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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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NPC Networks Engage in Covid-19 Relief Work

With money given by the Canadian government through its Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI), the National Peace Council organized the supply and distribution of dry food rations to communities affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Children's homes, elders' homes and homes for the differently-abled were chosen from districts where District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) operated.

Rs. 192,000 was allocated to Matara DIRC to provide dry rations to the homes.

Matara DIRC supplied dry food rations to six homes for elders and the differently-abled that had not received any assistance from other organizations. The DIRC worked with the District Secretariat, which provided a list of families who were struggling without supplies because of the curfew imposed to stop the spread of the virus.

"We usually depend on donations from various patrons for food but since curfew was enforced, no one was able to give us anything and this created a huge problem. We couldn't go out to buy supplies either, so we are very thankful for this food from Matara DIRC and NPC," Director of the Shakthi Ovitigamuwa Disability Home, Ms. Pramitha Wijayanthi, said.

"We were running low on food and there was no way to get any supplies because of the curfew. We have had no milk powder for some time now so we couldn't give our residents tea with milk. Since this is an elders' home, it is important that we are able to give them the necessary nutrition, so we are grateful to Matara DIRC for providing us with supplies," Director of the Senior Citizens' Home in Thihagoda, Mr. K.L. Nihal, said.



Kandy DIRC handed over Rs. 100,000 worth of dry rations to five children's and elders' homes in the district.

"When we received the food from NPC, we had only 20 kilos of rice left and there are more than 70 residents here. We were weighing our options when we received this contribution," Director of the Dambawatta Bisokumari Elders' Home, Ms. Lalani Asoka, said.

"I thank NPC and Kandy DIRC for selecting us and providing enough food to last for two weeks. We had almost finished the food in the home, so these supplies came at a good time. Apart from a small donation that we received from Sarvodaya, we did not get assistance from any other source," Director of the Subodha Elders' Home, Ms. Malini Chandralatha, said.

Kandy DIRC worked with the District Secretariat office and other government officials to purchase and distribute the dry rations.

Kandy DIRC Coordinator, Gamini Jayaweera, said that it was not an easy task because Kandy was a high risk zone under continuous curfew but it had been possible because of the commitment and dedication of DIRC members who were able to provide the rations within a short time.

Kegalle DIRC provided Rs. 99,000 worth of dry rations to five children's homes, elders' homes and long term care facilities.

The District Secretariat office supported Kegalle DIRC by helping to select families badly affected by the situation and purchasing food in bulk from Sathosa.

"We have not had enough food for our residents for some time now and we were purchasing rice from a nearby shop on credit, so this contribution from NPC came at the right time. The food is enough for more than two weeks, so we are extremely grateful and relieved to receive it," Director of the Thalghadeniya Subodha Elders' Disabled Home, Ms. M.D. Kanthi, said.

Directors of the homes commended the DIRC for providing food for each specific home necessary to meet the nutrition requirements of the children and elders. They requested supplies of sanitary items.

Polonnaruwa DIRC distributed Rs. 51,000 worth of dry food rations to a home for people with special needs and a children's home.

Both homes depend on donations to feed their residents and carry out day to day operations but since the curfew, they have been struggling to purchase supplies so they were grateful to receive the dry rations from the DIRC and NPC.



“Since curfew was imposed contributions to the home came to a complete stop and we had great difficulty in feeding our residents with the limited food supply, so this generous donation from NPC came at the right time, giving us enough food to last for two weeks,” Operations Director of the Vocational Training Center for Disabilities in Sewagama, Ms. Dinusha Sanjeewa Gamage, said.

Ratnapura DIRC, in collaboration with the Environment and Community Development Information Centre and the District Secretariat, donated dry rations to eight children’s homes, elders’ homes and long term care facilities in the district, which has been badly affected by the virus crisis.

“Although we received small contributions from different sources, this is the first time we had a substantial donation from one organization and we are very grateful. Without it, giving food to the residents would have been a problem. This act of generosity is proof of how dedicated NPC is to support the peace and reconciliation process in the country,” Mother Superior of the St. Vincent Children’s Home, Sister Rose Marina, said.

“Elapatha is one of the poorest areas in the Ratnapura district. There are no proper roads and it is with great difficulty that we run this home for the elderly. When curfew was declared we couldn’t find enough food for the residents, so we are grateful to NPC and the DIRC members for providing enough supplies to last for two weeks,” Executive Director of the Seneviratne Wanasundara Sarana Sewana Foundation, Venerable Colombage Aara Athulasena Thero, said.

Monaragala DIRC supplied Rs. 146,000 worth of dry food rations to one children’s home and one home for differently abled people.

“Because of the curfew, the home is not receiving donations that we depend on to feed our children. We are grateful to the Monaragala DIRC and NPC for giving us much needed relief and for inquiring about our welfare,” Director of the Maduruketiya Children’s Development Centre, Ms. Rangika Chandrakanthi, said.

She asked for assistance to continue the children’s education and also to help them to cultivate vegetable gardens. A member of the Monaragala DIRC offered to teach English and Tamil at the home on a voluntary basis.

“The Uva Province Probation Department is thankful to the DIRC for choosing this home to donate the food relief to,” District Probation Officer, Mr. Anura Madhusanka, said.



Badulla DIRC provided Rs. 87,000 worth of dry food rations to three orphanages, working closely with the Badulla District Secretariat's office to locate the orphanages that were struggling since the curfew was imposed to stop the spread of Covid-19.

The Leo Marga Ashram is home to 26 children who go to school around the Bandarawela area. Mrs. R. Devaki, a member of the Badulla DIRC said, "I brought the attention of the DIRC to the children living in the estate sector because they are suffering greatly and are in need of help."

The Louis Marie Orphanage has 31 boys and girls. Manager of the orphanage, Brother V. Annamalai, said, "This donation came at a good time because we had a scarcity of food."

Anuradhapura DIRC donated Rs. 200,00 worth of dry food to two children's homes, two elders' homes and one long term care facility.

The homes were grateful to receive the provisions from the DIRC because they were facing food shortages. They usually depend on donations from well-wishers during normal days but since curfew was imposed, these came to a stop.

Ms. S. Withanage, the Head of the Rajarata Adults' Home, said, "There are six elders living in this home. Although it is a small number, with the Covid-19 situation, they are at high risk from the virus due to the scarcity of food in the home. We depend on donations to feed our occupants and these have now stopped. This is the first time an organization has come forward to give us assistance, so we are grateful to the Anuradhapura DIRC, NPC and the Canadian donor for helping us out."

Mr. S.S. Sisira Kumara, Head of the House of Joy Children's Home said, "Because of the virus crisis we have great difficulty in getting food for our children as the donations we receive don't last for even a week. These supplies from NPC and the Canadian donor will be sufficient for us for some time."

Nuwara Eliya DIRC donated Rs. 64,000 worth of dry rations to two children's homes and two elders' homes.

Rev. J.A. Isha, Head of the Martha Children's Home, said, "There are 32 children living in our home. We usually depend on donations to feed our children. Because of the situation in the country, we do not receive them anymore and have many difficulties trying to find food. We have not received any relief from any organization, so we are grateful to the Nuwara Eliya DIRC for selecting us and for NPC and the Canadian donor for the dry food rations."



NPC HRFAC Networks Mobilised for Relief

NPC, through its European Union (EU) funded project Accountability through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT), provided community assistance to people affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Human Rights First Aid Centres (HRFACs), set up and maintained together with project partner Right to Life (R2L) in Gampaha, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Galle, Hambantota, Matara, Badulla, Monaragala, Jaffna, Mannar and Nuwara Eliya, provided assistance to 440 families of marginalised communities who are part of the ACE-IT intervention, including People With Disabilities (PWDs), members of female-headed households, families of missing - families registered under the Office of Missing Persons (OMP), war victims, selected vulnerable HRFAC volunteers who are also human rights defenders and victims of rights abuses.

These beneficiaries are part of efforts to uplift and empower marginalised groups through knowledge sharing and skill building. They are among the most severely affected as a result of the curfew. Life for marginalised persons, especially PWDs, is difficult under normal circumstances in the face of discrimination and sidelining due to their disabilities. They are most often unable to earn a living and are fully dependent on their relatives or the state for support.

The dry rations pack worth Rs. 2,000 was a welcome relief to many who said that it came at a time when they felt truly hopeless. The pack contained rice, dhal, wheat flour, coconut and other necessities. Each pack included a brochure containing basic health guidelines to minimise the effects of the virus and was branded with the EU logo. All HRFAC coordinators and volunteers followed health guidelines issued by the government when carrying out distributions.

In Gampaha, 48-year-old Sumith Aminda has been using a wheelchair to get around for the past 20 years, the result of an accident. He says that the basic necessities package provided with assistance from the EU through the Gampaha HRFAC was the first time he had received any support since the country went under curfew.

“I am unable to hold a permanent job because of my disability and we depend on my daughter’s salary to survive. Now she’s also at home. We are quite helpless,” he says, lying in bed in his tin roofed house. The current crisis has made Sumith miss his weekly visits to the hospital to change the tubes that assist his bladder function because he does not have the funds to pay for transport.



In Batticaloa, 70-year-old T. Saraswathi from Koolavadi village is a founding member of the Batticaloa HRFAC. She lost her husband in the war and lives with her daughter, also a widow. Both have no permanent source of income and survive by helping out in neighbourhood homes. With the curfew in place they are unable to earn a living and Mrs. Saraswathi is worried about her two grandsons, aged 11 and 16 years going hungry. The family is grateful for the pack of essential items.

Fifty-three-year-old Antony Robert is part of the marginalised communities' group maintained by the Batticaloa HRFAC. After attending an EU supported training on skills building and state support mechanisms available for persons with special needs, Anthony was able to apply for disability benefits from the government with help from the HRFAC.

"I am going to open a snack shop when I get help from the government," he says hopefully. He is one of the recipients who received a pack of basic necessities that will help him, his aged mother and sibling to survive for a few days of the curfew.

Fifteen-year-old Sachini Piyumika from Batagama in the Gampaha District attends training at the Gampaha HRFAC with her mother. She has special needs and her three-wheel driver father used to be able to take care of her by running hires. As a result of the curfew he is no longer able to earn a living. Sachini's mother, Shriyanthi Mary Perera, asked for support to purchase Sachini's personal hygiene items necessary for daily use. "My daughter has never let her disability break her spirit. But this crisis is slowly eroding her resilience because she can see that we are unable to provide for her," Mrs. Perera says.

At 87 years old, woodcraftsman Gunapala from Mampitiya in Galle should be spending his days in peace and comfort. However, this is not to be for him and his 80-year-old hearing impaired wife, who have survived the curfew due to the kindness of neighbours. Gunapala is a victim who has sought assistance from the Galle HRFAC to help him to apply for disability and Samurdhi benefits (support given by the government to low income families). These benefits have not yet materialised but Gunapala has continued to attend workshops run by the HRFAC and is one of the oldest participants. He says, "Our two children have abandoned us. We have no one to help us. I come to the HRFAC when I am desperate. This package is a godsend."



“I haven’t received my salary from the Ginthotha Plywood Corporation for two months now. How are we going to live?” asks 31-year-old mother of two, Nayomi Kaushalya, from Welipita in the Galle District. She lives with her ailing parents and four siblings. Nayomi became a widow in 2017 when her husband succumbed to a viral infection. She is part of the Galle HRFAC, having first gone there to seek support when her husband passed away. She continues to regularly attend programmes conducted by the HRFAC. While she understands that employment opportunities for temporary staff like her will be difficult in the future, she is angry that her rightful salary has not been not paid. She is grateful for the essentials pack.

Murugiah Letchumi is a 78-year-old widow from Parupukadanthaan East in the Mannar District. She lost two of her children during the war and continues to care for her surviving son who was injured and disabled during the war. The only source of income for Letchumi was by selling gram during festivals at places of worship in the village. As part of the marginalised communities’ group of the Mannar HRFAC, she was a recipient of the pack of essential items. She appreciated the gesture as she cannot earn anything due to the curfew.

Thirty-seven-year-old Mihira Oshitha from Ihalagama in the Matara District used to earn a living by selling gram in the town. With this, he supported his 75-year-old mother, who is his primary caregiver, as Mihira has been differently-abled from birth and uses a wheelchair to get around. With the curfew, Mihira has not earned anything to support himself or his mother. “I am stuck in this broken down wheelchair and can’t do much during this crisis. I have to earn to take care of my mother. This help through the Matara HRFAC is appreciated as it is easy to forget people like me because we have so little representation out there,” he says.

Siriyalatha Rajapakshe and her family from Deniyaya were forced into self-quarantine because her husband, a Colombo based woodcraftsman, returned to the village from Colombo in the early days of the curfew. Uninformed villagers, suspicious that her husband was carrying the Covid-19 virus, forced the family to isolate. Despite receiving support from relevant authorities during the self-quarantine period, they are now without any means of support because her husband had not been paid his salary when the curfew was imposed. With three school going children in the house, Siriyalatha appreciated the pack of provisions that she received through the Matara HRFAC with support from the EU.

A total of Rs. 3,000,000 has been committed to help project beneficiaries. Efforts are continuing through the 11 Human Rights First Aid Centres to support people affected by the pandemic with more deliveries.



NPC LIRCs Go to Assistance of Marginalised

Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members in 12 Divisional Secretariat Divisions - Addalachchanai, Akurana, Batticaloa, Beruwala, Weligama, Mannar, Trincomalee, Negombo, Paduwasnuwara, Kuliypitiya, Rakwana and Vavuniya - were able to help marginalised communities in their areas by providing dry rations with the financial support of Misereor.

LIRCs have reached 1,063 families including female-headed households, low income daily wage earners and differently-abled people who were recommended by Grama Niladhari officers. Misereor has contributed Rs. 1.2 million to fund the relief efforts.

Members of Beruwela LIRC, with support from NPC, distributed 100 packs of dry rations to needy families in the area with funds received from Misereor. LIRC members and Grama Niladhari officers made a list of beneficiary families including female-headed households, daily wage earners and differently-abled people.

People in the Beruwela area, which relies heavily on tourism as a means of livelihood, have been badly affected by the curfew imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Mr. Chathura Malraj, Divisional Secretary of Beruwela, pointed out that more funds were needed to assist orphanages and elders' homes.

“The packs were given to Hindus, Buddhists, Catholics and Muslims and delivered in time for the new year. Many Hindu and Buddhist beneficiaries told us that they had had nothing at home to celebrate the new year, so they were grateful for the provisions,” Ms. Anjali, Grama Niladhari Officer of Welipitiya Divison, said.

Ms. Fathima Josinka, Coordinator of the Negombo LIRC said that one family of four, including two children, were homeless and were allowed by police to use a building in the town for cooking purposes, so they were given a pack of dry rations.

She said most of the deprived were daily wage earners who had lost their means of income; some had had nothing to eat but boiled jackfruit for three days. She added that the police had issued curfew passes to do the distribution without any difficulty because Negombo LIRC was recognized for their work in the area.

“People here provide labour for the brick industry and some look after animals for a livelihood. We usually eat only one meal a day. After the curfew, there is no work anymore. We are trapped in the village. In this critical situation, only Addaicchenai LIRC members have helped us,” said S. Sulakna, a widow from Ampara.



“We have 55 elders but we have not received any livelihood support since the curfew was imposed. The donation from LIRC Addalaichchenai is the first assistance we have got. It included indigenous medicines as well as dry rations to improve the immunity of the vulnerable elders. We are very grateful to DIRC members for assisting us in this time of need,” said Sivanadiyan Maheswara from the Sarana Amaran Elders’ Home.

LIRC members also disseminated leaflets among beneficiaries to raise awareness on the safety measures to avoid the spread of the virus.

In the second stage of the Covid-19 relief efforts, LIRC members reached out more families and institutions such as children’s homes and elders’ homes to provide dry rations, which was funded by the Canadian government under its Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI).

A total of Rs. 2.9 million was spent to assist 1,390 families, 27 children’s homes and 21 elders’ homes.

Colombo District Secretary Participates in Donation

With funds from the Canadian government under its Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI), NPC distributed dry rations to 22 children’s homes, 15 elders’ homes and seven centres for the differently-abled in the Colombo district. The District Secretary of Colombo, Pradeep Yasaratne, participated in the events along with other government officials and members of NPC.

NPC was guided by the Colombo District Secretariat in selecting beneficiary institutions.

NPC ran similar distribution schemes in 23 other districts for institutions and also for marginalised families in consultation with government authorities on the ground through its network of District Inter Religious Committees, Human Rights First Aid Centres and partner organizations.

Ms. K.T.K. Ranjani, Matron of the Romiyel Alwis Memorial Elderly Home in Polgasowita, said, “This is the first time we have received a contribution; no one has come to help us during this difficult time. We have elders with special needs and we find it hard to get their supply of medicines. We had donors on daily basis to provide meals, but now they cannot come to help us because of the curfew.”

CFLI has contributed Rs. 1.3 million to fund relief efforts in Colombo.



Remembering Victims of Easter Sunday Attacks

Two events were held by Weligama Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) and Negombo LIRC to remember the victims of the Easter Sunday attacks last year.

Buddhist, Muslim and Catholic religious leaders of Weligama LIRC, Bishop of Galle Rt. Rev. Raymond Wickramasinghe, police officers and civil society leaders attended in a candle vigil to commemorate those who had died and were injured in the bombings.

Rev. Charles Hewawasam, a member of Weligama LIRC, conducted the event at the Shrine of Christ the Healer in Weligama.

Divisional Secretary, Mr. Sumith Shantha, who attended the event said they had planned a ceremony but had been unable to do it because of the Covid-19 crisis that limited public gatherings.

“It is great that we are united amid these difficulties. We are in solidarity with those who died and were injured in the Easter Sunday attacks and pray for justice for the victims,” he said.

Police officers from Weligama Police station and civil society leaders attended in the commemoration.

Moulavis of the Negombo Grand Mosque and DIRC members, Mohamed Salman, Mohamed Abdulla and Ismail Haris said that Muslims had decided to remember the bombing victims by donating dry rations to the St. Joseph Elders’ Home, which is run by Catholic nuns.

They also donated 100 packs of rations to the church in Katuwapitiya to be distributed to the needy in the village who had been affected by the attack in remembrance of those who had died in the bombings.



Emergency Actions Need To Be Within Constitutional Framework

Sri Lanka is facing an unprecedented crisis due to the COVID-19 virus. The government has taken firm and decisive actions on an emergency basis. These include the imposition of a 24 hour curfew that is now entering its fourth week in some areas continuously.

The National Peace Council expresses its appreciation for those at the front lines of COVID mitigation efforts of the government, especially those in the medical profession, the security forces, the public service and those in essential services including private sector food and medicine logistical services who have been deployed for this task, and to the political leadership that is doing what is difficult in the national interest.

We believe that the time is ripe for the emergency measures undertaken by the government to be regularized so as to operate within the framework of the constitution. There are two issues in particular that are cause for concern.

The first is regarding government spending after April 30 when the present budget period ends and there is need for parliamentary sanction for new allocations.

The second is the convening of a new parliament within 90 days of the dissolution of the old parliament on March 2 by the president, which falls on June 2. Both of these are constitutional requirements which are beyond the purview of the caretaker government that was appointed to oversee the run-up period to the general election.

We note the joint statement issued by election monitoring organisations who have pointed out to the dangers of prematurely conducting the general elections in the midst of the pandemic. In the context of the health and economic threats posed by the coronavirus the present caretaker government functioning without a parliament is inadequate to address the country's democratic and constitutional needs.

In these circumstances, the most viable option is for parliament to be recalled to serve the balance six months of its term until September 1, 2020. We would expect the opposition parties to support the government to ensure the regularization of the curfew, passage of a budget and of necessary laws to deal with the complex issues of protecting the health and economy of the people.

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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.

Presidential Pardons Need to Consider Institutional Stability

The presidential pardon given to an army soldier convicted and sentenced to death by the courts of law, including the Supreme Court, has generated severe criticism from political parties, human rights organisations and citizens groups. The eight killings for which this soldier was convicted were particularly brutal and included three children under the age of 18 with one being only five years old. The pardon is unacceptable because the events relating to the conviction do not even fall into the category of collateral damage, often used as a justification for civilian deaths on the battle field.

If one removes the ethnic lens, it would be clear that these killings and the absence of demonstrable remorse, would cause shock and horror within society. The presidential pardon has had its share of supporters who see the convicted soldier as part of the Sri Lanka military that defeated the LTTE after nearly three decades of often horrendous warfare in which atrocities occurred on all sides. The conviction of military officers for crimes during the period of war has been rare and this was an instance in which the Sri Lanka military itself led the investigation process and the courts of law followed through instilling confidence that the Sri Lankan judicial system was impartial and committed to justice for all of its citizens.

The National Peace Council endorses the position taken by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka which expressed its deep concern about the presidential pardon and, in the context of its opposition to the death penalty, stated that a decision to commute the death sentence to one of long term imprisonment would have been acceptable. We call upon the government to respect the independence and integrity of institutions such as the Courts of Law and the Human Rights Commission. In times of uncertainty like this there is a need to uphold and preserve institutional stability which will give confidence in the future to citizens.

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National Peace Council, 12/14 Balapokuna Vihara Road, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka

Website: www.peace-srilanka.org, Email: info@peace-srilanka.org

Tel: 2818344, 2854127, Fax: 2819064