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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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DIRCs Provide Relief to Covid-19 Casualties Hit by Curfew

Under NPC's Covid-19 relief programme, the Matara District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) organized the supply of dry rations to estate workers in Deniyaya who have been affected by the curfew imposed to stop the spread of the virus. The programme is funded by the Canadian government under its Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CLFI).

Estate workers living in the Southern Province are mostly daily labourers who earn their livelihood by doing jobs on the estates. Some are housed on company land others while others live in surrounding areas. Earlier this year they did not have work because of a severe drought; now they are unable to work because of the pandemic and as a result, are unable to feed their families.

When NPC initiated the Covid-19 relief food programme, Matara DIRC asked NPC to consider assisting marginalised families living in the outskirts of the district. Matara DIRC members Mr. K.S. Lankathilaka and Mr. V. Udaykumar spearheaded the donation to the estate community in Deniyaya, where they distributed 25 packs of dry rations that included rice, flour, noodles, biscuits, sugar and essentials items such as soap and toothpaste.

S. Selvakumari said, "I have four young children. My husband is a labourer on an estate. His elderly parents live us. When we were suffering from a lack of food and money, the company gave us only a food pack on credit, so this donation by NPC and the Canadian donor is very valuable and we are extremely thankful."



S. Rajeswary said, “I have five children and I work as a labourer on an estate. Last week a religious organization distributed food packs only to their followers. I did not receive one because I am a Hindu but we are also suffering from a food shortage just like everyone else in the area. I am thankful to the DIRC and NPC for supplying food for all of us in need, regardless of religion and ethnicity.”

Galle DIRC supplied dry ration packs to orphanages, elders’ homes and long term care institutions under NPC’s Covid-19 relief programme funded by CLFI.

Galle DIRC worked closely with relevant government officials, including Social Services Officer M.F. Sharmila from the Bentota Divisional Secretariat, who helped to identify families that were struggling due to the curfew restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the virus.

“The Sugatha Elders’ Care Centre is run with minimum funds; it has 85 residents. When the curfew was imposed, the home was unable to find enough food items to feed the residents. They had no milk powder. I thank NPC and the Canadian donor for this kind act of providing rations during these troubled times,” Ms Sharmila said.

The Sambodhi Children’s Home was having difficulties even before the curfew. A philanthropist had founded the home and was supporting it but after his death, the funds stopped. The 30 children, who are differently-abled, were fed by donations from neighbours, which came to a halt during curfew, so the gift of dry rations was received with much appreciation.

Fifty packs of dry rations worth Rs. 52,000 were provided to low income families in Kurunagala affected by the curfew under NPC’s Covid-19 relief programme implemented with funds from CFLI.

The beneficiaries included estate employees and garment workers who were at a factory that has stopped operating due to the curfew. The garment workers are unable to return to their home towns and have no food or money to purchase food.

Since they were not from the area, they were not eligible to receive the Rs. 5,000 in aid given by the government nor did they get any other relief.



“Before the start of the pandemic I was employed in a shop and my mother worked as a labourer in an office. My father is an invalid. When curfew was imposed my mother and I lost our incomes and our employers did not help us. We survived on the generosity of our neighbours, who would provide us with a little food. We received the rations from NPC when we were suffering and completely helpless. We are extremely grateful to Kurunagala DIRC, NPC and the Canadian donor for thinking about us during these difficult times,” said Shanika Swarnamali Ranathunga from Mawathagama.

“I am a 65-year-old mason and I am a daily wage worker. When the curfew was declared, I was unable to earn money for my family. I have four daughters who tried to find work but failed because of the strict curfew regulations and social distancing rules. We had absolutely no means of income and we couldn’t rely on our neighbours to help because we live in a poor area where everyone is suffering. We did not receive any relief from the government and our Grama Niladari couldn’t help us either so we are grateful for the dry rations pack we received from NPC and the Canadian donor and thankful to Kurunagala DIRC for coming to help us in these troubled times,” said Dharmalingam Karuppayya from Mawathagama.

Hambantota DIRC members supplied Rs. 100,000 worth of dry rations to low income families living in the Tangalle and Hambantota areas with funds donated to NPC by Misereor.

One beneficiary family in Tangalle consisted of four differently-abled members who were in wheelchairs. They had been unable to earn any money selling lottery tickets during the curfew. They were grateful for the provisions they received. They also made a request for new wheelchairs as theirs were old and worn.

Another family was headed by a widow with three school-going daughters. They had been surviving during the curfew period through the generosity of friends and relatives, and were happy to receive the rations.

In another family, the wife was paralysed and the husband, a daily wage earner, was deprived of his income, so the ration pack was welcome.



“I am 75 years old and I make money by selling food. I also have cancer, which makes it even harder for me to go out and earn my daily wages, so am grateful for this donation from NPC and the donor. It is impossible for me to earn any money during the curfew and when people are afraid to eat food from outside their homes,” said I. Kandaiyya.

“My husband used to be a daily wage worker but he was attacked by an elephant and is now an invalid. Because I have to look after him and my elderly mother, I am unable to work. We were suffering even before the curfew but with this new situation, we are completely helpless. We are thankful to Hambantota DIRC for recognising our hardships and for coming to our home to give us the food pack,” said W.G. Aulawathi.

All the families that were selected for NPC’s Covid-19 relief programme were either disabled, widowed or persons suffering from long term illnesses who have been working as daily wage earners and as a result are unable to earn an income and feed their families.

Celebrating Vesak and Eid in Times of Covid-19

Celebrations for Vesak, a significant event for Buddhists and Eid, the end of the fasting period for Muslims, could not be held on a large scale because of the prohibition of large gatherings and the curfew imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

To make up for this, religious leaders of the Weligama Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) decided to display banners instead of conducting public inter faith events for the Vesak and Eid festivals.

The banners were a collaborative effort of LIRC, Shashanarakshaka Bala Mandalaya, Jammeithul Ulama Committee and the Divisional Secretariat of Weligama.

“Let us celebrate Buddha Jayanthi concentrating on national unity with our sincere hearts,” was the message on a banner for Vesak, which was displayed in the town. It stated that Sri Lankans should rise up as a nation to face the Covid-19 crisis by forgetting differences and respecting each other. It urged people to follow the health instructions given by the government while celebrating Vesak.

The message of Weligama LIRC for Eid, which said, “Let’s rise up as one nation and let us pray for our country and the world to overcome the Covid-19 pandemic”, was displayed in public places including mosques.



Bridging the Language Divide for Unity and Reconciliation

A new project titled Language to Reconcile (L2R) will be launched in June funded by the National Languages Equality Advancement Project (NLEAP), which is supported by the Canadian government. The issue of language was a key dividing factor in the early years of Sri Lanka's independence and one of the root causes of the ethnic conflict that escalated into a three decade-long internal war.

The proposal deals with both the practical and nation building aspects of language. The practical dimension stems from the need of citizens to be able to communicate with the state in their own language. The inability of citizens to engage in business with the state in their language and resolve their problems or access resources will cause them to be marginalised and frustrated. Unless this is contained, it can become a focus for future conflict with the state.

The nation building dimension arises because language is the means of communication between people of different ethnicities and religions who may otherwise remain in isolation from one another. A significant part of the population lives in ethnically and religiously mixed surroundings.

But the fact that they live side-by-side does not guarantee that they will engage with one another. Especially due to the legacy of protracted ethnic conflict and the more recent spike in inter religious tensions, there is also a need for structured engagements rather than to rely on spontaneous engagements.

The project that is envisaged has three inter related components that mutually nourish one another. The first component will be one of creating awareness and thereby building the capacity of the targeted groups about the relevance and importance of the Official Language Policy and the language rights framework. This will include gaining an understanding of the language mechanisms, policy gaps and implementation difficulties and their impacts upon state delivery.

The second component will be to conduct language audits of three main institutions in each area in which the project will be implemented - Akurana in the Kandy District, Beruwela in the Kalutara District and Trincomalee in the Trincomalee District.

The audit of key institutions such as hospitals, police stations and local government authorities will identify the bottlenecks that prevent the Official Language Policy from being implemented in them. This will include an assessment of possible remedial actions that can be taken at the local level and what might require action at the central level.

The third component of the project is the strengthening of the nation building process. In the past language has been used to divide the communities and to assert the dominance of one over the other.

In this project, language will be used as a tool for unifying and reconciliation and will cater to the need for community level second language learning and be combined with structured interactions in the form of language camps and exchange visits.

Preventing Violent Extremism At the Community Level

A new intervention funded by the European Union (EU) to strengthen Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to prevent violent extremism (PVE) in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka will be implemented in Sri Lanka by NPC with support from Helvetas.

The intervention is part of the EU's support to civil society actors in promoting confidence building and preventing radicalisation in South Asia. It is being implemented in the districts of Vavuniya, Mannar, Ampara, Batticaloa, Kandy and Kurunagala.

The project will engage Sri Lankan and Bangladesh CSOs and their actors in PVE in their constituencies. In both countries, there is insufficient knowledge and understanding of PVE. Civil society actors will be technically equipped to adapt and mainstream PVE to the specific community contexts based on the insights resulting from the cross-country learnings and institutional dialogue.

It is envisaged that through the intervention, CSOs in both countries will be able to prevent violent extremism in their respective countries in the long term. PVE has to be approached from the perspective of push and pull factors bringing into focus the need for a layered response.

Both in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, it is civil society that looks at issues of PVE from a long term perspective in contrast to the short term national security focused approaches taken by political parties and state actors for political gains.

In both countries the respective governments apply a heavy-handed securitisation approach to counter violent extremism utilising law enforcement mechanisms and use political instigation of ethnic and religious polarisation to secure electoral support.

The project focuses on CSOs as repositories of value-based approaches to PVE that emphasise the importance of pluralism in practice and rule of law through community level capacity building and dialogue to create counter narratives to prevent radicalisation and promote tolerance and social cohesion across various social, political and religious divides.

Specific activities to be carried out in Sri Lanka include a structured learning conference on PVE with international resource persons; a training of trainers on PVE to set up a national resource pool; capacitation of CSOs, members of NPC's Local Inter Religious Committees, local government state sector service delivery institutions, law enforcement and youth on PVE through trainings; and follow on activities with police, targeted state institutions and youth to address violent extremism in their localities.

In addition, dominant narratives from the project districts specific to particular ethno-religious groups and collective groups will be identified and district and national level campaigns will be carried out to engage local communities, especially targeted youth, to share counter narratives to prevailing dominant narratives.

NPC will produce target specific training modules on PVE using local and internationally available resource material, drawing in from different perspectives, case studies and tools.

Including Youth in Reconciliation and Dialogue Process

A new project titled Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP) commenced in May with support from GIZ (Germany). The project engages university students and community youth to make them aware of issues of pluralism and inter community relations and to increase their skills to address these issues.

Youth have traditionally been a volatile sector of Sri Lankan society engaging in insurrections and in the civil war that lasted three decades. A part of the reason has been the lack of inclusion of youth in dialogue processes, which makes them susceptible to misinformation and propaganda. There has been little focused work with youth on the issues of inter ethnic justice and the necessity of pluralism in a multi ethnic and multi religious polity.

The four universities selected to implement the project are the Jaffna, Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa and Eastern universities. The students and community youth will design and implement their own actualisation tools such as debating championships, art competitions and folklore events.

The objective of the project is to positively influence the public discourse about pluralism and inter community relations in order to strengthen the reconciliation process in Sri Lanka.

There will be a focus on pluralism in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious or social groups maintain and develop their traditional culture or special interests within the sphere of a common citizenship in which they have an equal voice.

The project is a follow up to an initiative funded by the UN Peacebuilding Fund and implemented by NPC from 2017 to 2019 to promote peacebuilding among youth across Sri Lanka in which more than 1,500 youth from 12 universities and 21 districts were trained on peacebuilding.

COMPACT Begins After Covid-19 Curfew

The Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) project will begin its regular meetings, which had stopped during the Covid-19 lockdown, while adhering to all health advisory rules.

During the islandwide lockdown, all 16 DIRCs carried out relief programmes for selected beneficiaries including low income earning families, those who are differently-abled, widowed or suffering from long term illnesses and daily wage workers deprived of their earnings. The DIRCs also provided relief packs to selected orphanages, elders' homes and long term care institutions that were struggling to provide for their residents during the curfew.

The COMPACT team will first attend DIRC meetings in nearby districts. The meetings will focus on the theme of democratic values and how to protect democracy, and consider how Sri Lanka should go forward in the context of the forthcoming general election.

Participants will examine the importance of protecting the 19th Amendment to maintain democracy in the country and issues of racism in Sri Lanka. NPC will also discuss how DIRCs can help the local communities that faced economic difficulties due to the pandemic to adapt and find a more stable situation.

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.

Solidarity in the Time of Covid

The lifting of the day time curfew in all parts of the country from the beginning of this week reflects the government's determination and confidence to restore normalcy to the lives of people. This government decision will be welcomed especially by those whose very livelihoods depend on the economic and social transactions that normalcy makes possible. However, Health Services Director General Anil Jasinghe has warned that although the government had relaxed the curfew the situation is not normalised hundred per cent and curfews are continuing. This suggests the need to continue with Covid relief measures to assist those who continue to find it difficult to earn their livelihood and provide sustenance to their dependents.

During the past two months, the National Peace Council with several other civil society organisations were part of a Civil Society Collective that operated with the support of the Presidential Task Force on Covid Response. This group was specifically mandated to provide humanitarian assistance to institutions that provide care to children, elders and the disabled. NPC deployed its country-wide network of 21 District level Inter-Religious Committees (DIRCs), 12 Local Inter-Religious Committees (LIRCs) and 11 Human Rights First Aid Centres (HRFACs) to provide humanitarian assistance to affected families and social welfare institutions in their areas.

Through these efforts 3,579 low income families, 5,680 persons including persons with disabilities and special needs residing in orphanages and old people's homes and 440 families from marginalised community groups including persons with disabilities and members of female-headed households were supported up to April 30, 2020. These families consisted mainly of daily income earners with little or no savings. NPC also provided assistance to 42 institutions in Colombo and to 86 institutions in other parts of the country. Engaging in humanitarian activities helped strengthen local level voluntary bodies to further collaborate across ethnic and religious divides, and has also induced them to engage in follow up activities on their own.

We are glad to note that government agencies were of support not only during the goods distribution process but also the beneficiary identification process helping to prioritise particular localities and communities. Such cooperation was beneficial to maximize the impact of the efforts of the civil society organisations and to mitigate the suffering of those worst affected. Major dislocations have been caused to large segments of the population especially those workers who have lost their jobs to their workplaces either shutting down or having to downsize which has compelled them to return to their hometowns and villages. This applies also to migrant workers. In time to come our society will be judged by how we treated the least fortunate among us including those waiting to return to Sri Lanka from abroad. We call for a larger societal commitment with leadership by the government to address the continuing humanitarian issues.

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