



ශ්‍රී ලංකා ජාතික සාම මණ්ඩලය
தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

December
2022

Strengthening Religious Freedom Through Collective Efforts

Recent religious violent extremism in the country arose as a result of mistrust among different ethnoreligious groups. The lack of mechanisms to identify and address conflict stressors that can lead to violence is a long standing issue. Civil society groups and community leaders have a greater responsibility to dispel mistrust and misconceptions and to rebuild relations among religious groups.

The Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) intervention was designed after identifying this responsibility to capacitate targeted localities with an understanding of the importance of religious coexistence. The programmes on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) envisage enhancing the knowledge of youth leaders on the negative consequences of violent extremism, focusing on Youth Wings' role in standing against extremist ideologies.

Hari Prasath, a member of the Youth Wing in Bandarawela believed that knowledge was the key to resolving most of the issues in society. "As a person who learnt about this for the first time, I realised the importance of understanding the negative consequences of violent extremism. Most of the time young people do not know about the past and make their assumptions based on the media, which is dangerous. Misinformation can prompt people to become extremists. By taking these training programmes to a wider community, we can create peacebuilders," he said.



Extremist parties were involved in spreading misconceptions to create divisions among communities, which was why communities must learn the importance of religious coexistence.

Dinuka Lakshan believed that joining the Youth Wing in Panduwasnuwara would empower him to counter violent extremism. “I learnt a lot. I realised how pull and push factors that emerge through the political, religious and economic issues create extremist ideologies. Parents, teachers and adults should educate younger generations on the negative consequences of violence. Parents should teach their children to respect others’ values and rights,” he said.

Topics including understanding violent extremists, the factors that created violent extremist ideologies, identifying root causes and elements of extremist ideologies and measures to counter violent extremism were discussed during the training programme.

A programme on the rule of law was carried out for members of the Youth Wing in Rakwana. Participants were educated on the concept of the rule of law and how it linked with religious freedom by improving knowledge of the legal framework to drive the discourse on religious freedom. The facilitator used group activities to keep participants engaged.

Ashifa Thawoos, a member of the Youth Wing in Rakwana, said, “As a youth member I know opportunities to learn about the laws of the country are lacking. People do not know ways to seek justice when they face injustice. Educating communities on the constitution is needed. NPC has taken this initiative to empower communities by teaching them the importance of the rule of law.”

Need assessments were carried out to find solutions for the concerns of communities in the process of strengthening religious freedom. The ARC team will use the findings of the assessments to design activities to find solutions for religious conflicts.

Pluralism and Inclusive Service Delivery for Public Officials

NPC board members met officials of the Jaffna University to speed up the implementation of the advanced certificate course, sustainable peace through pluralism and inclusive service delivery, funded by Freedom House.

NPC’s Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera and Governing Council member Mr. G.V. Thilakasiri met Vice Chancellor Prof. S. Srisatkunarajah, the student counsellor and other academics. Prof. S. Srisatkunarajah was pleased about the course content and agreed to facilitate and expedite the process. It is expected that the university would be able to get the first batch in by early May.

The preliminary work has been completed to offer the course at the universities Ruhuna, Eastern and Sabaragamuwa.

NPC officials met Mr. Piratheepan, Additional District Secretary of Jaffna District Secretariat, to explain the course. He said he would motivate his staff to follow the course.

Government Officials Learn About Pluralism and Inclusion

A residential workshop on pluralism and inclusion was held for 54 senior officials of the NGO Secretariat and the NGO Coordinators in 25 District Secretariats, attended by the Director General of the NGO Secretariat Sanjeewa Wimalagunaratna and other senior officials, NGO coordinators and micro finance officials under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project.

NPC Treasurer Prof. T. Jayasingam spoke on the problems faced by the people of the North and East and explained the measures people could take to build pluralism.

Prof. Upul Abeyratne, NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera, and NPC Programme Manager Saman Seneviratne participated as resource persons. Dr. Perera discussed the current situation of the country and the role of NGOs. Prof. Upul Abeyratne explained the conceptual ideas of pluralism and inclusion. Mr. Seneviratne outlined the challenges and opportunities encountered in building a pluralistic society.

Other sessions included what NGOs are, the need for NGOs, different types of NGOs, why monitoring was needed, different types of monitoring and the challenges faced in monitoring and how to overcome them. The sessions were interactive and participants were enthusiastic and engaged.

Several NGO coordinators said that special attention should be paid to the problems of minority groups and that there should be formal mechanisms for this. Others said that such workshops should be organized in their district as well.

In the evening there were cultural performances with singing of Sinhala and Tamil songs.

"The topics discussed by the resource persons were very interesting. Most of the officials did not know about pluralism before the workshop. They told me that they had learned a lot," Mr. Wimalagunaratna said.



Also under PACT, a programme to strengthen fellowship and harmony among Sinhalese and Muslims was organized by the Pangaragammana Sub Committee affiliated to the Badulla District Inter Religious Committee (DIRC).

Conflicts between Muslims and Sinhalese have escalated in the last few years in several areas including Pangaragammana. In order to relieve tensions, Badulla DIRC organized a programme for the Muslim community and neighbouring Sinhalese people. It was attended by 132 people including 65 Sinhalese, 63 Muslims, and four Tamil people. Religious leaders, government officials, local government officials and youth participated in the programme, which included shramadanas, cultural performances and discussions.

The young participants said that they had had an unique experience while older people believed that these programmes could re-unite the Sinhalese and Muslim people.

Coexistence Through Language

Participants in two second language courses in the Gampaha and Trincomalee Districts under NPC's project Language to Reconcile conducted by the National Institute of Language Education Training (NILET) were awarded their certificates. Each of the courses comprised 90 hours of class sessions.

In the Gampaha district, the Tamil language was taught to 43 participants from Negombo including Local Inter Religious Committee members, District Inter Religious Committee members, religious leaders, government officers, Community Police Officers and community leaders. The participants performed stage dramas, dances, speeches and songs at the certificate awarding event, which was attended by NPC Chairman Dr. Joe William, NPC Executive Director Dr. Jehan Perera and the Negombo Divisional Secretary.

The course in the Trincomalee District had 50 participants. The certificate awarding ceremony was attended by NPC Treasurer Prof. T. Jayasingam.

Participants requested NPC to extend the course hours to 150 hours so that they could fulfil the requirement necessary for government servants to receive increments and promotions. Prof. Jayasingam said NPC would check the possibility of doing this with its partner organizations and other stakeholders.



December
2022

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.

Set up Constitutional Council to Reflect Country's Plural Character

The restoration of the Constitutional Council has been the most positive feature of the 21st Amendment to the constitution which repealed the 20th Amendment that over-concentrated power in the executive presidency. The constitutional council is meant to be a politically bipartisan institution that has members of the government and opposition together with politically non-partisan members of civil society. The positive expectation is that the constitutional council will contribute to the strengthening of the state and its agencies to act in the best interests of the country.

However, the manner of appointment of the three members who will represent civil society is a cause for concern. The procedure that the government has advertised is to call for personal applications from those who are interested in applying to be members of the constitutional council. Persons of eminence and integrity who have distinguished themselves in public or professional life and who are not members of any political party as indicated in the guidelines for appointment may not wish to submit their applications. The National Peace Council believes that this procedure needs to be supplemented by a process of nominations. Civil society organisations should be given the opportunity to nominate their choice of members of civil society to be considered for appointment to the constitutional council.

In the context of Sri Lanka's plural society we believe that the selection of the civil society representatives on the constitutional council should be based on the principle of inclusiveness. The decisions of state authorities need to be sensitive to the diversity and pluralism in Sri Lankan society, the focus of which is ethnicity and religion, but which also includes caste, gender, physical disability, occupation and regions among others. The most urgent need today is unity among both the political leadership and unity among the people so that the entire country can act as one force to overcome the economic and developmental crisis it is presently trapped in. We call for the constitutional council to be selected soon so that the task of state building and nation building may take place without delay.

Media Release issued on 16.12.22

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