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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

An United Front to Build a Pluralistic Society

December
2020

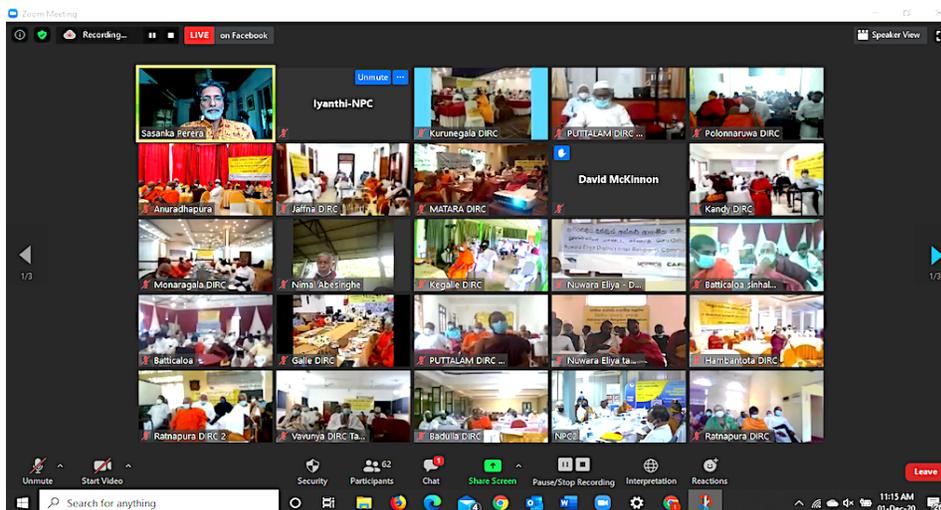
Over 500 religious leaders and civil society activists from around the country took part in a National Inter Religious Symposium on Building a Pluralistic Society organized by NPC under its project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT).

It was a virtual symposium in keeping with restrictions imposed by the government preventing large crowds from gathering in one place to stop the spread of COVID-19. Participants from the 16 districts where District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) operated joined the symposium through the Zoom application.

Speakers at the symposium included Professor Sasanka Perera from the South Asian University in New Delhi, lawyer Mr. Jagath Liyana Arachchi and NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera while many prominent religious leaders delivered messages on the importance of building a pluralistic society to ensure sustainable peace and harmony in the country.

Canadian High Commissioner Mr. David McKinnon spoke on pluralistic practices in Canada.

After the main sessions, religious leaders and civil society activists from 17 districts including Colombo discussed provisions that should be included in the new constitution that were necessary to build a harmonious and pluralistic society with strong institutions.



The recommendations included:

- All ethnicities should enjoy freedom of expression equally and that equal space is ensured in mainstream discourse;
- Sufficient laws should be introduced to bar hate speech or expression where violence is directed towards a particular group or community;
- Ensure that the national anthem is sung on both official languages;
- Ensure that there are Tamil speaking officers in all government departments and fix name boards in all three national languages on all public buildings and roads;
- State should make it compulsory for all Sri Lankan citizens to learn Sinhala and Tamil;
- Ensure equity in the distribution of resources and equality in delivering services, which include police, health and education;
- Strengthen independent commissions to ensure that the public sector acts without fear or favour.

The recommendations will be compiled into one document and presented to the National Constitutional Reform Committee to be considered in the forming of the next constitution.

During the symposium, NPC's 25 years of existence was celebrated with the cutting of 17 cakes, one each for a district. For 25 years NPC has journeyed with religious leaders, civil society activists and community representatives to build sustainable peace in the country.

In honour of NPC's anniversary, a stamp valued at Rs 10 was issued by the Postal Department at the Kandy DIRC's behest.



Virtual Learning on Preventing Violent Extremism Techniques

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NPC and its partner Helvetas Sri Lanka carried out a two day virtual learning conference on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) with international and local resource persons under its project Capacity Building for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) on PVE in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. The initiative is being implemented across six districts with support from Helvetas Sri Lanka and funded by the European Union.

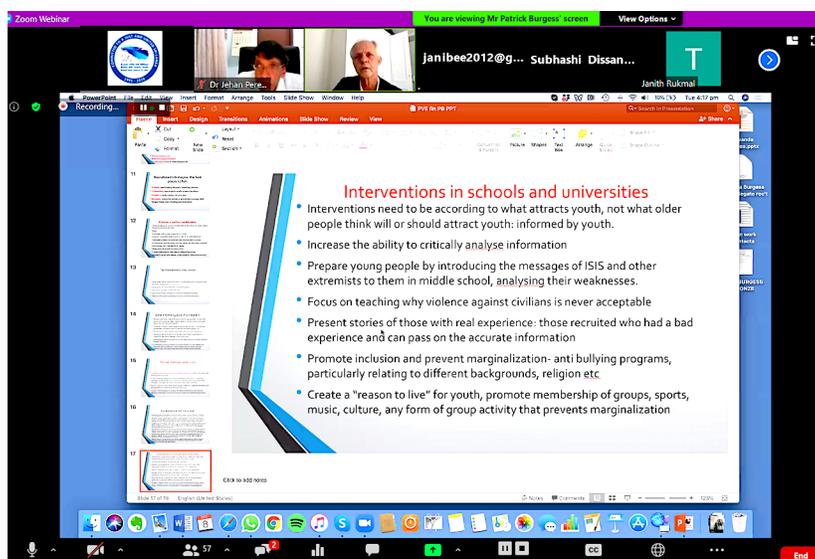
The conference brought together experts and practitioners to discuss the contextual relevance and nuances along with national and regional perspectives. Due to Covid-19 restrictions and rising number of cases in the Colombo district, the conference was conducted as a virtual learning engagement.

On the first day Patrick Burgess, an international human rights expert and co-founder and President of Asia Justice and Rights, presented an introduction to PVE focussing on a simplified approach by looking at the three elements – supply, demand and the context. NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera discussed the root causes of Violent Extremism (VE) and Professor Shahab Enam Khan from Jahangirnagar University in Bangladesh spoke on the role of religion and PVE. Professor Oliver Richmond, a peace building expert, discussed the interaction of peace processes and PVE.

Professor Gamini Keerawella, Executive Director of the Regional Centre For Strategic Studies, shared his insights on the prevention of VE in South Asia. Dr. Barbara Perry, from the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, spoke on hate speech.

Participants were able to learn the fundamentals of VE and what leads to people becoming not just radicalised but violent as well.

The second day began with a panel discussion on the role of the state in PVE. Panellists included former Governor of Eastern Province and former Secretary of Defense Austin Fernando, Director General of the Institute of National Security Studies Sri Lanka (INSSSL) Asanga Abeyagoonasekera and Deputy Commissioner of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Abdul Mannan.



This was followed by a session on PVE in the digital age by Asela Waidyalankara, an expert in technology and cybersecurity. Dr. Kazi Maruful Islam from the University of Dhaka discussed engaging and empowering youth for PVE and Dr. Sandra Pogodda from University of Manchester talked about radicalisation and countermeasures.

The conference ended with a presentation by Dr. Rashmi Singh, Associate Professor at PUC Minas in Brazil, who explained the key drivers and dynamics of VE by using examples from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

The second day of the conference concentrated on the specific areas of VE, how the state addresses it, how VE uses digital technology to approach different groups and how civil society can be a positive influence in addressing PVE.

Lessons from the conference will feed into future activities of the project, especially the Training of Trainers workshop to set up a cadre of PVE trainers in Sri Lanka.

The Value of Giving Leadership to Structured Interactions

The role that religious clergy can play in bringing divided communities together cannot be underestimated.

In the Sri Lankan context, religious clergy are highly respected and given status that even exceeds that given to politicians despite their greater access to resources and to coercive power. They are persons who are respected and influential in their communities. As a result they can have a multiplier effect in their localities. They have sufficient maturity to continue with peace and reconciliation work and necessary experience to navigate the political space if they choose to do so.

This was visible in the joint statement issued by the Buddhist clergy of the Amarapura and Ramanya Nikayas who wrote to the president requesting him to reconsider the government policy to enforce cremation of Covid-19 dead against the religious traditions of the Muslims and other religious groups such as the Catholics.

The head of NPC's partner organisation in Monaragala, Dhammika Laksman, had an encouraging message to give. He said that the district inter religious group that he was coordinating had decided to donate the travel allowance that they had received to support a nearby Muslim village that was under lockdown due to the discovery of Covid-19 patients.

This had happened because the inter religious group had Muslim members in it who had been able to win the trust and confidence of the Sinhala and Tamil members due to their interactions in the committee they had formed.

These informal groups constitute a first line of defense against the spread of inter community mistrust and violence and are effective problems solving bodies at the community level. This suggests the value of structured interactions across ethnic and religious divides that can create the trust among communities and build the nation.

Promoting the Rule of Law and Religious Freedom

Forty civil society representatives from Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCS) in Weligama, Beruwala, Negombo, Akurana, Mannar, Rakwana, Kuliypitiya, Batticaloa, Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Panduwasnuwara and Addalaichchenai participated in an online training programme on religious freedom and rule of law under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) facilitated by lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi.

Areas related to rule of law and religious freedom were discussed to help participants understand the rule of law and domestic and international legal provisions pertaining to religious freedom to help them conduct community level interventions and activities more effectively.

A case study analysis was conducted where the participants had to determine whether a given scenario was a violation of religious freedom and if so what the remedies were. For example, if a woman wore a shirt depicting a religious leader's image, was that a violation of religious freedom?

Participants raised questions on the appointment of judges, cremation of Muslims, mediation boards and international justice mechanisms.

A participant from Negombo pointed out that there were enough laws but they were not implemented and asked what could be done to remedy the situation. Mr. Liyana Arachchi replied that the rule of law was affected by many factors that were not directly linked to the justice system. "As responsible citizens, we are tasked to voice our concerns about the decisions made by the government," he said.

The training programme is the continuation of the one held in November.

Also under the CERF project, a programme was held for Vavuniya LIRC members including religious leaders, government officers, civil society members and other social activists.

The Public Health Inspector of Vavuniya spoke on Covid-19 and how LIRC members could contribute to combat it.



At the next session, the results of the survey on religious freedom conducted by CERF project were discussed so that they could be taken into the account when planning activities in the division.

Asked about the state of religious freedom in Vavuniya, a participants said, “On the surface it seems there are no issues in terms of religious freedom but there are many examples to prove that the religious freedom of minority communities such as Hindus, Muslims and Christians have been violated.”

It was recognised that caste played a negative role in Hindu and Catholic communities to hinder certain groups from enjoying their religious freedom such as not being allowed to enter religious places of worship.

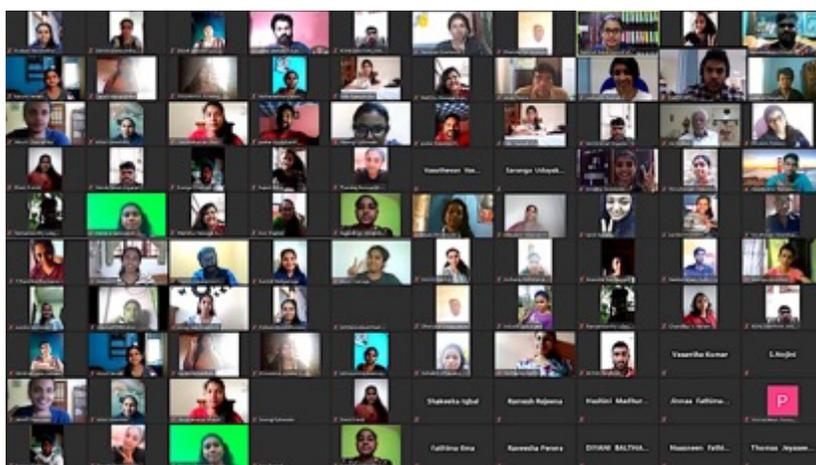
There was a discussion on conversion to another religion. Participants mentioned that the Hindu community was more vulnerable and some had converted to Islam and Christianity. Hindu religious leaders said that they had no objection to conversion if it was done with proper understanding and knowledge but since conversions mostly took place because of poverty and vulnerability, they believed that it was a violation of their religious rights.

University Students Learn About Pluralism and Community Relations

Under its project Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism, NPC conducted two days of training to teach over 130 students from the Eastern, Jaffna, Sabaragamuwa and Ruhuna universities about pluralism and community relations with a focus on how these topics related to their daily lives and to the Sri Lankan political and social situation.

The first session on a framework for a pluralistic society was done by political scientist and constitutional expert Professor Jayadeva Uyangoda. The second session on practicing pluralism - the missing elements was delivered by Professor Tudor Silva from the University of Peradeniya. The students discussed the necessity of mutual understanding of each other’s rights and opinions to build a pluralistic society.

The next day’s training on elements of pluralism and the legal and political context in Sri Lanka was conducted by NPC’s Programme Advisor, Ms. Sumadhu Weerawarna Perera, followed by a session on the sociohistorical experience of pluralism by Professor Sasanka Perera from the South Asian University in New Delhi.



Democracy Training by Virtual Means at Community Level

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Under the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity, NPC organized five training programmes on Resilient Communities Through Everyday Democracy to enhance the participants' basic understanding of democratic values, review lessons from past training and identify key issues for creating a values-based democratic society.

Due to the government's restriction on public gatherings to stop the spread of Covid-19, it had been difficult to train grassroots level community platforms as usual.

The SCORE team conducted a digital literacy survey in November to find out the possibility of adapting online platforms to carry out training programmes. Based on the survey results, the team decided to adopt an online approach for training programmes and activities.

Two programmes were carried out in Monaragala and Trincomalee conducted by Imran Nafeer.

The Monaragala training programme was conducted for 15 Co-existence Society members. According to a focus group that evaluated the knowledge of the participants, all the respondents demonstrated a good knowledge of democracy and identified the values and necessary components of democracy. They demonstrated a positive attitude towards establishing democracy in the country.

“Before participating in this training I did not have sufficient knowledge about democracy. Through the training, I was able to improve my knowledge and identify issues in society. As people who live in remote areas, we are not familiar with online platforms, so through this programme we were able to experience the new technology for the first time. It was a huge victory,” said H.M. Anusha Kumari from Monaragala.

Another online training programme was conducted for 17 Co-existence Society members in Trincomalee.

In Mullaitivu, three face to face training programmes were carried out with the support of co-facilitators who were trained during the last Training for Trainers. Participants' statements revealed that the trainings had improved their knowledge of democracy while inspiring them to work towards strengthening democracy.

“We improved our knowledge of democracy. Actually, the training inspired us to work on strengthening democracy. I hope that your organization will assist us in the future to empower communities,” said Nallalingam from Mullaitivu.

The training programmes used interactive tools and techniques including activities and games to reflect the realities in the society, group work to discuss various topics, group brainstorming and individual reflections and follow up agreements.

The online sessions were converted to encourage a productive dialogue in different thematic areas.

Training Befrienders to Help Victims of Human Rights Abuses

A training programme on trauma counselling for 17 Befrienders of the Gampaha Human Rights First Aid Centres (HRFACs) was held under NPC's Accountability through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT) project, conducted by Senior Counsellor and Trainer, Sister Canice.

Participants were taught how to listen to those who came to HRFACs and how to direct them to relevant government institutions. They were also told how to handle the new difficulties that have arisen because of Covid-19.

Activities were held to teach participants how to handle victims' trauma through counselling and learn about the qualities a counsellor should have, what questions to ask and what not to ask and how to listen to problems and be empathetic.

One participant, Felishiya Kalubovila, said the training was important because it helped the befrienders to interact with victims correctly.

"In the Gampaha district we come across various cases on human rights abuse, sexual harassment and other social issues. We need this type of training to help us to deal with these issues," said J.A. Dayananda, another participant.

Conflict Analysis and Management for Religious Leaders and State Officials

Ten training programmes on conflict analysis and management for state officials and religious leaders were conducted by master trainers under NPC's project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka in Badulla, Monaragala, Kandy, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa.

In Badulla six training programmes were conducted for 235 newly appointed state officials on the request of the Badulla Divisional Secretary, who praised the skills of the master trainers and thanked NPC for providing the training.

The first part focused on basic human needs and identity, which were important concepts when learning to respect and accept other cultures. The second part explained conflict analysis and management, showing how that in order to resolve or manage a conflict, it was essential to understand the conflict. Participants analysed conflicts in their communities using the four tools of the conflict tree, conflict mapping, the conflict layer model and timeline.

The next stage of the training was to identify the pluralism process to understand the importance of living and interacting with all religions and cultures. There was a discussion on the role and responsibilities of youth in building a pluralistic and peaceful society.

There were discussions among participants that helped to bring them to a common understanding on the issues.

Among the other topics discussed were minority religious rights, overcoming prejudice, facilitating dialogue between communities, gender rights and the political will to bring about sustainable peace.

Proposals To Experts Committee For a New Constitution

The government's intention to replace the present constitution with a new constitution offers the possibility of developing a framework of governance that could address the conflicts between the ethnic and religious communities that have marred the post-independence progress of Sri Lanka. Under colonial rule Sri Lanka was at the top of Asia's economies and described as the "Switzerland of the East." However, the inability to forge a unified polity, and ensure a feeling of equal belonging and participation in national policymaking, led to decades of conflict. Politicians over the past seven decades have to take responsibility for the current state of decline. Even today, with the three decade long civil war ended more than 11 years, Sri Lanka has yet to find a consensual solution to its ethnic and religious conflicts.

Civil society has an important role to play to reverse this trend with the opportunities given to them to contribute to the constitution drafting process. With the intention of participating in the constitutional development process and to support the government's efforts to unify the polity on the basis of respect for democracy, human rights and the wellbeing of all, the National Peace Council embarked on a series of consultations with civil society to ascertain what people believe is necessary to include in constitutional reform proposals to build a just, harmonious and pluralistic society with strong institutions that would prevent conflict occurring in future.

During its discussions with civil society groups and individuals across the country, many concerns were expressed about the amendments needed as well as the process of including people's participation. It was felt that the time period allocated was insufficient for obtaining a wide enough range of opinions and the government should be more involved in the process of creating public awareness about the issues involved in constitutional reform. Several key proposals were made which are summarized below.

- The necessity to ensure that the system of devolved government provided for by provincial councils is enhanced and activated to bring more participatory and representative government as required in a plural and multi-ethnic country. From the United States to Europe to India, devolution has been the answer to many developed and developing nations solving their problems.
- The Constitution to have provisions to safeguard the independence of state institutions from partisan political interventions. State officers should be protected from the risk of politically partisan victimization and harassment. Everyone to be accountable, answerable and treated equally before the law.
- Establishment of a Pluralism and Equal Rights Commission on the lines of other independent commissions, such as the Human Rights Commission and mandated to propagate the idea of pluralism in society and to work on issues that are identified in the fundamental rights chapter of the constitution.
- Establishment of District Reconciliation Committees to address the incidence of inter-religious and inter-ethnic tensions and to promote national integration and reconciliation in all 25 districts.

We believe that the leadership of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa who has the popular mandate and trust of the majority of people offers the best chance to overcome the previous failures of constitution making processes and reach a consensual solution for the benefit of the country at large. We believe that the post-war need for national reconciliation requires a constitution that is pluralist in its vision and obtains the concurrence of the ethnic and religious minorities and the necessary support from the ethnic and religious majority. It is only a united peaceful country that could develop in a post-war manner similar to Japan, South Korea or Germany.

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.

Government Needs To Give Vision Of New Constitution

One of the pledges of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has been to provide a new constitution to the country. In giving leadership to the passage of the 20th Amendment, and securing the necessary 2/3 majority in parliament, the president demonstrated that the government has the ability to honour this pledge of a new constitution. The government's decision to extend the deadline for the submission of constitutional proposals by the general public to December 31 of this year is to be welcomed. This is an indication of the responsiveness of the government to the difficulties that people have been facing to gather together for discussion on the issue due the spread of the Covid virus.

The National Peace Council notes that the successful efforts at constitutional change in the past occurred in situations where the government clearly stated its vision of the direction of constitutional change. In 1972 it was the desire to forge a republican constitution and break free of the colonial legacy through a locally grown (autochthonous) constitution. In 1978 it was to create an executive presidency that would be even able to take the unpopular but necessary decisions to develop the country by accelerating economic growth. The problem was that these visions were not shared with the rest of the polity. It should be remembered that components in constitutional changes introduced in 1972 and 1978 were contributory factors that led to unfortunate events from the 1980s onwards.

We believe that the leadership of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa who has the popular mandate and trust of the majority of people offers the best chance to overcome the failures of constitutional drafting processes after 1978 and reach a consensual solution for the benefit of the country at large. From the perspective of the National Peace Council, the post-war need for national reconciliation would emphasize the need for a constitution that is pluralist in its vision and obtains the concurrence of the ethnic and religious minorities in addition to the necessary support from the ethnic and religious majority. Inasmuch as the 20th Amendment has satisfied one set of interests, there is a need to consider the 13th Amendment in the light of 13+ as promised during the period of President Mahinda Rajapaksa.

NPC therefore urges the government to share its vision of the new constitution it proposes for the country's wellbeing. This will facilitate meaningful contribution from the general public towards it. Sharing the vision and ideology that inspires the new constitution will contribute to the formulation of institutions that are connected to that vision. We call on the government to take special efforts to consult with opposition political parties and civil society organisations to draft a constitution that protects national security, human rights, human dignity, equal protection and equal opportunity for all.

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