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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

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Non Violent Communication to Sustain Religious Coexistence

A training programme on Non Violent Communication (NVC) was carried out for 52 Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) members of the Bandarawela LIRC under NPC's Action for Religious Coexistence (ARC) project. By enhancing NVC skills it is expected that these community leaders will use the knowledge gained to mediate and solve existing issues in their areas.

In divided societies, people tend to live in their own circles in which misunderstandings and doubts about the other communities can easily come to the fore. NPC provides a number of forums by which people from different communities can interact with each other in a facilitated and safe environment.

In a world that is rich in diversity, the coexistence of various religious beliefs and practices is both a challenge and an opportunity. Religion has the power to inspire individuals, build communities and provide a sense of purpose and belonging. However, religious diversity can also lead to conflicts and tensions if not approached with understanding, empathy and respect.

Effective communication is vital for promoting religious coexistence. By focusing on the needs and values underlying each person's beliefs, NVC encourages the exploration of common ground and shared values. This approach helps dismantle barriers and stereotypes, fostering an environment of trust and mutual respect.



The participants of the training programme gained a clear understanding of how to effectively engage with individuals who harboured negative feelings. They were taught the significance of effective communication and the way of practicing these skills in conflict mitigation.

"We were able to establish effective connections with other religious leaders by engaging in group activities. The training provided practical knowledge and guidance and will assist us in our jobs. In a multi-religious society like Bandarawela, understanding the root cause of conflicts without judgment is vital. By sharing ideas, emotions and needs through NVC, we can identify the needs of conflicting parties and address them directly. Conflict resolution is not a magical process; it requires practical work. Communication forms the backbone of this process," said R.M.G. Bandara, Grama Niladhari in Baddekumbura.

Religious differences can often lead to conflicts as people feel threatened or misunderstood. NVC offers an effective framework for conflict resolution. Instead of resorting to aggression or violence, individuals can use NVC techniques to address disagreements and find solutions. Through active listening, empathetic expression and collaborative problem solving, conflicts can be transformed into opportunities for growth, understanding and reconciliation.

"As police officers, we are exposed to numerous conflicts on a daily basis. Through our interactions with individuals involved in these conflicts, we have come to recognise that lack of communication and hate speech are at the root of many issues. People often struggle to identify and express their genuine needs and emotions to others, which can sometimes result in tragic outcomes, including acts of violence. These training sessions have enabled us to reflect on our own shortcomings. We must avoid making hasty judgments and instead focus on improving our listening skills," said M.A.R.P. Gunawardhana, a women police inspector from Bandarawela.

Training on Civic Rights

A training programme was conducted for 35 participants in Dehiowita on civic rights under NPC's Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) project. In the aftermath of the economic crisis and rise of the protest movement, issues of civic space and freedom of association have become major challenges. The training content included discussions on civic space and freedom of association and analysing problems using a tool.

The trainers were Mrs. Indika Weerawardena, Integration Reconciliation Officer for the Kegalle District, Ms. Rupa Keeragala Child Protection Officer at Divisional Secretariat and Mr. Janake Ihalagoda Development Officer in the Divisional Secretariat. "This is the first time that we are learning about civic rights and freedom of association. It is a good opportunity to learn about our role as citizens," said Chairperson of Sumudu Women's Organization, Ms. Vinitha Ranjane. "This programme helps our organization to work for safeguarding of civic space."



Government Officers Commit to Providing an Inclusive Service

NPC is supporting four selected state universities to capacitate frontline government officers to ensure delivery of non-discriminatory and inclusive service with funding support by Freedom House. Sabaragamuwa University and Eastern University commenced the academic activities of the Advanced Certificate Course in Inclusive Service Delivery for Sustainable Peace with government officials from the state's management service, excise, national integration and village level Grama Niladari officers and development officers.

Sabaragamuwa University was the first university to commence the academic activities with Eastern University being the second. Eastern University was about to commence the academic activities related to this course some two months ago but this got delayed due to the trade union actions of university academics. The identification of the diverse group of students by the two universities was itself a positive factor for successful course delivery. Group work was conducted and all students actively participated demonstrating keen interest.

One of the participating government officers remarked, "The discussion study method made us more interested in participating in class as the discussion was on practical issues and problems we faced in office and field which was very helpful to us to apply the theories."

Another government official said, "This course provides us with a good platform to share our official experiences since we were able to meet other government officers who work in different institutions. This is so practical and it not only helps us to solve problems relevant to people we serve but also problems faced by our fellow officers."

The student feedback on study structure gives a good sign that the course has identified an effective way by which the course content may be delivered to the government officers. The six month advanced certificate course is aimed at enhancing the quality of government services to make sure each citizen gets an equal opportunity to access government services. Two more universities, Jaffna and Ruhuna, will commence the certificate course in the near future.



Easing the Burden with Food Relief

A food relief distribution programme was implemented by NPC under the National Language Equality Advancement Project (NLEAP) that was supported by Alinea International with the funds from the government of Canada.

The project was a onetime activity to assist vulnerable families who were hit by the economic crisis. Food relief packages were distributed to 350 families in the Batticaloa, Kandy, Monaragala, Mullaitivu and Nuwara Eliya districts.

Each pack contained 14 items worth of about Rs.15,000. In order to maintain the quality and uniformity of the food packs, NPC partnered with Cargills Food City, which provided the packs through their outlets.

The beneficiaries were selected under certain criteria that included families with only one parent, female headed families, families with lactating mothers, families with pregnant women, families with children 14 years of age and under, families with chronic non-communicable diseases and families who have lost their livelihoods.

The Butterfly Peace Garden in the Batticaloa District, Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in the Kandy District, Human Rights First Aid Centre in the Monaragala District, Organization for Elangai Refugees Rehabilitation in the Mullaitivu District and Suya Shakthi Foundation in the Nuwara Eliya District joined the project as the partner organizations.

A staff member of an organization for persons with disabilities in Wellawaya said the packs had reached the most needy in time for Ramadan and the Sinhala and Tamil New Year.



Ensuring the Right to Religious Freedom

Two conferences for 60 religious leaders, civil society representatives and journalists in the North Central Province and the Uva Province were held in Habarana and Monaragala under NPC's Plural Action for Conflict Transformation (PACT) project.

Participants included religious leaders who were members of District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCs) as well as those who did not belong to DIRCs.

The issue of religious freedom was one of the main topics for discussion. The lack of awareness about the right to religious freedom has resulted in extremist groups stirring up tension by creating misconceptions and spreading hate speech to cause divisions among different religious communities.

One way to prevent this problem from escalating is to initiate dialogue on religious freedom among religious leaders and to promote pluralistic values to create understanding, respect and cooperation among the religious communities in the country.

Other topics discussed included opportunities for ensuring religious freedom and promoting harmony and reconciliation as well as the obstacles that are faced in ensuring religious freedom.

"These kinds of programmes should be continued. Relationships can be improved if there is interaction between religious leaders. Religious harmony should be taught from the school level," said Ven. Habarana Sumedha Thero, who attended the North Central Province conference.

"Conflicts arise due to ethnic or religious tension. As religious leaders, we should intervene in these cases. Young people should be taught to respect all religions," said Ven. Dehivinne Gunananda Thero, Chairman of the Badulla Sasanaraksaka Bala Mandalaya.



Anti-Terrorism Bill Fails to Meet Democratic Standards

The government has decided to delay presenting its proposed Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) to parliament. The National Peace Council welcomes this decision and urges the government to reconsider its presentation as it would impact negatively on the democratic space and rights available to political parties, trade unions and civic activists. In any legal reform, the fundamental rights and protection of citizens need to be guaranteed. After all, the power of the people is shared with the government for their benefit as per the constitution. The ATA fails to achieve both these objectives. The draft ATA presented by the government has several features that are worse than the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) it is intended to replace.

Among the unacceptable features of the proposed ATA are its vague and broad interpretation of terrorism that would include theft of government and even private property and trade union action. The law leaves wide open who can be arrested, by whom they can be arrested and for what purpose they are arrested. It brings legitimate activities within the scope of terrorism including protests, publishing material, demands for action by government, strikes and disputes relating to racial and religious places. The law permits police or military or coast guard personnel to arrest anyone without warrant on whom they have “reasonable suspicion” of being involved in acts such as those given above. Unfortunately, it appears there is no change in the mindset of those who have framed the replacement legislation. Instead there are indications of a mindset that wishes to suppress political activism on the grounds of terrorism.

The potential for abuse under the ATA is enormous considering what we have faced under the PTA. Only last month, three persons were acquitted by the high court after having spent 14 years in prison under the PTA. The proposed ATA specifies that once a person is arrested, that person can be detained for up to 24 hours, and even more depending on the situation, in a place of the arresting party’s choosing. The plight of a young person arrested in such a manner can be imagined. Thereafter, if a detention order is signed by a senior police officer of the rank of Deputy Inspector General of police those arrested can be held for up to three months without being presented before a court of law for judicial endorsement rather than for decision.

We are opposed to the proposed ATA because it violates the constitution, duplicates existing laws and transmogrifies them into terrorism and endangers the freedoms and human rights that are guaranteed in a democratic society. We recommend that the existing laws such as the Penal Code and Criminal Procedure Code are strengthened to meet the new needs, and police are better trained in investigative methods if necessary, instead of setting up an entirely new law and security apparatus to deal specifically with terrorism. If new security laws are deemed necessary, they need to be within the parameters of human rights governed by our constitution and international standards. We call for the ATA to be withdrawn as otherwise it would empower the authorities to act with impunity to violate fundamental human rights, silence critics and those who hold opposing viewpoints.

Media Release issued on 09.04.23

Pay Heed to Protests in North and East

The hartal that took place in the North and East earlier in the week was barely noticed in the rest of the country even though it led to the shutdown of public and commercial life in that part of the country. The hartal was called by a collective of political parties and civil society groups to protest against both the proposed Anti-Terrorism legislation (ATA) and religious and cultural discrimination that is taking place in the North and East.

The ATA has met with strong criticism and condemnation from a wide cross section of national level political parties and organisations, including trade unions and the Bar Association. The protest in the North and East is evidence of the nationwide rejection of the government's proposed legislation. It is indicative of the commonality of the underlying concerns of the people irrespective of region, ethnicity or religion.

On the other hand, lack of awareness in the rest of the country of the protests in the North and East is an indication of alienation and distancing between the different parts of the country. The concern there is vandalism of Hindu religious sites of both archaeological and religious significance by unknown groups.

At the same time, some of those sites have had Buddhist religious constructions erected in them despite court orders prohibiting such constructions. This asymmetry of treatment is compounded by the refusal by the Archaeology Department to permit Hindus to worship at ancient religious sites on the grounds that they are archaeological remains while not restraining Buddhist worship at similar archaeological remains, such as at Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa.

The reasonable demand of those who have supported the hartal is that the government should identify and apprehend the vandals who destroy Hindu shrines and deal with them according to the law. They also want the government to treat them without discrimination and permit them to reconstruct and worship at sites of historical importance in the same way as people of other ethnicities and religions. The NPC supports these reasonable demands of the people of the North and East and believes that the government has a responsibility to address the grievances that gave rise to the hartal in discussion with those who led the agitation.

Media Release issued on 28.04.23

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.

Truth and Accountability Needed for Easter Bombing

Four years have passed since the fateful Easter in 2019 which plunged the entire country into shock and terror. The synchronized attack by a team of 10 suicide bombers took the lives of 272 persons and injured another 500 or more in a total of six simultaneous attacks- on three churches and three luxury hotels. The victims included entire families, parents with their children and also foreign citizens who had come to spend their Easter in Sri Lanka. The country virtually shut down for two months during which time people were living on rumours and afraid to venture into crowded areas. There was no logic in the attack in which one minority religious group targeted another minority religious group with whom there had been no prior local history of conflict.

The investigations by governments under three successive presidents, however, have not disclosed the truth of who was behind the attacks. The best that has been done so far, has been by the Supreme Court. This followed a Fundamental Rights case filed by the Catholic Church and other citizens as no proper investigations were initiated by the government to provide legal redress. Having perused the investigation reports, it found former President Maithripala Sirisena and four senior security officials guilty of negligence in having failed to act on intelligence information that they had received. They all were subjected to fines, running into millions of rupees which the officials in particular would be hard pressed to pay. Unfortunately, the court did not identify who was the mastermind behind the bombings. So the search for the truth must continue as it is now widely suspected that these horrific attacks could have been engineered in order to gain political advantage electorally.

Spokespersons for the Catholic Church led by Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith have registered their dissatisfaction with the government investigations so far. The Church is also putting pressure on the UN Human Rights Council on the need to carry out an independent investigation. There is a need to support the initiatives of the Church to identify and expose the perpetrators and not protect the culprits. The National Peace Council believes in the need for a truth commission to investigate the Easter bombings in the context of the failure of the current government investigations. The dead have no voice to demand justice, so it is the duty of the living to seek the truth. This is one of the reasons for the importance given worldwide to truth commissions to investigate controversial events of the past.

While we remember the victims of the Easter 2019 carnage, we cannot ignore the fact that family members of disappeared persons during the three decade long war have been protesting for the past 2000 days without any meaningful response from the authorities. We note that the government is proposing to establish a truth commission to look into what happened in the war and bring about national reconciliation. Such national initiatives which demonstrate the commitment of the government and larger society to achieve reconciliation through truth seeking and accountability for crimes committed, including the Easter bombing, need to be supported by opposition political parties, the business sector, religious leaders, civil society and the international community .

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