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தில்ங்கை தேசிய சமாதானப் பேரவை
National Peace Council of Sri Lanka

Paths To Peace

December
2018

NPC Supports Civil Society Campaign for Democracy

NPC's District Inter Religious Committees (DIRCS) conducted several seminars and awareness raising activities around the country in the wake of the Constitutional crisis triggered by President Maithripala Sirisena's sacking of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe.

In Matara, the DIRC organized a seminar on the citizen's role to protect democracy for 50 DIRC members and journalists while in Monaragala over 200 people, including local politicians and religious leaders, attended a similar seminar. Participants felt the removal of the Prime Minister was unconstitutional. After the seminar a leaflet distribution campaign was carried out in the Monaragala and Buttala towns.

In Anuradhapura, 60 civil society leaders and government officials attended a seminar where NPC's Project Manager Saman Seneviratne made a presentation on the political crisis and the role of citizens to protect democracy.

At the Batticaloa seminar, consultant S. Balakrishnan spoke about good governance, democracy and the Constitution. Over 150 people attended, including civil society groups and religious leaders. Participants were told about the court verdict against dissolving the parliament and provisions of the Constitution. They learnt the principles of democracy and good governance.



In Polonnaruwa and Hinguragoda, DIRC members distributed 2,000 information leaflets on the current political crisis at the Sunday fairs. People said the leaflets were important to understand the legal provisions that were violated by President Sirisena.

In Nuwara Eliya, over 70 people representing different civil society groups came to a public seminar in the town. After the seminar, 2,000 leaflets providing the details of how the actions of the president undermined the provisions of the Constitution and the effects of the current political crisis were distributed among the people.

In Colombo the Sathyagraha organized by National Civil Society Forum and Trade Union Collective at Viharamaha Devi Park concluded. Religious leaders, politicians, civil activists and trade union members had participated. NPC invited 16 religious leaders to attend the final meeting representing Batticaloa, Galle and Kurunegala DIRCs.

Befriender Training For Human Rights Volunteers

A six day training session on befriending for Human Rights First Aid Centres (HRFAC) volunteers under NPC's project Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (ACE-IT) was held in Colombo to help the volunteers to become befrienders in their districts.

The participants came from the 11 districts of Batticaloa, Badulla, Galle, Gampaha, Hambantota, Jaffna, Mannar, Matara, Monaragala, Nuwara Eliya and Trincomalee.

The training, which was conducted in English, Sinhala and Tamil, was organized by NPC and Right to Life Human Rights Centre with support from the European Union.

The programme was designed to improve the knowledge of the advisory services available to people faced with human rights issues.



Exchange Visits Promote Religious And Ethnic Harmony

Members of the Beruwala Local Inter Religious Committee (LIRC) visited Ampara and shared their experiences with the LIRC members of Addalachenai under NPC's project Collective Engagement for Religious Freedom (CERF), in a bid to promote inter religious and inter ethnic harmony.

The initiative - in which 33 members the Beruwala LIRC participated including religious leaders, government officers, police officers and CBO representatives - was the first in a series of visits planned for other LIRCs.

The activities were designed to be informative and entertaining, where participants visited Buddhist, Hindu and Islamic religious places and attended experience sharing sessions and group activities.

The group activities fostered amicable and lasting relationships between the members of the two committees, where they were given the opportunity to find a partner from the other committee and share experiences and ideas.

Another objective of the programme was to make the two committees aware of each other's work, so that they were able to discuss progress made in conducting activities, issues faced, challenges encountered, solutions found and knowledge they gained from the visit.

Participants visited places of religious worship and held discussions with religious leaders, which shed light on the reasons behind the communal violence that had taken place earlier in the year.



Transitional Justice Training for Southern University Students

Forty five students from the University of Ruhuna participated in a training programme on Transitional Justice (TJ) with team building activities, lectures, film screenings and participatory discussions under NPC's project Youth Engagement with Transitional Justice for Long-lasting Peace in Sri Lanka.

The students were shown a war film and had a discussion on the issues involved.

They were introduced to the four pillars of TJ by lawyer Jagath Liyana Arachchi. They did a group presentation on the steps that could be taken by the government and civil organizations to promote TJ and participated in role playing exercises.

NPC Executive Director Dr Jehan Perera discussed peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka and suggested initiatives that university students could take to build sustainable peace.

The students were presented with several statements on peace and reconciliation, which they had to agree or disagree with and justify their positions.

Some students were from border villages and had experienced the civil war first hand. They related how they had had to flee to the forest to escape attack without lighting a single lamp and how they had seen their loved ones killed before their eyes.

The students suggested that the training programme should be held for younger students to give them an understanding about the causes of the war and to educate them on the importance of the TJ process.



In Memorium: Father Harry Miller - A Human Rights Champion

Father Benjamin Henry Miller passed away on December 31 as the year 2018 came to its close.

This was the end of a long chapter in a single individual's defense of human rights.

In 2014 NPC awarded its Citizens Peace Award for 2014 to Father Miller for his long years of service to the war affected people of Sri Lanka, especially during the period of war. It was inspiring to us that, although born in the United States of America, Father Miller chose to come to Sri Lanka and make its people and their sorrows his own, and commit himself not to leave them in their time of need. The US ambassador Michelle Sisson at that time traveled from Colombo to Batticaloa and spoke at the event.



During a period of time spanning over 50 years when he served as Rector of St. Michael's College and as a teacher, Father Miller saw many opportunities to become involved in civic organizations. He helped in the formation of an inter religious organization, in civil societies to combat tuberculosis and cancer through preventive education, the establishment of a branch of the Federation of Red Cross and, as a Rotarian, he served as its President as well as on the National Rotary Council for Peace and Harmony. Father Miller was one of the founders of the Batticaloa Peace Committee and the Batticaloa Council of Religions as lasting initiatives to find a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

His bravery in denouncing human rights violations by both the LTTE and the military demonstrated that such abuses could not be committed with complete impunity and that there still existed individuals and organizations prepared to raise issues of responsibility and accountability. Father Miller's outspoken criticisms of human rights abuses became a beacon of truth and moral courage in the darkness of violence and intimidation that had befallen the Eastern Province.

The Citizens Peace Award was established by NPC to honour those individuals in civil society who are resident in Sri Lanka and have stood up for the protection of human rights when such rights are under threat and such action requires unusual courage and self-sacrifice to do so.

During the period of war, and continuing today, there was much controversy about the interventionist role of the international community in post war Sri Lanka. However, Father Miller's work exemplified the universality of human rights and the duty to protect the rights of all human beings irrespective of race, religion, gender or nationality.

Therefore, we made an exception in making our award to a foreign citizen and not to a citizen of Sri Lanka. We mourn his passing and will work to ensure the values he stood for prevail in the country of his adoption.

Judicial Intervention Needed To Resolve Opposition Leader Dispute

Speaker Karu Jayasuriya has made an initial announcement in parliament that the new Leader of the Opposition would be former president Mahinda Rajapaksa of the SLFP/UPFA. However, this has been challenged by the TNA whose leader R Sampanthan previously held the position and who has not been removed from this position.

This has led to a situation where there are currently two Leaders of the Opposition similar to the situation of Sri Lanka having two Prime Ministers in the recent past! The National Peace Council believes that the position of opposition leader cannot be ignored by those who are concerned with political morality and adherence to traditions, conventions and the rule of law

We note that President Sirisena holds three important cabinet ministries for himself, these being Defence, Mahaweli Development and Environment. In addition, he has taken a fourth to himself, which is the former Ministry of Law and Order dealing with police and amalgamated it with the Defence Ministry. By taking these ministries to himself President Sirisena has entrenched himself and SLFP/UPFA policies within the government.

It can also be seen that President Sirisena is actively participating in governance by vetoing ministerial appointments, appointing commissions of inquiry, and directing the Grama Shakthi development programme, among others.

The appointment of former president Rajapaksa who belongs to his party as opposition leader in this context is a contradiction in terms. In these circumstances a legal question arises whether the SLFP/UPFA can, or ought to, be given the Leader of the Opposition's position.

It appears that the idea of governance of many in the polity is to find loopholes in the law and use political power to get their way. This can be seen in the denial of Mr Rajapaksa and other SLFP/UPFA parliamentarians that they obtained membership of the SLPP.

They were publicly televised accepting such membership shortly after President Sirisena's abortive dissolution of parliament on November 9 which was ruled as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. In legal terms verbal statements are taken as evidence of contract between parties and thus leaders ought to be bound by their statements for which they can be legally sued or made responsible.

The National Peace Council believes that the judiciary needs to be called on to look into the legal aspects of the conflict and ways of ending it. It is essential that politicians in general and leaders in politics in particular should be held accountable for the actions and assertions they make if the people are to have confidence in governance.

The judiciary seems to be the only institutional vehicle in the polity at the present time that can ensure this level of democratic accountability. Failure to do so will be tantamount to a denial of the aspirations of all Sri Lankans who wish to have a stable government at the dawn of another New Year.

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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.

Politicians Need to Follow the Law to Resolve Political Crisis

The political crisis that commenced with President Maithripala Sirisena's decision to dismiss Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe continues. The sticking point at present is that the President is repeatedly stating both in public and private that he cannot work together with former Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and will therefore not appoint him again as Prime Minister. The parliamentary majority has made it clear through written and verbal statements that their choice is indeed former Prime Minister Wickremesinghe. On the other hand, the President is asserting his authority as the elected President to make his own choice of Prime Minister. His appointment of former President Mahinda Rajapakse as Prime Minister was a controversial choice which led to political chaos which political analysts have identified as akin to a political coup albeit a non-violent one. In this context it is necessary to find a solution that is both constitutional and just.

Conflicts can either be resolved through negotiations or through the law. So far our political leaders have been unable and unwilling to find a negotiated settlement to their conflicts. Even as our political leaders continue to be deadlocked in crisis, and violent in Parliament, attention has turned to the judiciary and to their interpretation of the law as the problem solving agency. It has therefore fallen upon the judiciary to resolve the two main problems that beset the polity. The first is the issue of whether the President has the power to dissolve parliament even before four and a half years have elapsed since the commencement of parliament's term. The second is whether the Prime Minister can be selected at the President's discretion. These are issues that need speedy resolution. Our country cannot afford a period in which it has no Prime Minister and no Cabinet of Ministers.

The National Peace Council calls on the President and Parliamentarians to abide by and respect the rulings of the Judiciary and not cause further dissensions in and outside of the parliament. When there is deadlock and the country and its people are hurting, it is important that political leaders should rise to the occasion by respecting the judgment of the Judiciary. Democracy is not only about elections and following the will of the majority. It is also about following the rules of democracy. There is no question of losing face in obeying the decisions of the Judiciary. We call on the President to allow Parliament to determine the Prime Minister. This is in keeping with parliamentary tradition, in which the person who enjoys majority support in Parliament is appointed as Prime Minister.

Finally, we wish to state our deep concern that in the event of the President's unwillingness to abide by the norms of democratic practice, the government will face both domestic and international opprobrium which our country can ill afford. There is an urgent need to recover from the events of the past six weeks as many Parliamentarians have to rebuild their credibility, should they wish to seek re-election following their disruptive and violent behavior in Parliament. The unacceptable behavior of some of them was witnessed worldwide and in Sri Lanka including the younger generation. In a context in which early elections are being proposed as one of the means of resolving this political crisis, we believe that those who behaved in an unparliamentary manner should not receive nominations from their respective parties in order to bring in fresh blood and dignity to Parliament.

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