized the importance of national security, would have contributed to this attitude. But the commitment of the civil society activists ensured that a large enough number of Sinhalese children joined the programme where they, together with Muslim children, drew pictures of ethnic harmony together. In doing so they got to know each other better, and so did their parents who had accompanied them.

The local groups involved who collaborated to make the event a success comprised a wide range of both state and civil society and included the Matara district branches of the National Youth Services Council, the Human Rights Commission, Sarvodaya, Transparency International, Gandara Fisheries Society, Gandara Police Station and Community Policing Unit, Matara DIRC and NPC. This showed the potential for peace building if the necessary leadership was given.



Spreading the Message of Unity

An exchange visit between Addalachenai and Weligama Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) was organized by NPC under its project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

On the way to Weligama, members of Addalachenai LIRC witnessed a Jumma prayer session at the Wellawaya grand mosque. The moulavi delivered a speech on the value of unity among religious communities and how activities such as the exchange helped to build harmony. A discussion between LIRC members and the mosque trustee committee members followed.

For lunch, they stopped at the Bodhiraja temple. The chief incumbent of the temple praised the organizers for realising the value of such activities. The evening refreshment was arranged at a mosque in Weligama where participants discussed its historical significance.

At the introductory session, Bishop of Galle Reverend Dr Raymond Wickremasinghe, praised the CERF project for its efforts to create peace among religious communities and for bringing together people from different parts of the country to share experiences with each other.

LIRC Committee members then shared some of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences they had gathered through the years. Later they witnessed traditional Southern dance routines including one presented by the Elders Committee of Udumulla.

On the third day, LIRC members visited the Agrabodhi Rajamaha Viharaya in Weligama to witness the talents of Daham school children, where religious leaders emphasised the importance of young people working towards coexistence. They also went to a church in Weligama and the Kataragama kovil.

“We all bleed the same irrespective of what ethnicity or religion we belong to. Sri Lanka has a rich past where all religions have lived together in harmony. Recently there has been a rise in the majoritarian rhetoric fueled by the forthcoming polls. However, none of these people are true lovers of this country. As true lovers of this country we must act wisely and not heed the words of these power hungry politicians,” said Reverend Nalaka Quintus.



Community Leaders Trained to Be Prepared to Prevent Conflict

Training programmes on preparedness were held in Galle, Matara and Nuwara Eliya 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, which is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) the U.S. Government's development agency.



The project is working with religious leaders and community leaders to address and mitigate religious and ethnic tension by working within the pluralistic framework.

The objective of the training programmes was to ensure that District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members and other group members would be able to intervene to prevent community conflict because it escalated into violence.

Participants learnt about various aspects of conflict transformation including conflict management and conflict prevention. While the term preparedness was used mainly in disasters relief activities, it could also be used in the context of being prepared in advance to deal with conflict situations.

Participants examined conflict analysis practices, conflict mapping and timeline tools as well as stakeholders mapping and case studies in the Kandy DIRC truth commission report.

"I was impressed by the way Kandy DIRC was committed to find the truth and disseminate that report to everyone. Sometimes women believe information without verification and we inform others. Now I realize that this can lead to violence and destruction of property. So I will spread this message to women I know," a Nuwara Eliya woman DIRC member said.

Religious Leaders Address the Media

The National Inter Religious Committee (NIRC), comprising religious and civil society leaders from 16 districts, held a meeting and media conference in Colombo under NPC's project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT).

The meeting began with a political discussion on the current situation with a panel of experts including Mr Prabodha Rathnayake from Rights Now, Mr Thilak Kariyawasam from Sri Lanka Nature Group and Mr S. Vishvalingam from Food Initiative Action Network of Sri Lanka.

The panel also discussed the role of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in the country's path to peace and reconciliation.

At the media conference, where journalists from electronic and print media were represented, religious leaders delivered messages of peace for the upcoming presidential election.

After the media conference NIRC members discussed the positive and negative impacts of the policies of the government since 2015. They appreciated the Right to Information Act and spoke about the challenges facing the country regardless of which presidential candidate wins and how it was important to change narrow religious ideologies and traditional values.

Parents and Teachers in the North Learn About Peace Building

A multilevel school-based awareness campaign on reconciliation and social cohesion was conducted in Tellippalai, Jaffna, for 80 parents and teachers in three schools under NPC's Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity, with support of its partner Social Organizations Networking for Development.

A range of the topics including Non-Violent Communication (NVC) and peace building were discussed using group work and power point presentations.

Special sessions were arranged for the students to disseminate the message of peace building and NVC through short films. Audio-visual means of bringing the message of reconciliation has been highlighted by the US Institute for Peace (USIP), which works closely with the SCORE activity.

As part of the campaign, a peace week was held at the schools where teachers who participated in the NVC awareness campaign delivered the message of peace daily to students.

During peace week, every student wrote a sentence about peace with the help of their teachers, hung it in the classroom and read out their sentences to fellow students.

"The topics we learnt are very important at the school level because any change to be made to our society will have to be practiced at school first. NPC has made this rare type of training available to us. Let's get together and build a non-violent community starting with schools," said Mr T. Thayanathan, Principal, Keerimalai Naguleswara Maha Vidyalayam.

"I am going to encourage parents and old students to learn the communication model. When we practice it in our family, it will spread in our community as well," said Mrs Suganthini Kamaleswaran, Secretary, Old Students Association.

Civil Society Platform Launched

NPC organized a Civil Society Forum in Colombo that was attended representatives of 112 NGOs and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The forum was the first meeting of the Civil Society Platform that was founded by NPC in collaboration with other organizations.

Among the topics discussed were civil society and global trends, women's role in civil society, issues faced by the hill country plantation population and the media's role and the civil society organizations.

NPC's Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera spoke about the obstacles on the path to reconciliation, while Mr Brito Fernando outlined the challenges faced by civil society and how to overcome them. Ms F. Sharika addressed the current issues facing the Muslim community.

Participants then discussed their concerns with the panel. They spoke about certain civil organizations that promoted extremist religious ideas and how this was a threat to the image of civil society in general, especially when they were already being criticized by politicians fulfilling their own political agendas.

After the panel discussion, the way forward was discussed. A representative was chosen from each district to form the executive committee. The forum hopes to develop a common mandate that all CSOs could follow in order to strengthen their role in the country's peace and reconciliation process.

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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.

Continuity of State Commitments to Ensure Sustainable Development

Among the plethora of promises made by the presidential contestants is one that Sri Lanka will withdraw from the UNHRC resolution it co-signed in Geneva in 2015. This was an international commitment made in an assembly of 46 other countries. If Sri Lanka were to unilaterally withdraw from its commitments made to the UNHRC by rejecting the co-sponsored resolution, this is likely to have international repercussions that isolate the country. It will also create fear within the country that the negative practices of the past will re-emerge. The Sri Lankan state and successor governments need to respect international bodies and treaties and truly live up to its role as a member of a universal fraternity within a rules-based international order.

One of the positive benefits of agreeing to co-sponsor the UNHRC resolution in 2015 was that Sri Lanka regained access to the economic benefits of the GSP plus tariff concession from the European Union. It has also enabled Sri Lanka to access the USD 480 million MCC grant from the United States. Such benefits are likely to be placed in jeopardy in the event of a unilateral withdrawal from international commitments which will diminish the economic resources to improve the people's standard of living which most of the election promises are directed towards.

The UNHRC resolution sets out the process of reconciliation that Sri Lanka will undertake in the aftermath of three decades of war. The President and his government need to ensure, among others, continued support to the Office of Missing Persons in its efforts to locate the missing in the North, East and the South and also ensure that the Office of Reparations resolves the issues of people affected by the war and pay compensation in an equitable manner.

The National Peace Council calls on the presidential candidates and the political parties they represent to present their vision of a political solution that includes all ethnicities and religions, and to publicly pledge that the impunity that prevailed in the past will not reemerge to violate human rights. Whichever candidate wins, the outcome of the presidential election must be one that gives hope about the future in which the human rights of all sectors and all communities are protected and nurtured.

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