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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

June
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Sharing New Thinking on Peace Building Around the World

An online course on Peace Building and Pluralism for Academics was conducted as part of NPC's Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP) project.

Six one-and-a-half-hour sessions were held daily to share new thinking on issues of peace building in societies that face ethnic and religious tension. A group of 33 academics from the universities of Jaffna, Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa and the Eastern university of Sri Lanka were capacitated through these online sessions.

The online training had a line-up of eminent local and international resource persons who shared their ideas and thinking including Neil Devotta, Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Wake Forest University, North Carolina; Donald Horowitz, Professor of Law and Political Science at Duke Law School and Duke University in Durham, North Carolina; Oliver Richmond, Professor in International Relations, Peace, and Conflict Studies at the University of Manchester; Vasuki Nesiah, Associate Professor of Practice at the Gallatin School at New York University and Dr. Malathi de Alwis, feminist scholar and activist at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo.

NPC Executive Director, Dr. Jehan Perera, delivered the opening session.



The objective of the programme was to discuss theoretical and practical issues related to peace building globally and encouraging participants to incorporate the learning into work undertaken through the C-YEP project with university students.

NPC's overall intervention, supported by GIZ, includes the capacitation of university students to raise their awareness on pluralism and positively influence public discourse on pluralism and inter community relations to strengthen peace building in Sri Lanka.

Marginalised People Hear About Their Rights in Gampaha

A meeting to raise awareness on the rights of marginalised people was held in Gampaha. A total of 65 participants attended the meeting, the first to be held after restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19 were eased.

The meeting, held under NPC's project Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT) that is funded by the European Union (EU), was conducted in accordance with government regulations on washing hands, sanitising, temperature checks before entering the premises, wearing masks and in a one metre distanced seating arrangement.

Mr. Lakshan Fernando from Right to Life Human Rights Centre explained the rights afforded to marginalised groups and described the benefits they could obtain from the government.

State institutions such as the Human Rights Commission, the National Police Commission, the Right to Information Act and the Office on Missing Persons could provide assistance and relief to these groups, he pointed out.

During the discussions it was revealed that most participants had not been able to get the Rs. 5,000 given by the government for those who had been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I'm unable to do a job because no organization will hire a disabled person like me. Due to this pandemic, my family has faced many problems. My daughter is a government officer but her salary is not enough for us to survive. We are not getting any government support," said Sumith Aminda from Ekala.

Also under the ACE-IT project, which supports Human Rights First Aid Centres (HRFACs) established under the project, EU Ambassador Denis Chaibi visited the Gampaha centre in the Batticaloa district for a review meeting.

Mr. Chaibi met HRFAC members, victims, survivors and families of missing persons and discussed commonly occurring human rights violations. He also met the Bishop of Batticaloa, Dr. Joseph Ponniah.

Mr. Chaibi praised NPC's relief campaign providing rations to disadvantaged people carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was funded by the EU.

Fighting Hate Speech and Fake News During Election Time

A Civil Society Platform (CSP) meeting was held in Anamaduwa with the participation of 75 civil society activists.

A panel consisting of NPC Project Manager Mr. Saman Seneviratne, Head of PAFFAREL Mr. Rohana Hettiarachchi and lawyer Mr. Prabodha Rathnayaka spoke on the importance of strengthening independent commissions, the damage cause by hate speech and fake news to peace and reconciliation efforts in the wake of an election and the role of the civil society during the pandemic lockdown recovery while preparing for the general election.

The panel discussion was followed by a session where participants raised questions about the importance of protecting the 19th Amendment and the need to promote women's representation in responsible roles in the country.

The CSP is an initiative supported by NPC under the project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT). The meeting in Anamaduwa was funded by the Open Society Foundation (OSF).

The CSP also convened a media conference to promote an election campaign free of hate speech and fake news.

Panellists from the meeting held earlier spoke out against election campaigns using hate speech and false statements, and urged that those who promoted racism and religious extremism to be brought to justice.

They also urged people to demand that election candidates make their personal financial details public to promote a more transparent election campaign, and to vote for candidates who would contribute to forming national policies instead of selecting candidates who have done them personal favours and services.



DIRCs Get Back to Work After Covid-19 Rules Ease

As the conditions imposed to stop the spread of Covid-19 were gradually eased, District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) across the country began having their regular meetings under health guidance and social distancing rules imposed by the government.

At the Kandy DIRC meeting attended by 22 members, a Public Health Inspector outlined the new health regulations and told members how to practice good hygiene to stop the spread of the virus.

NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera and Project Manager Saman Seneviratne spoke on the importance of protecting independent commissions to maintain democracy in the country and on the role of civil society activists as Sri Lanka recovers from the effects of Covid-19.

DIRC members discussed the current governance practices and expressed their concern over some of the appointments to senior positions in public administration and public service offices.

They also spoke on the relief activities they were involved in during the lockdown and they said that they appreciated the assistance provided by NPC through funds received from Misereor and the Canadian government.

Twenty members attended the Puttalam DIRC meeting where discussions centered around the importance of strengthening independent commissions and protecting the 19th Amendment.

They also spoke about government actions taken to diminish the power of the civil society and expressed the concern that the power of Parliament might be eroded to increase the power of the President and how it could endanger democracy in the country.



Training Youth in Conflict Prevention

Master trainers conducted a training programme on Conflict Analysis and Management for 20 youth in Matara to provide knowledge, insight and skills in conflict analysis and management under the framework of pluralism under NPC's project, Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka.

The programme consisted of three main parts. The first part was on basic human needs and identity, acceptance and respect for other cultures and an explanation of the basic needs such as survival, wellbeing, identity and freedom.

The second part was on conflict analysis and management. Participants were taught that in order to resolve or manage a conflict, it was essential to first obtain an understanding of the conflict. Participants were divided into four groups and asked to analyse the major conflicts in their communities using the four standard tools - conflict tree, conflict mapping, conflict layer model and timeline.

The third part was to identify the pluralism process, which helped participants to understand the importance of coexisting. There was a discussion on the role and responsibilities of youth when building a pluralistic and peaceful society.

LIRCs Discuss Aftermath of Covid-19

Negombo Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) held its monthly meeting following health guidelines to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Thirty five members including religious leaders, civil society leaders, government officers and community coordinating officers attended the meeting.

Among the topics discussed were current political, social and economic issues in the aftermath of the lockdown imposed due to the pandemic. Members also came up with suggestions for online campaigns to promote religious harmony to counter hate speech and discrimination that are going viral on social media during the upcoming general elections.

Weligama and Beruwala LIRCs also held their meetings with the participation of religious leaders, government officers, police officers and civil society leaders. The discussions were about relief efforts during the pandemic and the religious tensions prevailing in their areas.



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.

Decision Making Bodies Need Better Ethnic and Religious Representation

The government has recently been appointing ad hoc bodies to find answers to issues of governance. One of these recently established bodies is the Presidential Task Force for Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province. This comprises high level security forces personnel and a few others who will be tasked with dealing with complex issues of history, identity and land use. The task force on Archaeological Heritage Management in the Eastern Province has been mandated to identify sites of archaeological importance in the Eastern Province and identify the extent of land that should be allocated for such archaeological sites and take necessary measures to allocate them properly and legally. However, this presidential task force has no minority representation although the Eastern province has a population that is over 75 percent Tamil and Muslim.

In the aftermath of the thirty year war against Tamil separatism in 2009 and the Easter bombing by suicide bombers from the Muslim community who were influenced by international Islamic ideologies in 2019, the containment of extremist ethnic and religious minority influence has become an important part of state policy. There has been a rise in insecurity amongst the ethnic and religious majority population. However, the lack of minority representation in the new and ad hoc institutions of governance can itself be a cause for disaffection that the government intends to contain. If sections of the people feel that they are not being included in decision making, and that decisions being made exclude them, there can grow an alienation of heart and mind that cannot be stopped by more security measures and more intelligence gathering alone.

It is in this political context that land is being transferred from minority usage to be used to protect ancient archaeological sites. The National Peace Council is concerned about potential flashpoints such as in Pottuvil, in the Ampara district, where the dispute over the Muhudu Maha Vihara temple land could increase in intensity as it has the potential to lead to the displacement of Muslim communities living in the contested areas. We believe that if the presidential task force has been appointed for the purpose of problem solving in the Eastern province, then it needs to have more non-partisan professional Muslim and Tamil representation, and in more than token numbers, if its recommendations are to be seen as based on objective truth and unbiased. Failure to do so will be seen by the affected minority communities that this is another ethnic nationalist agenda thereby creating another flashpoint further damaging inter-ethnic relationships.

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