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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

March
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A Charter on Religious Freedom for a Pluralistic Society

NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project was initiated in 2017 to promote and strengthen religious freedom in the country within the framework of pluralism and rule of law. To achieve this objective, NPC established 12 inter religious platforms with the participation of the government officers, religious leaders, civil society members and community leaders representing 12 divisional secretariats. These committees share the values of religious freedom while acting as community leaders within their localities to establish religious coexistence.

During the final months of the project, a consultation process was carried out with Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) while obtaining the assistance of members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) in 16 districts and prominent religious leaders to compile a charter on ensuring the religious freedom of citizens. The charter was developed based on the opinions and suggestions derived from the discussions that were held in 2021.

The charter explains the existing obstructions to ensuring religious rights while elaborating the duties and responsibilities of different parties to promote an inclusive society where there is a space for all religious beliefs. Through developing a discussion to safeguard religious rights, NPC will urge policymakers to develop laws to establish a pluralistic society.



The first set of consultation discussions was carried out with the participation of 417 LIRC members representing 12 divisional secretariats. Following the consultations, the first draft was developed consisting of LIRCs' recommendations to strengthen religious freedom based on their experiences and opinions. The first draft was vetted by DIRCs in 16 districts.

The factors hampering religious freedom of citizens fell under three categories such as obstructions to sustaining inter religious coexistence, factions within the religious groups and hindrances by other parties.

Inter religious coexistence is crucial in sustaining reconciliation. Lack of mutual understanding and suspicion among the different religious groups have hampered religious freedom. The impact of extremist groups and conflicts weaken trust among religious groups. Misconceptions, attitudes, hate speech and establishing religious places on unnecessary sites can prevent coexistence among religious groups. Identifying the need to examine internal issues within the religious groups, the charter described how extremist ideologies, lack of understanding of their own religion, divisions among religious groups and political ideologies lead to religious conflicts. Party politics of religious leaders, unequal support of the government to different religious groups and the negative impact of social media should be addressed for long lasting religious freedom.

Emphasising the need to address existing obstructions, the charter presents a number of recommendations to policymakers and to the society including religious leaders. Highlighting the duty and responsibility of religious leaders in ensuring religious coexistence, the charter provides a comprehensive explanation. According to the charter, religious leaders should enhance the understanding of followers on the clear and accurate teachings of the religions. They should inspire their followers to respect other religions. Compilations and translations of religious teachings should be monitored by a qualified expert pool. Preventing hate speech, obtaining youth participation in religious work and taking efforts to undermine extremist ideologies are a few of the recommendations in the charter.



According to the charter, identifying the need of recognising Sri Lanka as a multi ethnic and multi religious country is needed to mitigate religious tension. The government has a responsibility to take action against misconceptions and extremist ideologies of religions. One of the key suggestions is reforming the divided school system based on religion. Following an equal policy in establishing places of worship and forming national and provincial level advisory committees with religious leaders from all faiths are also suggested.

The charter identifies the responsibility of civil society to eliminate religious discrimination. It emphasises the need to influence the government to establish a proper mechanism to strengthen religious cohesion among different communities and establish a society where all religions are equally respected.

Improving Lives of People in the Estate sector

NPC has launched a new project to uplift socio economic conditions in the plantation sector and neighbouring village youths in collaboration with its partner organization PDF-Kegalle, funded by Freedom House.

The project focuses on improving the conditions of people live in four estates in Dehiovita and Yatiyantota through inclusive service delivery targetting women and youth. Underprivileged women will be educated on their rights and receive knowledge and skills for livelihood development through government channels. Estate youths will get opportunities to develop their skills through government run vocational training institutes to find better employment opportunities elsewhere.

PDF also conducted a workshop for 40 women on the rights of women and the role of the parents in helping their children to find vocational training opportunities. This was followed by a discussion on assistance available through government agencies on livelihood development.

The estate people who attended the meeting appreciated the commitment of PDF and NPC in providing assistance to them. With the interest shown by beneficiaries, government officers mentioned their willingness to work with NPC and PDF in future.



Educating Youth to Fight Extremism

Under its project Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE), NPC held training programmes in Mannar, Vavuniya, Kandy and Kurunegala for 160 Divisional level youth including National Youth Council members, university students, youth parliamentarians and youth club members.

Participants learnt about the actors and drivers of extremism, push and pull factors, the context of post independence politics, JVP insurrections, Tamil minority alienation, Easter Sunday attacks and planning for PVE intervention activity.

During group activities, participants identified the issues polarising different religious and ethnic communities including drug use, unemployment, social media narratives, child abuse, land encroachment and the cost of living.

Participants recommended activities to counter these issues such as video campaigns on social media and information sessions.

“Young people are the backbone of society. They have the power to change the future but they did not realise it. With the right education and awareness, young people can be saved from taking the wrong path. These programmes make a contribution to that. As young leaders, we have a responsibility to work to prevent violent extremism. The knowledge we gained can be passed on to our other members,” said Kavidu Perera from the Kandy District.

“Ethnic and religious conflicts in society are created based on political factors that have turned religion and nationality into weapons to create violence. As young people, we can make a positive contribution to build a counter narrative to prevent violent extremism, especially through the use of social media,” said Mohamed Azwer from the Vavuniya District.



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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.

Find Answers Through Genuine Discussions

Sharp increases in prices of basic commodities, accompanied by shortages, have severely impacted upon the standard of living of the general population and even prompted the government to call out the army to maintain social peace where queues have formed, as at petrol stations. The All Party Conference (APC) presided over by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has taken place in this context of an unprecedented economic crisis in the country.

The boycott of the APC by the main opposition parties and even by a section within the government highlights the sharp political divisions and lack of trust within the polity. The president recognized this reality when he stated that the conference was not called to gain a political advantage. He added that he would once again invite the parties that did not attend the conference. The president also said that he would prepare a plan to carry out the recommendations made by the political party leaders.

The National Peace Council appreciates the approach of finding solutions through discussions. President Rajapaksa's apology to former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe after a government member tried to score political points against the former government was in keeping with his stated commitment to make this an occasion for non-partisan problem solving. The president's meeting with the TNA today must also lead to further discussions and action on the ground in the area of national reconciliation that will help to strengthen economic investment and aid flows to the country.

We call on the other political parties to join the next round of discussions. Unlike the parliamentary forum in which the government and opposition sit on opposite sides, the need of the present time is to agree on a policy for the country that will resolve the economic problems that the people face and which all political parties can endorse for the longer term irrespective of who leads the government. This time of crisis demands sincerity, commitment and mutual accommodation on partisan political positions for the sake of the people.

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