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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

Promoting Religious Freedom Locally

January
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Two new Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) in Trincomalee and Rakwana were set up under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The CERF project is aimed at promoting religious freedom within the framework of pluralism and the rule of law and is being implemented in the Vavuniya, Mannar, Kandy, Badulla, Kalutara, Gampaha, Matara and Ampara districts.

During the 24-month project, local inter religious groups are engaging with police officials to ensure that people are able to practice their religion freely in areas identified as possible sites of tension. The lessons learnt will be taken to national and local levels for replication.

In Trincomalee, the inauguration of the LIRC was attended by religious leaders, community police officers, Grama Sevaka officers and civil society activists.

Trincomalee Divisional Secretary, Mr. J. S. Arulraj, said that the formation of the LIRC was necessary because the different ethnic and religious communities mistrusted and feared each other. "Although there are no serious religious tensions in Trincomalee, NPC's initiative will bring all communities together in order to maintain a safe environment for all," he said.



Participants pointed out that despite living side-by-side, the different communities did not engage with each other.

Religious leaders expressed their support for the project, which they said paved the way for cooperation among religious leaders and their communities.

Also under the CERF project, an orientation meeting was held to explain the project details and to develop an action plan to set up the Rakwana LIRC. The meeting was attended by religious leaders, government officers and NGO and CBO representatives as well as media personnel.

The Godakawela Divisional Secretary, Ms. D.P.G. Renuka, said that it was important to set up a local level platform to promote religious coexistence in Rakwana, which was home to different religious and ethnic groups. She expressed her willingness to support the LIRC. Many participants emphasised the need for building trust and understanding across all religious and ethnic communities in the area.

Chief Incumbent of the Sabaragamu Province Vihare, Ven. Panane Saddathissa Thero, said that it was everyone's duty to bring people from all religious and ethnic communities together for social cohesion. He added that Rakwana LIRC would play a significant role to promote religious pluralism in the area.

One issue discussed at the meeting was unethical conversions to Christianity for money. However, it was pointed out that conversion was a matter of religious freedom.

Spreading the Message of Pluralism

Under NPC's project Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT), refresher workshops on pluralism were conducted for selected District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) members from Jaffna and Vavuniya and Kegalle and Kandy.

During the first session of the workshops, participants are told what pluralism was and how it could be practiced in their daily lives through different activities.

The next day was spent discussing the role of DIRC members in promoting pluralism through their day to day activities in the form of respect for diversity, tolerance of the other and not using the majority principal to overpower ethnic and religious minorities.

Participants said that they were able to understand the concept easily because of the simple methods used by the resource persons to explain the principles of pluralism.

They said that one of the biggest obstacles to spreading pluralistic attitudes within the society was political influence, so it was important to educate political leaders on pluralism and its value in a country such as Sri Lanka.

They added that religious leaders should also be told of pluralistic concepts and that religion could help in spreading the message to the public.

Reaching Larger Numbers to Promote Harmony and Coexistence

A solidarity visit was conducted to Horowpothana organized by Anuradhapura DIRC on the request of Ven. Yakaweva Jinarathana Thero, the Chief incumbent of the temple in the area. This was under NPC's project ACE Actively Countering Extremism (ACE) funded by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI).

More than 80 Sinhala and Muslim people along with their children gathered in the temple. During the morning session the children were told about the importance of living in ethnic and religious harmony in order to develop a peaceful and developed country. Religious leaders shared their views and carried out an interactive session with the children and adults.

In the evening participants played various games and activities with each other, which enabled them to build trust and find new friendships with people from different communities.

One of the Sinhalese youth said that it was the first time he had had the opportunity to interact with Muslim people. He worked together with them as a team to win a game and this enabled him to understand them better and to realise that they were similar to him.

Another solidarity visit was organized by Puttalam DIRC in collaboration with civil society organizations and government institutions in Puttalam. About 800 people gathered for this visit including students from the Muslim Vidyalaya, the Palavi Sinhala Vidyalaya and Tamil children from the nearby village.

Thai Pongal was celebrated, so non-Hindus were able to witness the different Hindu rituals observed during Thai Pongal. A Kurukkal explained the importance of the festival and the reasons behind the rituals.

Many participants remarked that this was the first time they were interacting with people from other ethnicities and religions even though they lived in neighbouring villages. They commented that they had enjoyed playing solidarity building games, which allowed them to make new friends.

The visit ended with a musical session by musician Jayathilaka Bandara, who sang songs on the importance of living in ethnic and religious harmony, how it had benefitted Sri Lanka in the past and how it would do so in the future.



Preventing and Managing Conflict at the Grassroots

A training programme on conflict identification, prevention and management was held for Grama Niladharis, government officials, police officers, religious leaders and NGO representatives in Weligama under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The programme aimed at providing participants with a comprehensive understanding of the concepts of conflict sensitivity and early warning, dealing with conflict and conflict analysis tools as well as how to develop a process to identify community level issues and refer them to the Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) of Weligama, which was established under the project. During the programme, 47 state officers were trained on conflict identification, prevention and management and an official data base was set up.

“Conflicts play an important role in today's society. As Grama Niladhari officers, we have to intervene to resolve conflicts at the village level. Therefore, it is important to learn how to identify, prevent and manage them. I will apply the knowledge gained from this programme to my work so I can be more efficient,” a Grama Niladhari said.

Under the same project, a cohesion activity to celebrate Thai Pongal was held in Weligama with the participation of 100 community members of the Hindu community, religious leaders, school children and government officials.

The Hindu participants said that it was the first time they had celebrated Thai Pongal with the collaboration of the government and with the participation of Sinhala and Muslim community members.

The CERF project also conducted a training programme on community mediation for Vavuniya LIRC members attended by religious leaders, government officers and civil society activists. The objective was to give them an understanding of mediation and its processes and to provide them with the skills to engage in mediation as soon as conflict arises.

Beruwala, Negombo, Weligama and Mannar LIRCs held their first meetings of the year to develop action plans for 2020. They also identified prevailing issues related to religious tension and designed interventions during the meetings.



Bottom Up Approaches Are Also Necessary

NPC's Consolidating Ongoing Multi-Level Partnership Actions for Conflict Transformation (COMPACT) project, which focuses on strengthening District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs), held three activities in Vavuniya, Mannar and Jaffna and also discussed the setting up of a civil society platform to canvass issues relevant to the communities and groups that CSOs work for and with. The general impression was that the situation of normalcy that existed in the previous years continues. However, the military checkpoints that have come up since the change of government appear to be an unnecessary irritation that targets the North and separates it from the rest of the country as a threat. Some of those we spoke to in the North felt that the purpose of the checkpoints was to assert symbolic dominance in the North, which they saw as a symptom of a deeper problem of a government that does not stand for the principles of governance appropriate for a plural and multi ethnic society.

Some of the other key issues that the civil society groups in the North brought up are not necessarily ones that are being prioritised by the government for resolution. These include the continuing problem that particularly affects the fishing community in Mannar of Indian fishing trawlers coming in thrice a week in one thousand-strong fleets to take away all the fish by bottom trawling methods. This was an issue that was highlighted by the media in the past but is now barely given attention. The contest for ownership of land in which there is a religious or ethnic aspect in Vavuniya, and which involves the three main communities consisting of Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese, which further increases the possibility for conflict, was also highlighted. These are important issues to the people in the North and they are frustrated that no one seems to be interested in solving them.

Another problem that was highlighted was drug addiction and the smuggling in of narcotics from India. A Christian priest, Father Patrick, appealed for resources to start a drug rehabilitation centre in Jaffna to cater to the affected population. The drug problem is not unique to the North and exists in other parts of the country as well, so much so that former president Maithripala Sirisena was driven to make it his number one priority towards the end of his presidency.

Father Patrick's insight was that combating the drug menace has to be locally driven with prevention being in the hands of families and local authorities who need to be better funded and empowered. On the other hand, the problem of Indian fishing in Sri Lankan seas shows the need for a centralised approach with negotiations between governments being the way forward. Some problems require a centralised approach while others require a decentralised approach if they are to be solved. A responsive and problem solving government approach cannot only be top down.



Including the Marginalised in Peace Building

NPC Board Member and former Vice Chacellor of the Eastern University, Professor M. S. Mookaiah, attended a programme in Hatton conducted by NPC for marginalised people living in the plantations in the area, including those with different types of disabilities.

Programme Coordinator N. Vijaykathan guided a discussion session, with the aid of videos clippings and songs, that was designed to inspire confidence in the participants.

A crucial point brought out was that problems were a fact of life that affected everybody regardless of wealth, age or physical ability.

During the second session, the discussion centred on the nature and importance of good governance and the role of political leadership and the voting population of the electorate. Some participants narrated their various personal problems and complained that they were unable to contact the relevant people and institutions in order to approach them to find solutions.

He also attended a similar discussion session in Badulla, where participants were also marginalised sections of the population of the district, including street cleaning workers who had never had an opportunity to attend such a discussion session before.

Several people spoke about missing relatives lost during the war from the district that borders the eastern area of the country. Both Sinhalese and Tamil participants discussed the issue in relation to the Office on Missing Persons (OMP), Office of Reparations, a commission on truth seeking, the Right to Information Act and the Human Rights Commission.

The importance of the rule of law in relation to the rights of the victims was also explored at the discussion session.



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.

President Needs to Resolve Dispute Over National Anthem

An issue that has surfaced and which is causing heartburn among Tamil-speaking citizens is the likelihood that the national anthem will not be sung in Tamil at the forthcoming National Independence Day celebrations on February 4. Government members have been making contradictory statements on this issue. Some of them have openly declared that the national anthem will not be sung in Tamil on this occasion whereas Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa has said that no final decision has been taken on this matter. The National Peace Council is concerned about the government's delay in taking a decision on this issue. Adding to our concerns is the provocative action of a government minister who went to the predominantly Tamil-speaking north and ordered the name board of an institution under his ministry to be redone so that the Sinhala wording comes on top and the Tamil wording below it.

The national anthem issue is deeply upsetting to Tamil-speaking citizens in general, and not only in the north, who see the step motherly treatment meted out to the Tamil language. 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. We need to learn from the past. The National Peace Council calls on the government to take this issue seriously as it affects the sense of dignity, equality and sense of belonging of those who are Tamil-speakers. It is a travesty that this issue should be re-ignited today a full decade after the end of that war by those who do not believe in the plural nature of our multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual and plural society. The Sri Lankan constitution gives equal place to the Sinhala and Tamil languages, and also ensures that in Tamil will be the language of administration in Tamil majority areas.

In his inaugural speech at his swearing in ceremony, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa noted that he has been elected by the Sinhala Buddhist majority, but he would be the president of all Sri Lankans whether or not they had voted for him. He was elected by the people to develop the country and to ensure national security. As Sri Lanka has a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual and plural society it is important that the president should be responsive to this reality in his decision making. The development and national security that Sri Lanka needs will be best secured by citizens who feel that they are treated equally by the state and equally belong to the country. We believe that the president, as the head of state and head of government is the person who can and should make the decision regarding the singing of the national anthem in Tamil prior to Independence Day, on which day he will take the centre stage as the president of all Sri Lankans.

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National Peace Council, 12/14 Balapokuna Vihara Road, Colombo 6, Sri Lanka

Website: www.peace-srilanka.org, Email: info@peace-srilanka.org

Tel: 2818344, 2854127, Fax: 2819064