



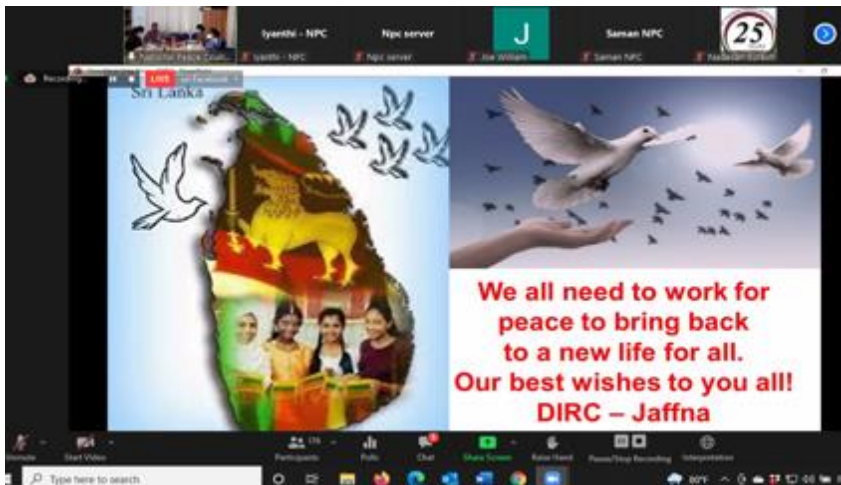
Celebrating International Day of Peace

September
2021

To celebrate International Day of Peace, NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project organized a webinar on the theme of recovering better for an equitable and sustainable world for 400 participants including religious leaders, youth, community leaders and civil society activists.

The keynote speech was delivered by Kulani Wijayabahu, Senior Lecturer of the Department of International Relations at the University of Colombo, who gave a comprehensive analysis of the Afghanistan situation with the Taliban coming into power and the security threats to its neighbours, the South Asian region and the world. While countries such as Iran, Pakistan and India were more concerned with traditional security threats to its borders, countries such as Sri Lanka were concerned with terrorism and extremism spilling into its borders, along with environmental security concerns, a refugee crisis and human rights violations.

The other speakers were Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne Chairmen of Sarvodaya, Rohana Hettiarachchi Executive Director of People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, Manjula Gajanayaka from Center for Monitoring Election Violence, Brito Fernando President of the Families of the Disappeared, Philip Dissanayaka from Right to Life Lanka Human Rights Centre, Mohammed Nawaz Country Director of Search for Common Ground, Prabodha Rathnayaka Chief Executive Officer of Rights Now Collective for Democracy, Dr. Deshapriya Wijetunge Director General Sri Lanka United Nations Friendship Organization, Herman Kumara National Fisheries Solidarity Organization, Saman Hamangoda Executive Director Partners on Alternative Training, Chinthaka Rajapakse Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform, S. Senthurajah Executive Director Social Organization Networking for Development, Achini Wijesinghe Project Manager Internews and Suresh Nadesan Chairman Uva Shakthi Foundation.



NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera spoke on the current political situation and how the country's leaders were working towards strengthening good relations with the international community and the importance of building a pluralistic society in the country.

"I admire NPC for organizing such an impressive event on a significant day. Listening to the lecture on the current situation in Afghanistan, we wonder whether Sri Lanka will also fall into a similar situation. To avoid this we need to find internal peace to achieve external peace. But we have come to notice that with Covid, social segregations have only deepened. So we now need to work even harder and very practically to strengthen peace. Today people are suffering from economic hardship and health difficulties so we as civil society have to come up with new approaches to counter these crises while maintaining peace," said Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne.

"Sri Lankans have a proud history of helping one another and living in peace and harmony. But today we live in a segregated society where the communities are divided according to religion, culture, ethnicity and language. The divisions are being used by political groups for their own interests. We need to come forward despite these forces to strengthen peace in the country. We need to work for peace from within and then only will it be visible outside," said Ramachandran Odayan from Kandy DIRC.

Community Policing and Peace Building

NPC's Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF) project conducted three webinars to increase awareness of the Community Policing Service to strengthen the civil society and police collaboration to resolve local issues. One webinar was conducted for 115 Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members in Trincomalee, Kuliyaipitiya, Paduwasnuwara and Rakwana and two other webinars were conducted for 170 Community Police officers in Trincomalee and Batticaloa, facilitated by SSP Priyankara De Silva, former Director of Community Police Service.

The sessions discussed the concept of community policing, its objectives, benefits and challenges as well as the role of community policing in conflict transformation, mitigation, mediation and crime prevention. The facilitator explained how the Community Policing Service improved relations between the community and police and ensured greater police responsiveness to security issues.

A Grama Niladhari Officer from Trincomalee said, "Community Policing Units should be more empowered; these units can be more active." The facilitator explained that police officers had many commitments, especially during the pandemic, when they were occupied with Covid prevention work. Since the situation was normalising, Community Police could start their usual work, he said.

To celebrate International Day of Peace, CERF conducted advocacy campaigns to raise awareness on religious coexistence. Members of Batticaloa, Negombo, Weligama and Trincomalee LIRCs spoke about religious coexistence and pluralism on radio and TV interview programmes. Religious leaders, government officials and LIRC members as well as NPC's Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera participated as panellists.

Among the topics discussed were how to build religious coexistence, how to prevent religious extremism and what obstructs strengthening religious coexistence. Panellists pointed out that there was fear, suspicion, hatred and divisions among different religions. "Religious coexistence can be strengthened through cooperation among religious leaders, who have a responsibility to raise their voices against misconceptions and hatred towards other religious beliefs," said Moulavi Naizar.

Training for Community Leaders on PVE

Training sessions for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) on preventing violent extremist were held under NPC’s project Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) conducted with Helvetas Sri Lanka and funded by the European Union.

Five CSO members will be selected from each district to train others including government officials, community police and youth who are eligible to deliver training to the next level. Sixty percent of the 267 CSO members were interested in training others.

Although the initial plan was to have physical training for 20 to 25 CSO members, because of the Covid-19 pandemic two one day sessions were held via zoom. The themes were understanding violent extremism, the context of violent extremism, how violent extremists recruit followers and preventing violent extremism. Examples of successful programmes from other countries and creating a plan to prevent violent extremism in communities were discussed.

The sessions included a visual presentation, watching a documentary video related to PVE concepts and group discussions. Poor internet connections in some districts disrupted the sessions. The technical knowledge of participants should be improved to facilitate their participation in virtual workshops.

Learning to Combat Hate Speech

Under NPC’s Technical Assistance to Justice Institutions in Sri Lanka project, 14 training programmes on the prevention of hate speech were conducted by master trainers for government officers, journalists, religious leaders and local government authorities in Matara, Monaragala, Polonnaruwa, Badulla, Kandy, Ratnapura, Kalutara, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura and Kegalle.

During the first session, participants were given an introduction on hate speech, which is defined as a speech or expression that denigrates a person or persons on the basis of (alleged) membership in a social group identified by attributes such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age or physical or mental disability.



In the second session, participants learnt the factors that contributed to the spread of hate speech and its social impact depending on where the speech was said, the image of the speaker and the objective with which it was said. It could lead to division among communities and damage to property and people. Hate speech led to degrading people, physical assault, property destruction, attacks on places of religious worship and disruption of livelihoods and business activities. Modes in which hate speech was spread were meetings, media, group discussions, posters, gossip and social media.

The third session was on social media. Participants were taught about the rapid increase of internet users, algorithms and google cookies. The speakers used examples to show instances where expressions of hate speech on social media had led to violence. In Myanmar, military leaders used social media to demonize the Rohingya Muslim minority ahead of and during a campaign of ethnic cleansing. A UN fact finding mission said, “Facebook has been a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate, in a context where, for most users, Facebook is the Internet”.

Sri Lanka has similarly seen vigilantism inspired by rumours spread online targeting the Tamil Muslim minority. During a spate of violence in March 2018, the government blocked access to Facebook and WhatsApp for a week, saying that Facebook had not been sufficiently responsive during the emergency.

Participants were made aware of the international and domestic legal framework of hate speech in the final session. The master trainers spoke about Articles 19 and 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Rabat Plan of Action, Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Sri Lankan Penal Code, Sri Lankan Police Ordinance, Profane Publications Act No. 41 of 1958 and Prevention of Terrorism Act (Temporary Provisions Act) No.48 of 1979.

“Teachers experienced hate speech during the teachers’ strike. On social media and on many TV stations teachers were humiliated. At the end it is the children who suffered. There is conflict created between officials, teachers and parents. I as teacher will teach my students about the things we learnt. There are many people here who work in different institutions and they can influence their co-workers,” said Shiromi Pandipperuma, a teacher from Kalutara.

“We have received messages saying we should not eat from Muslim shops. We now understand that we should always fact check and not forward these messages to anyone,” said a government officer from Kalutara.

“It is a good initiative of NPC to take this message to youth, government officers and religious leaders. It is during elections that hate speech increases. As a principal I suggest that this topic should be taught to school children. NPC should conduct lectures in school,” said Saman Ekanayake from Anuradhapura.



University Students Debate Pluralism

Young people are often seen as passive beneficiaries rather than active leaders. Around the world, countless young people are eager to shape their communities but governance structures, poverty and a lack of education and employment can muffle their voices. To strengthen youth leadership in building pluralistic values in the post war context, NPC has provided youth with a platform to demonstrate leadership skills and create a positive impact within in their communities under its project, Creative Youth Engagement for Pluralism (C-YEP).

Several debate competitions were organized by undergraduates from the Eastern University, University of Ruhuna and Sabaragamuwa University with the guidance of academics.

Students from the Eastern University held an interfaculty debate competition with the participation of over 100 people. The topic on final day was individual rights of Sri Lankans can be controlled for the development of the country. The debate was held on Zoom and telecast on live on Facebook.

The University of Ruhuna organized an inter department debate competition via Zoom on voice of youth for pluralism.

Students from the Sabaragamuwa University also held a debate competition with the participation of Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala students. The topic for final day was the major factors influencing the crisis of pluralism in the modern world are the state policies that affect each country.

Before the competition, a series of training sessions on pluralism and debating were conducted and judges selected the best teams. Young people, Civil Society Organizations, community leaders, academics and the public were in the audience. Debating activities led by young people set a benchmark for conducting online activities during pandemic so that people enjoyed the discussions and gained knowledge.



Joint Effort Required for Stable Reconciliation

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's address to the UN General Assembly was short, simple and dignified. The president covered the main issues that confront the world with his focus on Sri Lanka. These included the Covid pandemic, economic difficulties, environmental degradation and violence that are global problems and which his government, which received two democratic mandates, has had to face.

In his speech in New York, the president sought international assistance to overcome the setbacks in the economic situation in the country. He also pledged to address the core issues that had given rise to violence through internal mechanisms that would address issues of accountability, restorative justice and reconciliation. The National Peace Council welcomes the president's statement that it is his "Government's firm intention to build a prosperous, stable and secure future for all Sri Lankans, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender. We are ready to engage with all domestic stakeholders, and to obtain the support of our international partners and the United Nations, in this process." He has also invited the Diaspora to dialogue in the process.

We urge the president to take action in society necessary for national reconciliation. There is a need to overcome the cynicism and mistrust that has grown due to the many lost opportunities and unmet promises. As immediate actions we would urge the release of long term and short term prisoners held without trial under the PTA. and facilitate truth seeking and reparation in the process of addressing the issue of missing persons as well as the Easter bombing. We would also urge the government to obtain UN assistance and that of international personnel to improve the internal mechanisms already established and work together on ones to come.

The president's intention to deal with contentious issues requires the support of the parties in the opposition especially the minority parties which have democratic mandates with them and we call on them to accept the invitation that the president extends. As the meeting with the TNA has been on hold for long the onus is on the president to give priority to that meeting. The already established reconciliation mechanisms need to be activated and efficiently managed for trust building of the people. We believe it is possible to overcome the country's challenges of peace, justice and development with the involvement of all stakeholders including the UN and international community.

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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.

Break with the Past is Needed to End Impunity Trap

The level of impunity in the country has reached very serious proportions. The incident in which the Minister of Prison Management Lohan Ratwatte is alleged to have entered prison compounds and threatened Tamil prisoners with his gun and made them kneel down before him is an indictment of the state of the Rule of Law, the independence of institutions and the system of checks and balances in a democracy. So far the minister concerned has only resigned from his portfolio as Minister of Prison Management but not from his other ministerial portfolios.

We note that the accused minister has asserted his innocence several days after the reported incidents took place and after his resignation as Prisons Management minister. As the minister is a member of parliament the National Peace Council believes it is appropriate that an independent inquiry be conducted with the investigators being appointed in a bipartisan manner by the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader to instill public confidence in the process. In the meantime we believe the Minister should resign from all ministerial appointments pending investigation or be removed from such positions. This is an issue that goes to the heart of the issue of impunity and the lack of regard for human rights and dignity in governance.

The problem of impunity of state actors is long standing and precedes the present government. It is this type of conduct with impunity and without accountability, by those in government who set themselves above the law that has taken the country to Geneva and calls into question the rights of individuals and democratic practice within the country. Unfortunately this type of conduct gained political acceptability during the period of the three decades long war and long periods of emergency rule. However, the war is now over more than 12 years and the last election was fought on promises of a restoration of law and order and the practice of discipline as being national values.

The National Peace Council believes that the time for a break with the past has come. The government needs to walk its talk if it is to serve the country and the national interest. Government leaders need to act within the law and respect the system of checks and balances and the independence of institutions. They need to demonstrate basic decency and civility.

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