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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

July
2020

Reaching Out to Marginalised Groups On Delft Island

A training programme for marginalised groups on leadership and good governance was held on Delft Island in the Jaffna District with the participation of 60 people under NPC's project Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT), which is funded by the European Union.

The programme was organized with approval from the Delft Divisional Secretary, Public Health Inspectors and police officers according to Health Ministry rules and regulations such as washing hands, sanitising, temperature checks before entering the premises, wearing masks and a one metre distanced seating arrangement.

Project Coordinator N. Vijayakanthan outlined the objectives of the project and explained the rights that were given to marginalised groups and the benefits they could get from the government.

Participants were told how they could obtain benefits from new state mechanisms such as the Human Rights Commission, the National Police Commission, the Right to Information Act and the Office on Missing Persons.

Many people said that they had not received the Rs. 5,000 given by the government to assist people during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.



The participants discussed the upcoming general elections and heard advice on how to choose a good parliamentarian. NPC's Executive Director, Dr. Jehan Perera, said that equal protection, equal rights and rule of law needed to be protected and the people's vote should go to politicians who upheld these values.

Mrs. Komathy Mayakrishnan, a resource person, taught participants how to make a snack and some of them said they would start small businesses making the product from their homes. They requested assistance to start small businesses such as making clothes from old material and growing aloe vera for processing into skin care products.

Media Conferences to Promote Fair Polls

Media conferences were held in several districts organized by District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to promote an election free of hate speech and fake news in order to protect democracy and strengthen the ongoing peace and reconciliation process in the country under NPC's Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) project, which is funded by Misereor.

Religious leaders and civil society activists condemned politicians who spread fake news and hate speech to increase their potential voter base. They emphasised the importance of voting sensibly and electing parliamentarians who were capable of forming national policies that could help the country to move forward economically while strengthening its peace building efforts.

The media conferences also created awareness on the importance of protecting the 19th Amendment and strengthening independent commissions in order to ensure democracy in the country.

The conferences have been held in the Kandy, Puttalam, Kegalle, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Nuwara Eliya and Matara districts and continued during the election campaigning period.



Rejecting Fake News and Hate Speech During Polls

District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in eight districts - Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Nuwara Eliya, Matara, Kurunagala, Batticaloa, Hambantota and Galle - held their monthly meetings with necessary health regulations and social distancing rules in place to ensure the safety of its members, limiting numbers to between 20 to 25. Public Health Inspectors outlined precautions necessary to curtail the spread of Covid-19.

The meetings started with a briefing on Covid-19 relief activities that were conducted by the DIRCs during the curfew where they distributed dry rations to low income families including women-headed households and differently-abled people. Rations were also provided to orphanages, elders' homes and long term care institutions for differently-abled people. The programme was funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives and Misereor.

The DIRCs spoke about their roles in assisting people who were suffering economically as a result of the lockdown that could cause a breakdown of the religious and ethnic harmony existing in the area.

The discussions also centered around the importance of the 19th Amendment and how it had helped to strengthen democracy in the country with the establishment of independent commissions, the Right to Information Act, and diminishing the executive power of the President and delegating it to the Prime Minister and Parliament. They also spoke about the importance of carrying forward the message of voting responsibly to choose candidates who were capable of establishing national policies that could help the country to progress socially and economically.

Most DIRCs spoke about how the use of hate speech and fake news during election campaigns could endanger existing ethnic and religious harmony and how it was important to counter these messages of hate targeting a specific community or religion.



Galle DIRC decided to create a Facebook page to publish messages of care and peace to counter hate speech and to maintain a WhatsApp group so members could share their stories and experiences of interventions to encourage each other.

DIRCs in Matara and Kurunegala carried out a billboard, banner and sticker campaign to emphasise that no particular community should be targeted for its ethnicity and religion and how holding an election free of hate speech and fake news was important to strengthen the peace and reconciliation process in the country.

Working for Harmony

Religious leaders, government officers and civil society activists at the Kuliypitiya and Panduwasnuwara Local Inter Religious Committees' (LIRCs) monthly meetings identified prevailing ethnic issues in the area and recommended a series of activities to address the issues. The meetings were held under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Coexistence (CERF).

Committee members also shared the experiences of the relief activities carried out during the Covid-19 lockdown.

Akurana, Vavuniya, Mannar, Addalaichchenai, Trincomalee and Batticaloa LIRCs also held their meetings with the participation of religious leaders, government officials, police officers and civil society leaders.

The Divisional Secretary of Akurana, Ms. Indika Abeysinghe, sharing her experiences during the pandemic, said that the relief activities implemented by LIRC members during the curfew were successful and that she admired the cooperation among LIRC members.

Also under the project, a print media campaign was carried out in national newspapers in three languages to motivate citizens to vote for candidates who promoted ethnic and religious harmony.



Conflict Analysis and Management for Youth Community Leaders

Twelve training programmes on conflict analysis and management for youth community leaders were conducted by master trainers under NPC's project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka in Kalutara, Matara, Kandy, Kurunegala, Ratnapura, Monaragala and Polonnaruwa districts.

The first part of the training focused on basic human needs and identity, which is an important concept 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.

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.

Participants spoke about releasing people convicted of war crimes from both the armed forces and the LTTE and their appointment as public officials as well as the issues of gender rights and discrimination against the LGBTQI community. They stressed the need for new legislation to safeguard the rights of these communities.

Female community leaders said the sessions on the conflict management process was useful because women had difficulty in getting the message across at the grassroots level. They were confident that the training programmes would create a better understanding among their communities and promote collective efforts to overcome common challenges.



Resilient Communities Through Everyday Democracy

Under the Social Cohesion and Reconciliation (SCORE) Activity, NPC organized a Training for Trainers (TOT) on resilient communities through everyday democracy, a module SCORE compiled for the purpose of empowering the village level community platforms.

The training programme was aimed at 22 members of SCORE's partner organizations in Mullaitivu, Monaragala, Vavuniya, Ampara and Batticaloa. NPC staff also took part in the programme.

Interactive tools and techniques were used based on adult learning principles to encourage a productive dialogue among participants on different thematic areas. Some of tools used included reflection activities and games, group work, discussions and brainstorming and individual reflections and follow up agreements.

Speakers at the training programme included Dr. Dayani Panagoda from Global Communities, NPC Chairman Dr. Joe William and NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera, who discussed democracy and the promotion of a cohesive national identity.

Most participants agreed that the training programme had enhanced their knowledge of democracy and prepared them to facilitate training based on the module.

“There were two modes in the training - facilitator mode and participant mode. During the participant mode we learnt and during the facilitator mode we implemented what we had learnt. We participated fully because of this teaching method,” said NPC Project Officer Sepalika Priyanthi.

“We were trained on the tactics that we should use as facilitators including how to use body language to connect with people,” said Balraj Tharshan, a youth coordinator from Vavuniya.



Civil Society: Making a Difference Around the Country

A series of Civil Society Platform meetings took place around the country where hundreds of civil society activists gathered to discuss the current political situation and the challenges facing civil society in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Civil Society Platform is an initiation of NPC's project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) funded by Misereor.

These meetings also discussed the importance of protecting the 19th Amendment and strengthening independent commissions in order to ensure that democracy prevailed in the country. Panellists at the meetings included NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera, NPC Project Manager Saman Seneviratne, lawyers Probodha Rathnayaka and Athila Athauda, National Coordinator of the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence Manjula Gajanayakae and civil society activist Ahilan Kadirgamar.

The panellists emphasised the importance of people realising the power of their vote and how they should vote for candidates who were not corrupt and were capable of building national policies that could take the country forward economically while strengthening its peace and reconciliation process.

Discussions centred around the importance of protecting the 19th Amendment as it helped to protect the democracy of the country by establishing independent commissions, the Right to Information Act and by decreasing the executive power of the President and delegating it to the Prime Minister and Parliament.

Several young people attended the meetings, showing the younger generation's desire to hold a clean and fair election and elect candidates who were capable of forming the constitutional changes needed to protect democracy of the country and the rights of all citizens regardless of their ethnic and religious differences.

"There have been human right issues for several years so a strong constitution is needed to protect the people. But most people do not know about the constitution and the amendments that have been made to strengthen democracy so this meeting is a really good initiative," said retired teaching instructor, Mr. Kodituwakku.

"These meetings conducted by the NPC are very timely because it is vital to create awareness on the importance of democracy and electing politicians who have the capacity to formulate national policies for the development of the country while ensuring peace. It is important to create awareness about the value of a person's informed vote. People need to be capable of making decisions that are not religiously biased nor favour one's ethnicity. Instead they should take decisions that are good for the future of the country," said Ms. Indrani Kusumalatha from the Praja Diriya Foundation.

She added that it was important to create awareness among female local government officials on the constitution and the power of democracy to enable them to participate in the decision making process.

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.

Seeking National Path to Reconciliation 37 Years After Black July

The week of July 23 marks the 37th year of one of the darkest periods of Sri Lanka's history. Beginning on this day and continuing for a week there were riots that targeted the Tamils living in the capital city of Colombo and elsewhere where they lived as a minority that led to death and destruction. The Sri Lankan state failed in its duty to protect its citizens. At the personal level the events of that day changed the course of life of many irreversibly and also the history of Sri Lanka. The loss spanned life, property, memories and material treasures that constitute personal histories in the lives of families. In national terms, the communal divide became further entrenched which may have been the cause for the rise of Tamil armed struggle to a mass scale with systematic international intervention soon following.

In the months leading up to July 1983 we saw a narrative being built up that would be used to justify the attacks that were to take place. It is an element of extremist violence that it is preceded by a justifying narrative. There were strident voices claiming, among others, that Tamils needed to be taught a lesson as they were too assertive, supporting militancy and needed to be taught a lesson. This was epitomized in the words of then President J R Jayewardene who said to the world at large and to Tamil people in particular, "If you want a fight, let there be a fight; if it is peace, let there be peace...It is not what I am saying. The people of Sri Lanka say this."

We need to carefully consider our thoughts and words which are the precursors of deeds. This can be a time for rethinking and recalibration. With general elections being less than two weeks away, the National Peace Council urges all political parties, candidates for election and the electorate to consider obtaining national reconciliation based on mutual understanding, trust and justice as their primary task. Our country has suffered far too long from our inability to unify and connect all citizens within one framework of governance that all can agree is reasonable and just. Irrespective of which party wins the forthcoming election, the country has to be united otherwise we will all lose. This is a challenge that continues to stand before us 37 years after Black July 1983 as we have still to define our national path to reconciliation.

This month of July needs to become a time of introspection where the Sri Lankan nation reflects on our divided past and how to achieve a shared future and peaceful coexistence. The National Peace Council believes the values that must permeate all structures of governance are those that ensure equal rights, equal opportunities and equal protection before the law. It is significant to note that during and after the July 1983 riots the government sent the riot-affected and displaced Tamil people from the south to the Tamil-majority areas in the north, especially to Jaffna, for safety. This is indicative of the need to also continue to seek a solution in which the devolution of power gives to the ethnic and religious minorities the confidence in their security and future in a manner that would hold our pluralistic, multi ethnic and multi religious society together.

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