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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

August
2021

Civil Society Lobbies Political Leaders On Reconciliation Issues

With the approach of the September session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, there has been an increase in interest on the part of the government in obtaining the views of civil society in regard to human rights issues. A delegation of civil society members, many of them drawn from NPC and functioning as a loose grouping going by the name of the Sri Lankan Collective for Consensus met with a number of government leaders, including former Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena, Justice Minister Ali Sabry, Sports Minister Namal Rajapaksa, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa. The group also met with former Speaker Karu Jayasuriya and Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa.

The primary purpose of these meetings was to urge a multi-partisan national approach to deal with these crises. As members of Civil Society involved in reconciliation, human rights and governance the group sought support on the several matters with a focus on national reconciliation. These included the following issues:

- **Burial grounds in each district:** Permit the burial of Muslim victims of Covid in every district and not only in Ottamavadi in the Eastern Province, which burial ground is difficult to access for the vast majority of the Muslim population and the burial ground itself is completely filled up.
- **NGO legislation to be discussed:** Ensure that the draft legislation pertaining to NGOs is first discussed with civil society/NGOs prior to being sent to the Legal Draftsman. Make the draft legislation public so that it can be scrutinized by the public and responses to it made.
- **Repeal of PTA Legislation:** Support legislation to repeal or amend the Prevention of Terrorism Act to ensure that any legislation on combating terrorism complies fully with the State's international human rights and humanitarian law obligations. Seek the release of prisoners held under the PTA without trial.
- **Conduct Provincial Council elections:** Call for the conduct of provincial council elections immediately. The Provincial Council system and the associated provisions for decentralized governance and participatory decision-making should to be strengthened.
- **Freedom of expression and Right of Association:** Protect the democratic right to hold alternative opinions, to dissent and to public protest in keeping with the Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Association which are constitutionally protected rights.

Those who took part in these meetings were Ven. Kalupahana Piyaratana, Rev Asiri Perera (Retd. Bishop), Fr. C.G. Jeyakumar, Prof. T. Jayasingam, Prof. Tudor Silva, Rev. Mr. Hilmy Ahamed, Mr. Rohana Hettiarachchi, Mr. V. Kamaladhas, Dr. Joe William, Mr. Sanjeewa Wimalagunaratna, Dr. Dayani Panagoda, Ms. Visaka Dharmadasa, Mr. Javid Yusuf, Dr. P. Saravanamuttu and Dr. Jehan Perera.

Covid-19 Relief Distribution to Care Homes and Institutions

Several care homes and institutions affected by travel restrictions received food and equipment through NPC's Covid-19 relief programme funded by the German embassy.

Members of the 17 District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) with the support of government officers selected institutions that were facing many shortages while trying to look after their residents. In each district Rs. 75,000 worth of dry rations and sanitary items were distributed to 54 orphanages, elders' homes, intermediate medical centers and institutions for disabled people and people with special needs.

A total of 1,705 residents and inmates benefited from the donations.

The DIRCs were supported by officials from social services and child protection and NGO coordinators. Their involvement helped to maintain accountability and transparency while strengthening the relationship with government bodies, DIRCs and NPC.

“There are 70 residents and 10 staff members living in the centre. Since the start of the pandemic, we have been struggling to meet the needs of our residents because the daily donations we usually get came to a sudden stop. We grow our own vegetables but getting other essential food items has become a challenge. Our residents have big appetites and we go through a substantial amount of food. The villagers are facing hardships because of the difficulties they are facing with farming and agriculture so we don't receive donations as we did before the pandemic; we don't get enough help or aid from the government as well. To receive this donation from NPC and Monaragala DIRC has been a blessing and we thank them profusely,” said Mr. Lanka Perera President of the Sitsewana Institute, in Thanamalwila.

“Since the new travel restrictions were imposed by the government, we have been struggling to look after and feed the residents who are disabled and with special needs. The donations we received from NPC and Polonnaruwa DIRC are well timed and highly appreciated,” said Mr. Dinusha Sanjeewa Gamage of the Vocational Training Centre for the Special Needs in Polonnaruwa.



Building Religious Coexistence Through Dialogue

NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project conducted two virtual religious dialogues to foster the roles and responsibilities of the religious leaders to build up religious coexistence with the participation of 100 Sinhala and Tamil speaking religious leaders representing 12 Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs).

The leaders were divided into five groups to share basic concepts of each religion. A Buddhist monk pointed out, "According to Buddhism, humans should disregard the disparities based on religion, ethnicity and cast."

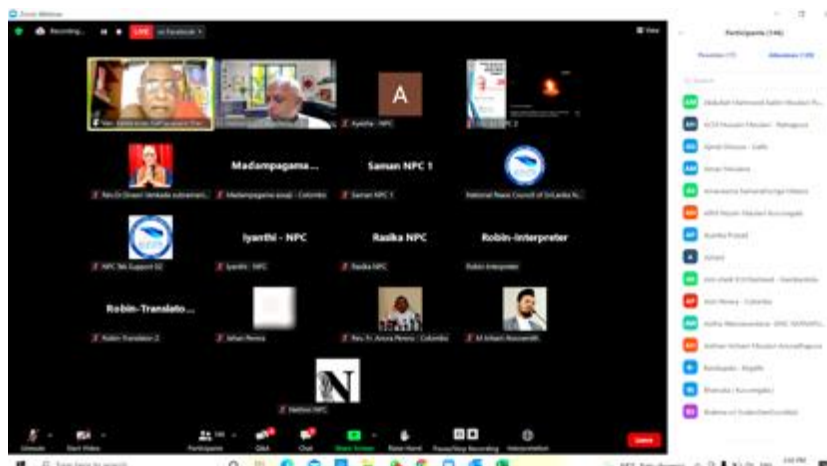
A Christian priest explained that Jesus sacrificed his life for all the human beings. He showed that people who belong to different ethnicities must live peacefully in the society. He said that religion teaches people to love God, themselves and society.

A maulavi said, "Islam is a philosophy that guides the followers to be honest and obedient. Prophet Muhammad promoted peace and calmness. Muslims always respect peace. Real Muslims who follow the Al-Quran hate violence." A Hindu priest explained that love was the basic principle of Hinduism.

Participants were given the opportunity to raise problems they had about other religions. A Hindu priest asked why the Buddhist clergy spoke about a Sinhala Buddhist nation. A Buddhist monk explained that the notion of a Sinhala Buddhist nation developed to protect the culture and identity of Sinhala Buddhists. "Although the behaviour of some religious leaders has created problems, Buddhism does not discriminate against non-Buddhist communities," the monk said.

The maulavis were asked about Islamic extremist groups and the reasons for the estrangement between Sinhalese and Muslims. A Maulvis pointed out that extremist groups worked for money or political influence. "They are committing crimes in the name of their religion but they are not accepted by the religion. People must not point their finger at the entire Muslim community because of a small group of offenders. Islam leaders must take action to banish them from the religion," he said.

A Buddhist monk that priests were trying to spread Christianity in Buddhist villages and that many Buddhists had converted to Christianity. A Christian priests said that according to the constitution, religious leaders could encourage others to follow their religion and that they had a right to teach the religion.



The Hindu priests were asked the reason for animal sacrifice. A Kurukkal said that religion did not allow sacrifices but some groups followed the ritual. “People have changed some of the components of Hinduism to suit their needs,” he said.

Participants made suggestions to strengthen the co-existence among different religious groups while discussing the roles and responsibilities of religious leaders to develop a pluralistic society.

Use of Social Media for Coexistence

Social media has both negative and positive impacts. The misuse of social media can lead to conflicts in society but it also plays a role in addressing difficult issues. Under its Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project, NPC organized a webinar to enhance the skills and knowledge of youth to adopt social media platforms to establish religious coexistence.

The facilitator, Anidda editor Mr. K. W. Janaranjan, explained the importance of social media platforms and the features of traditional media. He focused on the responsibility of social media users including accurate reporting and apologies and corrections. He reiterated the need of active engagement of youth to counter misinformation in order to ensure religious coexistence.

A participant, Farhath Marikkar, stressed the need to learn about other religions to counter misinformation about other religions. “The NPC team is committed to enhancing religious coexistence but the opportunities to learn other religions are limited in the current context. But everyone must stand against social media posts that criticize religions,” Mr. Janaranjan said.

Another participant, M. Salman, said that as a multi ethnic country, everyone must promote pluralistic values through social media platforms. Ramesh from Ratnapura said that youth could be volunteers to ensure religious coexistence through the social media platforms.

Wasantha from Negombo expressed his gratitude for the discussions and suggested explaining the issues to rural youth to create awareness. The programme was a productive event that empowered youth to strengthen the religious coexistence through social media platforms.



Tackling Child Abuse in the Estate Sector

A seminar on child rights and prevention of child abuse was organised by NPC under its project Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) to increase awareness among stakeholders in the estate sector and to draft a resolution demanding authorities to take action to strengthen the law, mechanisms and institutions to protect child rights.

More than 240 participants attended the seminar including religious leaders, government officers and community leaders connected to the estate sector.

Sessions on the international and domestic legal framework on child rights and parental and social responsibility for child protection were delivered by resource persons from LEADS, an organisation working on child rights. Topics discussed included prevention of child abuse and child labour and actions to prevent them, and institutions and mechanisms for child protection.

The meeting ended with a resolution on how to improve existing mechanism to ensure the protection of child rights. The resolution was ratified by the participants and it will be later signed by the 17 DIRC coordinators and presented to government officials and private institutions.

“I contacted two government officials who directly work with children in the estate sector in Awisawella. They said that they learnt a lot from the programme and that they hope to use the knowledge they learnt in their duties,” said Sumithra Sirimanna from Colombo DIRC. She suggested the participants of the seminar should be focal points to organize future programmes as well as building the capacity of the participants.

“It was a very good programme. Young girls speak of their misfortunes to parents, teachers and community leaders but they are not allowed to take any action and are often forced to drop the issue. It is important to create a mechanism for them to get,” said Sathis Kumar from Deniyaya.

Also under the PACT project, a National Inter Religious Committee (NIRC) meeting was held through Zoom with the participation of more than 150 religious leaders and civil society activists to show solidarity to victims of the 2019 Easter Sunday terrorist attacks and to pay tribute to the Christian leaders for the calming role they played.

The main demand from the Christian community was to ensure justice to the victims of the attacks, not only by punishing the perpetrators but also to reveal the truth behind who was responsible for planning and funding it.

The government appointed a Commission to investigate the evidence and come up with recommendations, which should be implemented.

The meeting ended with the discussion of the first draft of a resolution consisting of 15 recommendations to be presented to government authorities and institutions on the way forward to achieve justice for the victims of the Easter Sunday attacks and what the NIRC could do.

“We could prepare a Petition to be signed by Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics and Muslim people at temples, kovils, churches and mosques so we can pressurise the Government and the President,” said Venerable Maharagama Uppalawanna Bhikkuni.

Promoting Pluralism Through Film

NPC's Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP) project is working with university students to raise their awareness and influence the public discourse on pluralism and inter community relations in order to strengthen the reconciliation process. To accelerate the conversions about pluralism through short videos and short films, NPC conducted a series of training on video making for university students.

A training programme on video making was conducted for Eastern University students by independent filmmaker and creative writer Ms. Bavaneedha Loganathan. Another training programme was held for Sabaragamuwa university students by Mr. Ruwan Bogamuwa, a senior producer at the Sri Lanka Development Journalist Forum.

The programmes were supposed to have been on site face to face training but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they were held virtually, covering different aspects of video making. Participants were given the creative freedom to improvise and come up with their own stories and scripts and came up with their own production using the knowledge they had gained through the training programme.

Countering Hate Speech in the Estate Sector

National Peace Council's Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka project conducted a series of campaigns on countering hate speech. The Monaragala district campaign was conducted in three phases: creating a dialogue against hate speech and violence with government officials, youth, differently abled persons and religious leaders; educating people in the plantation sector on countering hate speech and a discussion on the contribution of art and literature to minimise hate speech.

Master trainers visited the estates in Moneragala and explained that hate speech could be defined as any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are. They said that hate speech was not confined to religion or ethnicity and outlined the sociological framework of hate speech and hate speech laws. Booklets on countering hate speech and posters and banners were displayed to create awareness.

For the third phase, a workshop on the contribution of art and literature to minimise hate speech was conducted by Moneragala Additional District Secretary Mr. Chandana Lokuhevage, who spoke about the importance of art and literature in reducing hate speech and about the importance of protecting the environment. Residents of children's homes, Social Integration Officers, Child Development Officers and Probation Officers participated in the workshop.



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.

Sudden Appearance of NGO Legislation is Ill Timed

The Cabinet of Ministers has directed the Legal Draftsman to draft legislation that would replace the existing legislation that covers NGOs. The cabinet note on this issue points to the different laws that civil society organisations may register under and seeks to bring them all under a unified system of oversight. It also gives the background of the Easter terror attack as requiring the new legislation which would ensure financial transparency and accountability. The National Peace Council finds it very concerning as the government has so far had no discussion with NGOs such as ours on these matters, or shared or made public the draft legislation that the Legal Draftsman will work on. The draft legislation has the potential to impact upon civil society independence and role as part of the system of democracy.

Sri Lanka has general laws covering terrorist financing, money laundering and transparency. Special legislation to cover NGOs as a special category is liable to impact negatively on the independence of civil society from state regulators. We believe that it was not the lack of NGO regulation that permitted the heinous act of terror of the Easter bombings but the failure to monitor financial transactions within the available laws and regulations and also failure to follow on the intelligence information given to the state in this regard. Any regulation of NGOs should be compatible with the regulations of other non-state entities such as private companies and political parties. There is no justification to make scapegoats of NGOs when the inquiries on the Easter bombings continue to be contested in relation to the findings.

Ironically this call for draft legislation comes at a time when the government has been actively engaging with peacebuilding NGOs in discussions on the reconciliation process. The proposal for new legislation that could restrict the space for civil society undermines the credibility of this important initiative.

Sri Lanka contains a diverse range of NGOs engaged in a diverse range of activities. Any attempt to impose a uniform regime of NGOs would be impractical and inappropriate. For instance, state regulation would strike at the very core of those civic organizations that monitor the state's human rights record or groups that monitor corruption in governance. The concept of the independent existence of NGOs as voluntary organisations at the community level, such as temple societies and small village organisations which is part of our culture, may be lost in the process of unification. It is therefore necessary to ensure that the legislation regarding the NGO sector will not be formulated without the wider participation of the NGO sector as a whole and not only with government-friendly ones.

Media Release issued on 16.08.2021

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