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கிளங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை  
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

# Paths To Peace

July  
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## Dialogue Initiated with Government Leaders

The prospect of moving from a divided past to a shared future is an alluring one that needs to be realized on the ground through a more all-encompassing dialogue. With this goal in mind, a group of civil society members met with Minister of Foreign Affairs Dinesh Gunawardene, Minister of Justice Ali Sabry, State Minister of Regional Cooperation Tharaka Balasuriya and Foreign Secretary Admiral Professor Jayanath Colombage at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The group included members of NPC's governing council and board of directors Bishop Asiri Perera, Hilmy Ahamed, Visaka Dharmadasa, Rohana Hettiarachchi, Professor T. Jayasingam, Dr. Joe William and Dr. Jehan Perera.

At the outset of the meeting Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena said that this meeting is to help to understand the expectations from the government side and that the common intention is to democratically take the country forward. Justice Minister Ali Sabry said that they wished to obtain the views on how to face the challenges both nationally and internationally and emphasized the need to balance competing interests. Foreign Secretary Jayanath Colombage made a sober and rational point by point response to the memorandum presented to the government team by the civil society members.

The discussions that followed took place in an environment of equal treatment and mutual respect. The civil society members welcomed the opportunity to engage with members of the government on topics of post-war reconciliation, civil society space and governance. They emphasized the need for the government to view civil society as a partner in resolving national issues and to be consulted. They called on the government to take meaningful and concrete steps to address emblematic human rights cases, repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act, uphold civil society space, establish District Reconciliation Committees and form a parliamentary caucus on reconciliation, among others. The government members affirmed their commitment to getting the participation of civil society in development and post-war reconciliation and ensure that any prospective law with regard to NGOs would be discussed with them.

The government members also stated their conviction that government policy was to treat every citizen equally, to consider diversity to be a blessing rather than a liability and that the provincial council system would be sustained, and the elections would be held when technical issues are sorted out. They pointed out that institutions set up for reconciliation, including the Office on Missing Persons, the Office for Reparations and the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation would work in coordination in the future. The need to make the appointment process a more inclusive one was made. The meeting concluded with the prospect of future dialogue and engagement, with the civil society members calling on the government leadership to inform the general public about its position on issues of post-war reconciliation in particular and obtain their support.

# Bringing Relief to the Covid Affected

To assist people and institutions affected by travel restrictions and lockdowns imposed to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, NPC organized the distribution of hand washing basins, disinfectant liquid spray machines and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) kits to government institutions as well as dry ration packs to low income families who were daily wage earners or traders.

The families who received dry ration packs included disabled persons and war survivors. The relief programme is funded by MISEREOR and is being implemented by District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in Jaffna, Badulla, Vavuniya, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Kegalle, Monaragala, Anuradhapura, Puttalam, Galle and Colombo.

District and Divisional Secretariat officers and District NGO coordinators gave their support to ensure that the relief items were handed over to deserving individuals and institutions, helping to maintain accountability and transparency while strengthening relationships among government bodies, DIRCs and NPC.

NPC distributed 730 PPE kits, six hand washing basins and six disinfectant liquid spray machines to 12 Divisional Secretariats and three Mediation Boards in the Colombo district. The PPE kits were handed over to Divisional Secretaries in the presence of the Colombo District Secretary, who praised the work done by Colombo DIRC and NPC.

“My husband left me and my son, who is going to school. I work odd jobs to find an income. Because of Covid I am unable to find work and I have a spinal pain and a mental illness. We have been surviving because of help from my half-brother. The dry ration pack donated by Jaffna DIRC and NPC has been a great relief to us and I thank you for it,” said Thampirasa Geetha from Jaffna.

“The contents of the dry ration pack are well selected. Vavuniya DIRC has organized the donation well. They have displayed the list of items in the pack, which helps with transparency and accountability,” said Thevaky Elanakanathan a Grama Niladari officer from Cheddikulam.



“Today we are celebrating Haj. Although we live with so many problems because of the Covid-19 situation we try our best to celebrate this day however we can. So it was a wonderful surprise when three Anuradhapura DIRC members, who are Sinhala, came to our village to distribute dry ration packs to those of us who have been suffering. Despite the hardships in the country, it is important for both Sinhala and Muslim communities to live together in peace,” said A.B. Jipri from Anuradhapura.

“Mediation Board officers work in closely with the public but they have been overlooked when it comes to ensuring their safety in these dangerous times. The duties of Mediation Board officers have returned to normal but there is a threat because they do not have proper equipment so these protection kits, handwashing sinks and spray machines are most welcome. I am thankful to NPC,” said Sumithra Sirimanna a Mediation Board officer in Colombo.

## Two Languages, One Nation

Since 2020, NPC’s National Languages Equality Advancement Project (NLEAP) has held workshops on language rights and second language acquisition in Kandy, Kalutara and Trincomalee to bring people together through language.

In Trincomalee 40 participants learnt Sinhala including government officials, religious leaders, members of community organizations, police officers and youth who are members of the Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC), as well as members of the public.

The session was led by a government school teacher from the National Institute of Language Education and Training (NILET) in the Trincomalee district. The certificate course consists of 30 sessions. Participants are taught to speak Sinhala so that they can explain their problems to relevant authorities who may not speak Tamil.

Mr. Saman Dharshana Pandikorala, Trincomalee District Secretary, welcomed the language classes and requested them in other places as well.

“By learning Sinhala I maintain communication with people in my public service and I look forward to understanding the documents, letters and circulars when they are in Sinhala and doing government work effectively,” said a government officer.

“When doing business, incomprehensibility leads to delays and difficulties so the use of the relevant language will rectify the situation,” said a businessman.



# Countering Hate Speech Through Awareness and Dialogue

NPC's Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka project is conducting a series of campaigns on Countering Hate Speech.

The campaigns will be conducted in three phases:

- Creating a dialogue against hate speech and violence with government officials, youth and religious leaders
- Educating people in the plantation sector on countering hate speech
- Discussions about the contribution of art and literature to minimize hate speech

As part of the campaign in Monaragala, a dialogue against hate speech and violence was conducted online with the participation of 50 religious leaders, youth, government officers and differently abled persons.

Four religious leaders, Ven. W. Soma Nanda Thero, Kurrukal M. Jothykumar, Maulavi Mansoor Amanullah and Rev. Luke Edirisinghe, spoke about the importance of using positive speech.

“In several parts of the Bible, the importance of words is emphasised. The Bible mentions positive writings such as expression of remembrance and good deeds. But the Bible warns us that the use of negative words will lead to destruction. We are asked to think twice before speaking,” said Rev. Luke Edirisinghe.

“The main reason conflicts arise is because of hate speech. No religion teaches hatred. When people are obstructed from practicing their religion, it leads to hate speech and people tend to hurt the feelings of others. To take this message forward into society, religious leaders should teach this in their sermons,” said Maulavi Mansoor Amanullah.



NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera spoke of the importance of unity among ethnicities for the country to flourish. “In the early days of the Kandyan Kingdom, kings allowed other ethnicities to come and live in harmony. Even now we mostly live in harmony with other ethnicities. But when elections draw close, politicians cause conflict among religions.”

He stated that there were two aspects of hate speech - trying to eliminate external ethnicities and getting together internally. For example, after the Easter attack the media said that in two mosques there were swords found so there was a fear created in people that all mosques are similar. The swords were not brought for violence but for safety. Now there was no mention of this incident.

“The intention of religion is to unite people. It is important to know about hate speech so that we can learn to cross check information provided by media. The aim of NPC is the create unity and pluralism. We should view other ethnicities as our strengths and not weaknesses. We want to help the government. Only if there is unity can the country progress,” Dr. Perera said.

Mr. Tikirikumara Jayawardene, Development Officer of the Disability Unit of the Election Commission, explained the types of human diversity: cultural, ethnic, religion, age, sexuality, gender and disability. He emphasized that diversity was the identity of a country and that it must be respected.

He said that hate speech was not confined to religion or ethnicity, and people should not be demeaned and labelled with names that were physically and mentally hurtful, which would eventually propel people towards terrorism and extremism.

## Improving Debating Skills of Students

*“When students participate in debate, they learn to study issues in depth and from perspectives, a skill I use every day in the Senate.” Barack Obama*

Debate is a valuable activity for students and provides them with knowledge and insight. NPC conducted a two day training programme on improving debating skills for nine Eastern University and Sabaragamuwa University students.

The training programme was conducted by lawyer Mr. S. Sivaskanthasri, a former member of the Youth Parliament and former president of Law Student's Association at the University of Jaffna.

Mr. Sivaskanthasri delivered a presentation to demonstrate benefits of debating, importance of debating for students and roles and responsibilities of speakers. Six students were selected and given with a topic to do a practice debate, which was “The minimum qualification for a parliament member should be A/L pass”.

On the second day there were games to improve oratory skills and another practice debate on “Human rights can be breached to hasten economic development of a country”, which revealed facts about how economic growth prevails over human rights.

During the sessions there was an exchange of ideas, games and competitions. It was decided to conduct practice debates every Saturday to improve the skills of the students.

# NVC and Facilitation Training for LIRCS

An online training programme to improve the Non Violent Communication (NVC) skills of the Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members was held for Rakwana LIRC members under NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project to familiarize LIRC members with basic concepts and tools of NVC to enhance their effective engagement in reconciliation work.

The programme enabled participants to develop their communication skills that deepen understanding and compassion for self and others and improve relationships at all levels. Father Suranga explained the importance of practicing NVC skills, saying, "If all of us can follow the teachings of NVC, it will definitely pave the way for creating a good society. But we can see that people are not following these practices. I think they should be taught in combination with religious teachings, then people will incorporate these values into their lives."

Another training programme on facilitation skills was held for 36 members of Trincomalee LIRC to help them to engage with different groups in order to deliver awareness and training on religious coexistence. "The most important thing is I learnt is the difference between the role of trainer and facilitator. Although I have participated in many trainings, this is the first time I learnt the difference. For me, this is a great benefit," said Maulavi Yasir.

As LIRC members, mediation skills are necessary for handling conflict situations, especially those related to religious and ethnic issues. NPC conducted mediation training for the 36 members of Batticaloa LIRC to improve their skills in mediation and conflict transformation. It included practical sessions to analyze conflicts and how to mediate them.

Police representatives met Vavuniya LIRC members to discuss religious tension in Mannar and Vavuniya and the preventive measures that could be taken by the LIRC, police, religious leaders and civil society leaders. The religious leaders emphasised the need for the implementation of the rule of law when incidents take place.



*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.*

## Peaceful Public Protest is a Fundamental Right

Several protests by different political parties and civil society groups on grievances facing different sectors of society have been broken up by the police. The latest was the breakup by police of a peaceful public protest by a civil society group including Joseph Stalin, head of the Ceylon Teachers Union. The protestors, including elderly women and religious clergy, were arrested by the police on grounds of violating Covid health guidelines. When the judge refused to send them to a distant COVID quarantine center, the police forcibly carried them off to be transported to an army camp in the North.

Similar undemocratic actions have quelled other protests too, such as those against the ban on chemical fertilisers which is threatening to destroy small scale farmers, corporation staff protesting against failure to pay salaries and environmental activists opposing the construction of a new power plant in an environmentally fragile area. The National Peace Council holds that the misuse of COVID health regulations to deter public protests in this manner is totally unacceptable.

At the base of democracy is the right of people to dissent and when they do so peacefully they need to be protected. As stated by the Bar Association, public protest straddles three important fundamental rights in the constitution – the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom of peaceful assembly and the freedom of association. Public protests also strengthen the freedom of thought which is entrenched as a fundamental right in the constitution. Arresting and detaining persons who are exercising their peaceful right to protest sending them to quarantine has a chilling effect on the freedom to dissent which is fundamental to democracy.

The National Peace Council welcomes the government's willingness to address the issue of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) in response to the threat of withdrawal of the GSP Plus tariff concession. However, it needs to be understood that the 27 international agreements that Sri Lanka has ratified and needs to implement for purposes of the GSP Plus are wide ranging and include human rights, labour rights, environmental protection and also governance, including corruption. In terms of these agreements, civil society groups, such as the Ceylon Teachers Union play an important watchdog role which need to be respected. Fundamental to all these is the right to express dissent in whichever legal form they choose and denial of this right is a serious violation of Fundamental Rights to which every citizen is entitled.

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