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கிலங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

May
2022

Fostering Understanding and Tolerance Among Children

A reconciliation event organized by Kegalle District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) was held in Kegalle with the participation of 73 Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim school children in order to build trust between the different ethnic groups. DIRCs are supported by Misereor.

Several activities were carried out to bring about reconciliation including presenting dance forms representing different ethnicities as well as explanations on the cultural aspects of the dances so that the children could understand and respect different traditions. It also showed that language was not a hindrance to enjoyment.

The next activity was to show participants how different types of food are made and their history. Konda kavum representing the Sinhala community, idli representing the Tamil community and samosas representing the Muslim community were prepared at the venue. "I have eaten all three dishes. But I did not know about them. This experience is different," said a Muslim girl. Food also provides an insight into other cultures.

Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim children worked together to plant fruit plant trees on the school premises. The school appointed a teacher and three children to take care of each plant. After that there was a lecture on the history of reconciliation in Sri Lanka followed by group activities.

The reconciliation programme created an environment to bring about understanding between ethnic groups. The next step is to achieve the goal of a positive peace. The programme was designed to identify problems in the area and provide solutions for the underlying causes.



Promoting Pluralism at Community Level

Two new Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) were established in Mawanella in the Kegalle District and Bandarawela in the Badulla Districts under NPC's Action for Religions Coexistence (ARC) project supported by the US State Department. They become part of a LIRC network in 12 locations set up and maintained through the now concluded Community Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project. The new locations were selected after consultations with ground level organizations working in peace, reconciliation and human rights, a review of incidents of violence reported in media outlets and NPC's other work.

Setting up LIRCs in these locations enables NPC to expand the inter religious network to areas where Malaiyaha Tamils live in tea plantations. Their inclusion into the dialogue on religious freedom was identified as an important aspect during the previous CERF engagement as they are often overlooked in the larger decision making process.

LIRCs are home grown, community-led mechanisms that are able to mitigate localised ethnic and religious issues and create a conducive environment for religious freedom and coexistence. They are operating in Addalaichenai, Akurana, Batticaloa, Beruwala, Kuliypitiya, Mannar, Negombo, Panduwasnuwara, Rakwana, Trincomalee, Vavuniya and Weligama. They include multi religious leaders, state officials at the sub national level, police officers attached to the community policing structure, members of civil society organizations and community members.

In Mawanella and Bandarawela, the ARC project team worked closely with local partners to identify relevant and suitable members for the new LIRCs. They will be capacitated on issues such as pluralism, gender, facilitation and mediation, community policing and rule of law.

Youth wings were included into the ARC intervention to encourage youth activism. The youth, who are between 19 and 29 years old, will be mentored by LIRC members and encouraged to understand and apply knowledge gained to their work. It is envisaged that these youth wings will become community intermediaries and contribute to the discourse on pluralism and religious freedom. Members include youth parliament members and university students.



Preventing extremism and violence is the one of the main objectives of creating the youth wings that can be used as community intermediaries for counselling exercises. Selected members will be given training on pluralism, rule of law, religious freedom, preventing hate speech and prevention of violence extremism.

Dilan Gamage, a member of the youth parliament from Mawanella said, “This is a timely programme since we do not get many chances to work for coexistence. Young people need to learn about coexistence, rule of law and other issues related to reconciliation.”

In Bandarawela, Venerable Adhikarana Sanganayake, principal of the Liyangahawela school said, “Ethnic and religious conflicts are created to achieve different political agendas. The Buddha did not use religion to divide the community; he accepted everyone regardless of the ethnicity, class or caste. Like the Buddha we must also accept all religions and ethnic groups and use this committee is further inter religious work in the area.”

Learning About Preventing Violent Extremism

Under its project Prevention of Violent Extremism Capacity Building in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, NPC held workshops in Kurunegala, Ampara, Batticaloa, Vavuniya and Mannar for 173 representatives of civil society organizations, religious leaders, youth, state sector officials and community police.

The project aims to identify and analyse the intentions of dominant narratives in the context of violent extremism in districts, identify actors creating violent extremism and responding with counter narratives.

The workshops were facilitated by Kasun Sankalpa, a social media analyst with Hashtag Generation. Participants learnt about identifying harmful narratives and distinguishing the differences among them. They were taught about freedom of expression within local and international legal frameworks and were able to develop counter narratives avoiding stereotyping and discrimination.

These stories were identified by participants as ones that could foster extremism:

- The Muslim population is increasing in the Ampara district and they will take state lands belonging to Tamils and Sinhalese
- Mannar is only for Hindus
- The Mannar economy is controlled by the Katankudi Muslims so don't allow them to do any business
- Tamil women will be harassed by Muslims



Vocational Training to Uplift Marginalised Communities

Under NPC's Freedom House Project, its Kegalle partner organization People's Development Foundation (PDF), in collaboration with the Government Vocational Training Centers (VET), conducted a vocational training programme for marginalised youth in the plantation sector and helped them to get government support such as monthly season tickets. The project aims to uplift the socio-economic conditions of plantation and neighbouring village youth.

Sixteen youth were selected from Sapumalkanda Estate. An awareness meeting was conducted for the youth and their parents to advise them of the support to be gained from government officials. NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera handed over the season tickets to the youth for the month of May at the meeting.

Ms. Sharmila Jinath, Plantation Community Development Officer of Dehiowita Divisional Secretariat, explained the services provided by the Divisional Secretariat office for the development of the plantation community and promised her support to the project. Mr. Rohana Jayalath, Vocational Training Development Officer of Dehiowita Divisional Secretariat, spoke on the types of vocational training opportunities they could bring to the villages.

N. Janani, a vocational trainee, said that with the training and guidance she received during the programme, she was now confident that she could become a nurse.

S. Sajeewan said he joined an air conditioner repair course and was sure of earning a good income for his family. He added that most of the students at the Batangala Vocational Training Center where he had studied were Sinhalese and he was the only Tamil student from the plantation sector. The Sinhalese students had treated him well.

Other courses offered included beauty culture, baking, mobile phone repair and motor mechanics. The youth and their parents were grateful for the opportunities given by PDF.



Linking State Services to an Alienated Community

The economic crisis in the country has thrust large sections of the people into poverty. Official inflation rates are in the region of 40 %. But the price increases of many essentials have exceeded 100 to 200 %. As a result the effective income of the people has been halved. The impact is worst felt by those who are paid by the day and on fixed incomes. Those who work on the plantations constitute a very large group. Among the ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, the up country (or Malaiyaha) Tamils are notable for being historically discriminated. They are 4.12 % of the total population according to the Department of Census and Statistics Survey of 2012.

Up country Tamils have suffered long standing, systematic discrimination in university education, government employment, housing, health services, language laws, and procedures for naturalisation of noncitizens. Tomoya Obokata, UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery has noted that “Malaiyaha Tamils who were brought from India to work in the plantation sector 200 years ago continue to face multiple forms of discrimination based on their origin.”

After much struggle they succeeded in getting an income of Rs.1,000 per day which is less than 50 % of the market wages for labour outside of the plantation sector. Furthermore, this wage comes with many conditions by plantation companies which often prevent them from earning this amount. They have been unable to fully utilise this benefit, if it could be called such, as there is a lack of work. The fall in agricultural output due to the ill-advised fertiliser ban has given them fewer days of work.

After deductions for loans they have taken, some of them get about Rs.10,000 per month take home pay. In these circumstances, youth living on the plantations look for options outside their traditional sources of employment in the tea and rubber estates. NPC supported the People’s Development Foundation (PDF) in Kegalle to provide plantation youth with vocational training through the government’s vocational training programme. What was noteworthy about this initiative was that it took place by linking the state delivery system with the plantation management and the communities in a tripartite relationship through the facilitation of civil society.

The educational opportunities for estate children are abysmal. Three of the youth selected for vocational training had sat for their O’Level examination but had failed on three successive occasions to pass it due to their failure in the subject of mathematics. The vocational training programme facilitated by PDF gave them access to study the Korean language with an opportunity to work in Korea, to learn sewing, hairdressing and horticulture. These opened up new horizons to the youth.

The second positive feature of this initiative is that it linked the state official in charge of vocational training with the estate community. Prior to this activity they had never visited Sapumalkanda estate. But now that the linkage had been made by PDF, the relevant state officials expressed their willingness to arrange for regular visits. They even said they could arrange for vocational training to take place on the estate itself providing there was sufficient interest on the part of the estate children.

Bus fare to the town costs about Rs.500 per day on the private bus. The state bus service offers a monthly ticket for Rs. 2,900, but there are days when it does not run. Then the private bus becomes the only option. So the offer to hold training programmes on the estate itself is a great boon if it materialises. Through this initiative PDF has played the role of a civil society catalyst and bridgebuilder between the state and the people that reduces frustration and increases trust and social capital in society.

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.

People's Mandate Needed to Address National Crisis

The people are undergoing unprecedented hardships at the current time. There is a disjuncture between what government leaders have been saying and what is materializing. Assurances are being made that shiploads of fuel have been unloaded. However, many service stations remain closed and those open have lines stretching for kilometers even overnight. The small 15-member interim government drawn from all parties that was promised by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resolve the present crisis was not appointed. Now the government appears to be heading towards a large sized one dominated by the ruling party with a full complement of ministers and state ministers.

It seems to be the case that the present composition of parliament will not permit good governance. This is plainly the belief of those who continue to peacefully protest against the government in person at various protest sites. This is also the feeling of the many citizens who protest in their hearts and minds wherever they live and work. It is distressing that 19 of 27 hours of parliament time was spent to discuss the burned houses of the politicians. If this continues no one will be able to prevent this country from going to a situation of severe anarchy which will lead to further political upheavals and injury to people not only by violence but by hunger as well.

The National Peace Council is dismayed at the appointment of 23 new secretaries to ministries by the president, all of whom belong to the ethnic majority community. This insensitive action will not be conducive to promote a sense of belonging to the ethnic and religious minorities who constitute nearly one third of the population of the country. We are also dismayed that public minded citizens who volunteered to give evidence regarding the violence used against peaceful protestors in front of the prime minister's official residence and the presidential secretariat have had their passports impounded. This makes it seem as if the victim has become the accused.

The National Peace Council notes that the appointment of four cabinet spokespersons will not assure the people or the international community that a cohesive and stable government is in place. In this context we are concerned that the World Bank has issued a statement that they will not be in a position to financially assist the country until an adequate macroeconomic policy framework is in place for which political stability and unity is a prerequisite. The National Peace Council calls for elections to be held as soon as possible to enable the people to give a fresh mandate to those who will bring about change. We believe a government with a new mandate can win the confidence of the Sri Lankan people and the international community to get the country out of the quagmire it is in.

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