



Paths to Peace

A monthly newsletter from the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

NPC Supports Events on Torture Victims Day

NPC supported two of its partners who organised events to commemorate the UN's International Day in Support of Torture Victims, which fell on June 26.

The Committee Investigation Disappearances (CID) held a People's Tribunal in Colombo, which included a panel discussion with human rights lawyers Dr. Nimalka Fernando and Sudarshana Gunawardena, Governing Council member of the NPC and former civil servant Raja Senanayake, and local governmental authority member Ven. Watareka Vijith Thero. About 60 human rights defenders and civil society activists attended the event.

Torture victims from Jaffna, Muttur, Mannar and Panadura told their stories. They were still suffering from mental and physical scars due to the abuse and were waiting to obtain justice.

Mr. Gunewardena and Dr. Fernando discussed the lacuna in the judicial system to address acts of torture, punishing perpetrators - especially authorities guilty of torture, solutions to obtain justice and reparations and the role played by human rights defenders to support victims of torture.

Ven. Watareka Vijith shared his experience as a torture victim and said that he would continue to support any measures to prevent torture and build peace among ethnicities.

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"I was arrested as a suspected LTTE cadre by the security forces and I was tortured. They released me for rehabilitation. I was re-arrested and detained in Boosa where I was tortured again. My experiences were so painful that I can't talk about them. I can't work properly because one leg is damaged. There are many detainees still being tortured. I want to tell the government to stop this practice immediately."

A woman torture victim

Towards a Shared Future

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A torture victim himself, NSSP leader Dr. Vikramabahu

Karunaratne described his experience as a political prisoner and the abuse he underwent at the hands of the police. He said that because people did not do enough to prevent torture or speak against it, it continued to plague society.



The second event was a seminar in Ja-ela to create awareness on the recently passed Victim and Witness Protection Act, organised by the Citizens Committee Gampaha District. About 70 people including victims, human rights defenders and civil society leaders participated in the seminar.

The Act sets out rights and entitlements of victims of crime and witnesses and promotes their rights and entitlements. The Act gives effect to appropriate international norms, standards and best practices relating to the protection of victims of crime and witnesses and also provides for the establishment of the national authority in this connection.

At both events, NPC distributed its poster against torture produced under the Promoting Accountability and Preventing Torture by Strengthening Survivors in Asia project. The events were also funded through the project, which is run by Asia Justice and Rights and financed by the EU. It is being implemented in Indonesia, Timor Leste, Myanmar and Sri Lanka.



"In the name of humanity let's end all forms of torture."

Are you:

A minor

A woman

A man

An innocent

A suspect

Or a criminal?

Whoever you are, you have the supreme and irrevocable right to live free from physical and mental torture."

NPC's poster against torture

DIRC Highlights Plight of NE Estate Workers

Nuwara Eliya District Inter Religious Committee organised a public procession in Hatton to draw attention to the plight of estate workers, who have faced hardship and discrimination for generations.

In the past several years public demonstrations, especially by members of the ethnic Tamil minority, were suppressed by the government but with the change in January 2015, there has been a more liberal attitude that permitted civil society groups to be public in their work.

However, the organisers took precautions to ensure a peaceful day. Before the march, slogans were carefully scrutinized. Those who took part in the march, numbering about 200, distributed leaflets to the public calling for the grant of 20 perches of land for the plantation Tamil people to be able to own their own homes. They also called for the provision of more employment opportunities and the protection of children whose parents had to go afar for work.

The day's events concluded with a public meeting at the Hatton Municipal Council. At the meeting the organisers explained how the government had promised that land would be distributed to members of the plantation Tamil community who had been displaced by an irrigation project but the government had failed to deliver on its promise. Seven perches of land was insufficient, and it had not been given by the government but by plantation companies on behalf of their existing management.

Hatton is the main city of the plantation Tamil community, those of recent Indian origin who were brought down to work on the tea plantations by the British during the colonial period. For the first three decades after Independence was achieved in 1948, most of the plantation Tamils were denied the right of citizenship. They could not vote at elections and were overlooked by successive governments. The heritage of this discrimination still continues to affect them to their detriment.



News From The Field

The city of Jaffna has not had many Buddhist civilians in recent times. The three decades of internal war reduced their numbers significantly. As a result the Naga Vihara in Jaffna city is dependent on the alms of Buddhist pilgrims from the south and the security forces stationed in Jaffna.

Due to the importance of the Naga Vihara, the Governor of the Northern Province donated Rs 100,000 to its chief monk, Ven. Sirivimala, to use it for a constructive purpose during the Vesak period.

Ven. Sirivimala is one of the four co-presidents of the Jaffna DIRC. He discussed the Governor's offer with his fellow members and they jointly agreed to conduct a Vesak pandal competition in the schools.

DIRC members contacted the provincial school authorities to have the competition. The prize giving took place in the main cultural centre of the Hindu community in Jaffna. It was attended by representatives of the Governor's office, the Provincial Council and civil society.

The most significant feature of the event was the goodwill and cooperation that was generated between the representatives of the central government, provincial government and civil society.

One of the prize winning students who spoke at the event said that she got to know the Buddhist religion better as a result of taking part in the competition. The hope was expressed that the model set by the Jaffna DIRC would be replicated in other districts as well, so that the religious and cultural traditions of the minority communities in those districts would also be celebrated in the manner of Jaffna.



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.

Election Manifestos Need to Address On going Problems

The dissolution of Parliament became necessary due to the political deadlock between the government and opposition. The UNP-led government appointed by President Maithripala Sirisena was unable to get through the necessary legislation to govern effectively. The president was not able to deliver on some of the important promises he made in his election manifesto, including the passage of the 20th Amendment and the Right to Information Act due to the lack of cooperation between the government and opposition. As a result most of the unresolved issues that existed prior to the presidential election continue to be relevant, such as the need for a Freedom of Information Act. In particular, the main conflict that Sri Lanka has grappled with since its independence, the ethnic conflict, remains unresolved. The chances of a durable peace in Sri Lanka will be slim as long as feuding politicians do not resolve the issues but use the unresolved conflict as part of their political arsenal.

The brief lived UNP-led government that was formed after the presidential election gave an indication of the progress that is possible in taking the country in a new direction in terms of conflict transformation. In particular, the lifting of the fear psychosis that held society in thrall and the steps towards the reintegration of the ethnic and religious minorities into the mainstream of society were virtually instantaneous, due to the shift in the policy and outlook of the new president and the government. Both of them publicly acknowledged the multi ethnic and multi religious nature of the polity and the value of adhering to internationally recognised systems of good governance.

General elections are expected to take place in mid August. Election campaigns provide the greatest opportunity for public education. The National Peace Council urges the political parties to address the key issues that Sri Lanka as a country needs to resolve in their party manifestos. These are the issues of a just political solution to the ethnic conflict and the dealing with the problems of accountability for wartime violations of people's rights. We recognise that these are sensitive issues. However, the resolution of these problems must be done in consultation with the people and not by ignoring or bypassing them. The solutions should not be sprung on the people after the elections. Technical solutions of power sharing and truth and reconciliation commissions are as important as the practice of genuine democracy and good governance at all levels which gives legitimacy to the decisions of the government.

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