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National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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DIRCs Reach Out to Help Communities During Covid-19

Members of the National Peace Council's District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) across the country have been reaching out to disadvantaged people in their areas who are unable to access essential supplies due to lack of funds and availability caused by the Covid-19 crisis and the ensuing curfew. Many shops have run out of goods while people who rely on a daily wage are unable to work to feed their families.

These are citizens' initiatives. NPC is engaging in crisis mitigation activities by using its countrywide network of 16 district level and 12 divisional level inter religious committees and 11 Human Rights First Aid Centres to provide humanitarian assistance to the worst affected families and social welfare institutions in their areas.

These platforms are organic ones. Their strength lies in being with people in times of difficulty as happened during the Easter bombings. Many of them have been doing relief activities on their own.

These are trained groups who are conflict sensitive and whose activities will not be one dimensional. They will bring local knowledge to bear and take into account of those who fall between the cracks and who fail to be reached by large scale projects.

Engaging in humanitarian activities will strengthen these local level voluntary bodies to further collaborate across ethnic and religious divides, and also encourage them to engage in follow up activities on their own.



The district coordinator of Anuradhapura DIRC, Nimal Dissanayaka, made a donation to a group of women who made 500 facial masks that were distributed in the area while DIRC member Venerable Yakawewea Jinarathana Thero gave essential food packs to five low income families.

With the support of DIRC member, Jabardeen, the Nachchaduwa Jumma Mosque and the local School Development Board collaborated to distribute dry rations packs to 250 low income Sinhala and Muslim families.

In Hambantota, Co-coordinator of Hambantota DIRC, Chandrapala, distributed 300 leaflets to educate the public on the danger of Covid-19 and how to stay safe from it.

Nimal Abeysinghe, a member of the Puttalam DIRC, helped police and health officials to clear and disinfect the town. The police asked for the DIRC's support to distribute packs of essential items to selected low income families.

Polonnaruwa DIRC member, W. Nilawudeen, supplied essential food packs to 32 low income families.

With the support of Dhammika Lakshman, Coordinator of Monaragala DIRC, 200 facial masks were sewn by a DIRC member and handed over to the Monaragala prison. The raw material for the facial masks was provided by Mr. Lakshman.

Monaragala DIRC members also made and donated 500 face masks to the Sithivinagar Temple, a mosque and a medical center and gave rice packets 30 low income families in the area.

Ratnapura DIRC members distributed 500 face masks in Kahawatta and Pelmadulla and supplied cooked food to disadvantaged people and stray animals in the Ratnapura town.

With assistance from Nuwara Eliya DIRC Coordinator Emil Dissanayaka, the DIRC collaborated with the Cooperative Society of Nawalapitiya to distribute packs of food to low income families in the area.

Kegalle DIRC member Sulfican Moulavi, together with other moulavis, supplied dry ration packets to 50 Sinhalese and Muslim families in Warakapola and Godawela.



LIRC Members Mobilise to Tackle Covid-19 Crisis

Members of NPC's Local Inter Religious Committees (LIRCs) in several districts of the country have been assisting underprivileged people in their areas to meet their daily essential requirements and access protective face masks to fight the Covid-19 virus.

Realising the plight of several people in the area, especially daily wage earners who have run out of funds to buy food to feed their families, member of the Beruwela LIRC, businessman M. Uwain, along with a few of his friends, made arrangements to deliver dry rations to vulnerable families.

"Hunger knows no bounds. We are all human and we feel the same irrespective of our religious and ethnic differences. I will do what I can as a human being to help others in need," Mr. Uwain said.

He has pledged to provide medicine and medical equipment the next time the curfew is lifted.

Another member of Beruwela LIRC, Chandralal Premakumar, who a civil society leader, seeing that the limited supply of protective face masks was endangering his community, spent his own funds to make 300 masks that were distributed among health service and law enforcement staff. He will also supply dry rations to families who do not have funds to buy food.

Several members of Addalachenai LIRC have joined forces to design an emergency response and disaster management plan that can be implemented to deal with the Covid-19 crisis that is gripping the country.

As a first step, they provided dry rations to the needy in collaboration with civil society organizations in the area. Young committee members have been sent out to raise awareness about proper hygiene habits to prevent the spread of the virus. They are also assisting traffic police officers to control and manage the traffic when curfew is lifted temporarily.



Ven. Naththewela Nandasiri, a member of the Weligama LIRC, with the assistance of Ven. Vepathaira Indrasiri, made arrangements to sew face masks inside the temple premises with the help of several villagers. The mask were distributed to staff of the divisional health service, police and community members. The LIRC members also delivered dry rations to families in need.

In Negombo, disadvantaged people of all religions and ethnicities received 2,000 parcels of dry rations and daily essentials from the Periyamulla Grand Mosque Trustee Committee and the Negombo Merchant's Association.

Moulavi Salman, a member of the Negombo LIRC, helped to organize the parcels, which were distributed with the support of the Negombo Police Department.

Negombo LIRC also launched a Facebook campaign to counter hate speech after social media identified Covid-19 patients in Akurana and Atalugama who avoided quarantine as being Muslims, resulting in a backlash against the community.

HRFACs Assist Workers and Disadvantaged

The Human Rights First Aid Centre in Gampaha (HRFAC) has initiated a special complaint receiving mechanism for people to raise their concerns arising from the Covid-19 crisis and the ensuing curfew.

HRFACs were established by NPC and Right to Life under the project Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT), which in funded by the European Union.

Gampaha HRFAC heard of complaints from young workers at the Free Trade Zone who were unable to return to their home towns due to the curfew in Gampaha.

Mrs. Kusum Silva, Coordinator of Gampaha HRFAC, made arrangements to send young 33 employees who were living in the Ekala Industrial Zone back home. They did not have money for their journeys so funds were arranged and three vehicles were provided for their travel. They were also given a health check at the Ja Ela hospital prior to their travel and provided a medical certificate along with a travel permit.

Coordinator of Hatton HRFAC, Mr. Selvaraj, and the Sarvodaya Swashakthi Foundation distributed face masks to people in the area, which were made HRFAC members. Many people had been unable to purchase protective equipment due to lack of money.



Coexistence Through Religious Understanding

An awareness raising programme on religious coexistence was conducted for Muslim and Buddhist Sunday School children in Weligama under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF).

The objectives of the programme were to create awareness among children on pluralism in Sri Lanka, teach Muslim and Buddhist children about Christianity and allow Muslim, Catholic and Buddhist children to get to know each other to create meaningful relationships.

One hundred and sixty Sunday School children as well as teachers and Weligama LIRC members, including religious leaders, and government officers participated in the visit.

Rev. Father Charles Hewawasam, a LIRC member, volunteered to conduct the programme in his church. He told the children about Christian rituals and delivered a lecture on teachings of Jesus on peace and reconciliation. The children attended the Sunday Mass at the church.

Interactive games promoting the concept of pluralism were conducted by a member of Weligama LIRC.

"This is the first time that our children have attended to a religious service in a church, it is a new experience for them and an opportunity for them to learn about a new religion and its rituals," said Ven. Thellijawila Gnanaseeha Thero, a Weligama LIRC member who accompanied the Buddhist Sunday School children.

The programme helped to minimise the lack of knowledge and understanding about other religions and cultures, which will ultimately ensure religious coexistence and freedom.

The LIRC's engagement with youth to raise awareness will create a peaceful environment in the area.



Fighting the Spread of Corona Virus at Local Level

Master trainers under NPC's project Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka working in 10 districts across the country are collaborating with government officials to fight the spread of Covid-19 using the strong network they have built with among NGOs and the private sector within the district.

In the Monaragala District, master trainer U.G Chandana conducted training sessions in disadvantaged rural areas, where most people are daily wage earners who are badly hit by the curfew. After discussions with Mr. Chandana, government officials agreed to provide essential dry foods regularly to poor families.

The master trainer in the Ratnapura District, Priyantha, is working with the estate sector, which is isolated and poverty-stricken. He provided dry food to more than 500 families with donations from the business community. He formed a committee with religious and community leaders, government officers and youth to manage the activities.

In the Kurunegala district, master trainers, together with youth societies, are finding families in need of assistance. They distributed more than 250 lunch packs to disadvantaged families.

Aruna Hema Sri, master trainer in the Badulla District, collaborated with other NGOs to distribute dry food and conduct awareness activities on hygiene measures required to combat the virus.

Anuradhapura District master trainers, together with the district NGO forum and the District Secretariat, created a mechanism to convey correct information about the virus to the community.

Before the restrictions on gathering of people, Hambantota District master trainers held a meeting with fishermen in the area to explain about the dangers of Covid-19 and the precautions necessary to avoid its spread. Master trainers in Matara and Weligama area provided dry food to the fishing community. Polonnaruwa, Kalutara and Kandy master trainers are also providing relief to poor community members.



Solidarity Visits Create Harmony and Understanding

Three solidarity visits were held in Kurunagala, Hambantota and Polonnaruwa under NPC's project Actively Countering Extremism supported by the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI).

The solidarity visit to the Hambantota district, aimed building friendship and trust among Sinhala and Muslim students, their parents and teachers, was organized by Hambantota District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC) in collaboration with schools in the area.

In the morning, the students went to a mosque and learnt the different customs and rituals of the Islamic religion. The visit included games and activities such as dancing that allowed the students of both communities to interact with each other.

The visit to Kurunagala was organized by Kurunagala DIRC in collaboration with civil society organizations and government institutions. There were cultural events, team building games and discussions on religious and ethnic harmony.

A police officer said the visit gave participants the opportunity to interact with each other and become friends through the different interactive activities, a unique experience which he had not seen at other peace building programmes he had attended before.

The visit ended with a musical programme by Jayathilaka Bandara, who sang Sinhala and Tamil songs on the beauty of diversity and the importance of religious and ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka.

The visit to Polonnaruwa was organized by Polonnaruwa DIRC with the collaboration of government institutions and inter religious leaders and included several interactive games and activities that allowed the participants to bond with each other.

A Sinhala female participant said that this was first time she had the opportunity to interact with Muslim women and that it had diminished the fear and suspicion she had towards Muslims.



Cooperation Within Polity Needed to Tackle Covid-19 Crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised serious questions about the capacity of the current political and economic systems in many states to deal with a crisis of this nature. Sri Lanka, along with the rest of the world, is in an unprecedented crisis of enormous magnitude that has to be overcome with cooperation, solidarity and collective action. There has to be cooperation across all strata and groups with people helping people, especially those who are marginalised, daily wage earners and persons with disabilities who have no place to go. Sri Lanka has long prided itself as having an educated population. This is the time to show the world that our understanding of the crisis is real, and even as the lockdown and curfew continue, that we are willing to abide by the strictest measures necessary to control its spread.

We also need to find ways through the internet and through different social media to remain connected because one's mental health going through this is just as important as one's physical health. Those who have come from abroad from countries heavily infected by the virus, and those who have been infected by the virus for no fault of their own, need to be treated with care and concern rather than by stigmatising them so that they will not go underground. We would do well to remember that it is the care and protection we show the least of us that will save most of us.

It is also necessary at this time for the government to consider a holistic package of relief in consultation with all political parties. The opposition and other political parties need to become partners in resolving the crisis that has no respect for race, religion or social class. It is important that the cooperation among political parties also takes place at the provincial, local government and Pradeshiya Sabha levels as well. The current situation provides an opportunity to promote subsidiarity and enable local communities to deal with their own problems. In addition, in this situation of crisis, where urgent and unprecedented actions may need to be taken, we believe the government should enlist the support of the opposition to deal with situations that may require the framing of new laws and regulations.

The National Peace Council calls on the government to bring together all political parties to work on the way forward and to take political differences outside of the equation for action. We note that Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa recently called a meeting of political party leaders to determine what path to take. With parliament dissolved and elections postponed, it is necessary to ensure that the handling of the coronavirus epidemic is not compounded by other crises. In general there is a need to follow the provisions of the constitution as it is adherence to the law is what gives stability to societies. This is also the best way to ensure that having overcome the COVID health crisis, the country does not go into a post-COVID political crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis is very likely to run for more time and its economic and social effects will be felt for years worldwide and in Sri Lanka as well. This situation will also require an effective response. The post-COVID-19 economic recovery will need to be rooted not just in responding to the pandemic itself but also to the global recession and unemployment that is likely to follow it. Much will depend on the vigor of the debate within the country both during and especially after the current crisis to prepare for the future. This should aim at moving towards a sustainable social economic system focused very much on addressing prevailing deep inequalities and moving towards a stable and just society.

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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.

Keep Space Open For Soft Skills Programmes by NGOs

A set of guidelines issued by the Mullaitivu District Secretariat to all non-governmental organisations working in the district has notified them that their work should be focused on infrastructure development and not on soft skill training. Examples of the latter that are provided are women's empowerment, child rights, youth training, human rights, land rights training, and formation and strengthening of self-help groups. The district secretariat has said that action plans of organisations that contain "less than 70 percent of physical infrastructure activities, such as construction of rural roads, wells and preschools, will not receive its approval", which may be an indication of the district's needs rather than a policy statement.

We are aware that during the period of the war, the Mullaitivu district suffered great devastation. The National Peace Council acknowledges that the District Secretariat's commitment to economic and infrastructure development needs to be supported and it must ensure that this development is equitable and reach the widest possible population. However, not all NGOs are service delivery ones which engage in infrastructure development. Through their soft skills trainings NGOs, not only in Sri Lanka, but worldwide, seek to create awareness in the general population of their rights and responsibilities in relation to one another, the state and the larger community.

In this Independence Day message, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa reaffirmed the government's commitment to basic democratic values and to the rights of all citizens by saying "We will always ensure their right to think freely, hold independent opinions, and express themselves without any hindrance. We will always respect the right of any citizen to follow the religion of his or her choice. Every citizen has the right of free association and of free assembly." He went on to say "We consider all these as rights of human beings that no one can challenge."

In Geneva, at the UN Human Rights Council session, Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena stated that "the Government will also address other outstanding concerns and introduce institutional reforms where necessary, in a manner consistent with Sri Lanka's commitments, including the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (SDGs). We will implement policies rooted in the Government's commitment to the people by advancing individual and collective rights and protections under the law, ensuring justice and reconciliation and addressing the concerns of vulnerable sections of society."

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