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 Let us move forward to rebuild Sri Lanka

## A passage to Peace through Reconciliation

NEIFR Submission to the LLRC –02

2011 June

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 North East Inter Faith Forum for Reconciliation (NEIFR)

## **NEIFR Submission to the LLRC –02**

The North East Interfaith Forum for Reconciliation (NEIFR) is honoured to make a second submission before this august commission. The entire NEIFR membership and, in particular, we in the executive committee of this forum wish to place on record our sincere appreciation and gratitude to the Chairman and members of the LLRC for the privilege granted to us.

### **I. Notion of victim and perpetrator**

When some of us appeared before this Commission on the 1st December 2010, we submitted that reconciliation is a process and not a product that can be delivered or imposed on the various embittered communities of this country. Steps we take for infrastructure reconstruction are essential but, they alone will not lead us to national reconciliation. Ingredients for reconciliation are situation specific and cannot be found anywhere except in the very hearts of individuals suffering the pains from long years of their inability to meet basic human aspirations or pains from loss of loved ones and properties as innocent people became victims of calculated and indiscriminate violent attacks inflicted between the opposing factions for territorial control.

To many, reconciliation means transforming the parties from a conflict to a state of hibernation or inaction. Two years ago Sri Lanka emerged from a prolonged war but, with it, a large number of people also emerged wounded in one form or another. Physical wounds may gradually heal over time but, emotional and psychosomatic wounds sustained as a result of attacks on human dignity will remain open, and continue to fester and threaten even the ones who seem uninfluenced by prejudices. Today we see people with such wounds all over the country but, a large number of them are concentrated in the north and the eastern provinces. They are constant reminders that our lives have been altered drastically forever. Longer their wounds remain unattended greater are the risks, and that, they will reconstruct the past in the present and make individuals and societies they live in to go from being victims themselves and becoming perpetrators of wrong doing to others. For many years, our country has been subjected to such a vicious cycle, and because of it, we find it difficult today to sort out who is the victim and who is the perpetrator since, over time, all parties to the conflict have become both – the victim and the perpetrator. As each party claimed victimhood it was also used to justify inflicting violence on the other party.

### **II. Promoting spirituality that reconciles**

Our requirement of the hour is a healer who can enter the universe of pain and suffering that the victims are experiencing and accompany them towards recovery in ways unknown to the ordinary people. Victims often need to tell their story of trauma, pain and losses so many times in order to gain new perspective on them every time they speak out. When working with the traumatized individuals, we must be prepared to hear their story over and over again. Thus, the work of reconciliation takes great patience and perseverance, and therefore, workers recruited through political or bureaucratic arrangements are unsuited for this mission.

Reconciliation sometimes is naively imagined as a *status quo ante*, i.e. a return to things as they were before the conflict occurred. Of course, in this country, we can never go back to that previous state. The key to reconciliation therefore is in our ability to rectify the harms caused in the past without forgetting

them but, remembering them in a different way so that, they will not be repeated as we regain our future or held us hostage to the past state of victimhood.

We at NEIFR understand that reconciliation is about creating social spaces within which the wounded can dwell in safety and reconnect with their fragmented sociality patterns and come to imagine a different future without fear of diminished status and victimization a second time. When victims relate stories the religious leaders, as trustworthy and understanding listeners, should be able to create such safe places in their hearts through spiritual persuasion and communication. Therefore, we the religious leaders associated with NEIFR have assumed (while persuading and encouraging other religious leaders throughout the country to join) the role as agents of reconciliation, and prepare victims for healing to take place, and also to become a moral force to minimize or arrest a war-liberated society like ours from rapidly receding to a state of lawlessness and anarchy.

### **III. NEIFR moves towards Committee of Conscience**

At the meeting with the LLRC last December NEIFR had suggested the desirability of constituting a Committee of Conscience, rooted in spiritual guidelines, to become a strong moral advisory body (Moral/Ethical Ombudsman) in this country. Since then NEIFR has moved on its own to feel the pulse of the people for constituting such a body, and NEIFR is happy to put on record that there is an overwhelming support for a Committee of Conscience from the participants at meetings held in Jaffna, Anuradhapura, Horowapothana, -Batticaloa and Colombo. In addition, there is also a call from them for the formation of such committees (with some form of legitimacy) in every village so that it could act as a check on various abuses of public properties and anti-social activities beginning at that level.

After listening to voices from different parts of the country NEIFR had taken the position that "...cultural diversity is a cherished asset for the advancement of humanity at large, and in this country therefore, diversity should be valued, enjoyed, accepted and embraced as a permanent feature enriching our society..." and also NEIFR admits that the religious leaders could have played a greater role in the past to combat and denounce, in the larger interest of humanity, tendencies of racial discrimination in our society. Therefore, NEIFR is calling for a new environment that will enable a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in which all its citizens co-exist and enjoy equality, justice, human rights and security. In such a country, NEIFR contends that war cannot have a place in resolving disputes of any form in the future.

### **IV. Perceptual obstacles to national reconciliation**

On the 29<sup>th</sup>-30<sup>th</sup> April 2011 NEIFR held a convention at the St John's Church premises in -Batticaloa to conclude its people consultation series, and close to 100 participants, drawn from different parts of the north and the eastern provinces attended. Among many programmes discussed, the participants also ventured on a unique exercise to find out the perceptions of one community about the others. This was considered an ultimate requirement to eliminate all forms of suspicions as a prerequisite for moving towards genuine reconciliation. In this exercise, participants representing different communities: Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians were requested to form exclusive groups of the respective community. Each group was tasked to come up with its impressions about the other three communities in this country. They were not to discuss religious precepts, and instead, they discussed socio-cultural manifestations as practitioners of a religion. When the results were analyzed and shared at a plenary session, perceptions of one community by the other three communities led to individual soul searching. Although these perceptions may not be factual or they may even differ under another situation there was unanimous support for the exercise. The participants felt that until various communities hold on to such

perceptions among them they will constitute impediments for genuine reconciliation. It is to highlight these perceptions that NEIFR is now making this submission to LLRC for the second time.

NEIFR wishes to make this submission in good faith with love and respect for all and malice towards none. These perceptions should be taken only as indicative but, they should help raise questions which may have been brushed aside in the past. How these perceptions are clarified or allowed to be internalised in the minds of people will determine all our future efforts targeted towards reconciliation and inter-communal harmony.



NEIFR Participants at Batticaloa Convention - 29-30<sup>th</sup> April

## V. Perceptions of communities

Communities namely: Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims were involved in this exercise. Group discussion was not about creeds of other religions but how they have influenced socio-cultural manifestations among practitioners of the respective religions. Perceptions about a community (*in bold italics*) by the other three communities as presented at plenary session are listed below. At informal meetings explanations for such perceptions were picked up by some NEIFR members, and where possible, they are also given below as appropriate, against those perceptions for additional clarity.

### V.1. Perceptions about Muslims among other communities

- a) ***Prejudice of other cultures: feeling of superiority*** – There is a tendency of this community to assume that it has answers to all problems of this world and therefore a cynical contempt and disregard for other cultures
- b) ***Intolerance of other religions & religious symbols*** - To buttress this point the intentional destruction of the monumental statues of standing Buddhas carved into the side of a cliff in the Bamyán valley in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan was cited. As this was done on the order from the Taliban government it is viewed as an example of Muslim's intolerance of other religions.
- c) ***Animal torture and insensitive to (animal) pains*** – Muslims are associated with slaughterhouses and transporting of animals to markets. Large scale ritual slaughter of animals during Haj festive season by Muslims is considered repulsive, particularly in areas where Muslim live among other communities

- d) *Extreme views & assertive about own (factional) identities* – Intra community clashes amongst the Muslims were cited and recent clashes among ideologically different Muslims factions in Kattankudy and Beruwela were cited
- e) *No religious freedom: society is not open to other religious ideas and does not allow free choice of faith*
- f) *Other communities are barred from establishing business or form any economic activity(s) or taking (new) residence in Muslim dominated areas* – There is a feeling among other communities that Muslims are clannish in everything they do.
- g) *Always ready to change positions for personal benefits (from any government) & cannot be trusted for adhering to (agreed) policies, positions & people's wishes.* Several instances, all involving politicians were cited as background for such a perception
- h) *Divisive in outlook and approach: always wanting Muslim identity reflected everywhere – Muslim schools, hospitals, Muslim administrative offices, divisions etc...*
- i) *Mosques are not only used for religious propagations but also for other purposes – politics, business, militancy etc...* - A point was made that most demonstrations begin from the mosques after the mid-day special prayer on Fridays giving the impression that the Mosques are the dissent-breeding places for which there is also sanction from the Mosque (religious) authorities.
- j) *Disrespect & insensitive to rights of women* – mention was made about burqa (complete face/body - black cover) as an imposition on them unjustly and against their wish and free choice of the women

## V.2. Perceptions about Christians among other communities

- a) *Always aspiring to establish Christian domination* – examples of Christian missionary undertakings in all countries through Global Christian congregation was cited. Enormous amounts of funds available to carry out activities mentioned in **b to d** below.
- b) *Use foreign funds for religious propaganda and conversion of others to Christianity -*
- c) *People are bribed to impersonate and ridicule other religions, and present Christianity as the only alternative*
- d) *Systematic propaganda (in collusion with Christian global networks) to discredit (degrade) others*
- e) *Admission (in Christian denominating schools) for Children of other faiths increasingly discouraged, and very considerate in school admission if (children) are prepared to embrace Christianity*
- f) *Even emergency relief is decided on religious basis (bias), and only Christians are targeted*
- g) *Disrespect for other religions*

### V.3. Perceptions about Hindus among other communities

- a) *Extreme views, rigorous and pain-causing religious rituals – difficult and complicated community to understand (because of ideals derived from religion) – social segregation due to caste manifestations does not allow free interactions, and this behavior of segregation has been used to tighten control on people in one form or the other during conflict period.*
- b) *The community is distanced from the religious leaders and temple keepers & no free interaction between them*
- c) *There cannot be equality because of deeply entrenched caste system – there will be resistance for peaceful inter/intra community co-existence*
- d) *Disrespect for other religions*
- e) *No religious freedom: society is not open to other religious ideas and does not allow free choice of faith*

### V.4. Perceptions about Buddhists among other communities

- a) *Denial of religious freedom: increasing sensitivity and suspicion about other religions*
- b) *Always advocating for supremacy of Sinhalese language even when constitutionally Tamil is an official language of the country*
- c) *Insensitive and indifferent when other (minority) communities are suppressed – This (Sinhalese) community does not mind the government doing anything or the community may even encourage (the government) to deny rights of other communities as long as they get theirs*
- d) *Confident of preferential treatments & concessions in the application of law and justice – does not hesitate to influence even the judiciary to its favour*
- e) *Increasingly, this community has become anti-NGO's (Non-Governmental Organization) and international service providers to other communities but, indifferent when International NGO assistance is targeted to Sinhala community*
- f) *People of other Religious convictions are not a barrier for marriages: no social sanctions (from this community) for cross religious marriages – as a result, families are easily disoriented – at times husband and wife following different paths and children are left in confusion*
- g) *Proliferation and imposition of religious symbols (e.g. erecting statues) in new places disregarding sensitivity of other communities – as a ploy for land grabbing- this has increased after the war and a number of examples were given of new statues of Buddha that have been erected in the past two years*



Sinhalese analysing perceptions about others



Hindus analysing perceptions about others



Christians analysing perceptions about others



Muslims analysing perceptions about others

## VI. Unity in Adversity

This country is full of experience and anecdotes of all communities coming together and supporting each other as humans at times of danger and hardship. When the powerful tsunami struck this land of ours in December 2004 causing many deaths, extensive damage to properties and infrastructure it also removed, although temporarily, barriers between the communities as they congregated at Temples, Churches and Mosques that had been converted as refugee shelters. We have gripping accounts of how Sinhalese families, at personal risks, hosting Tamil families in their houses and keeping vigil against the unruly elements attacking those guest families during racial riots of 1983. We have heard stories from our soldiers being fed by women who took pity on them as the soldiers marched through Tamil villages during peak of the war. Unfortunately, such stories of sympathy and humanitarian care are very rare nowadays as people of this country have become hardened by the scale of atrocities that went around them for almost three decades.

Although fear of being killed or kidnapped has considerably reduced, people are still gripped by the feeling of danger and hardship. Voices resonating from different parts of the country, particularly among those resettling back in their own villages after years of displacement keep on pointing that they need an escape from the present plight of victimhood. What they want now is an alternative for them to restart their battered lives. What they want is an opportunity to come together with others to rebuild this country. Unfortunately, they do not see this happening and their hopes are fast fading away. Still there is a feeling that they are not being accepted as needed partners in the rebuilding process. They say, in the name of improving safety their lands are being encroached and their livelihood opportunities are

bureaucratically blocked. The majority of such people have no more tears to shed, no one who will listen to them nor have hope for any redress. Such frustrations are the breeding grounds for inter-community perceptual (mis)understandings that exist today which could move very fast, making even a casual altercation between two individuals to communal clash points. That should be averted. The legislators need to be alerted and their attention focused on serious issues facing this country today.

That is why NEIFR continues its appeal for:-

- A new environment that will enable (*through attitudinal change of everyone*) a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in this country in which all its citizens can co-exist and enjoy equality, justice, human rights, and security as Sri Lankans.
- A policy pronouncement that dissemination of ideas based upon racial superiority or hatred is an offence punishable by law, and to introduce vigilance and deterrence to discourage individuals, groups or organizations from disseminating racial superiority or hatred and treat these as acts of violence or incitement to commit such acts
- Innovations (in the form of Forums/Councils/Committees at each village) to fast track post-conflict healing and reconciliation by facilitating an environment for managing development of people's immediate locality which also allows space for mediation, expressing regrets, remorse and apology at individual, community and national levels
- Establishment of a Committee of Conscience (incorporating members well versed in the respective theologies) as a special unit in the country to enable – religious, moral and ethical-positions, opinions and guidelines to be highlighted on a regular basis and to speak with one voice in affairs concerning the people of this country thus, becoming a positive moral force having a modifying influence on governments
- A new vision for the country based on love, compassion, moral and spiritual principles enriched by all religions that are practiced in this country, through which, inter-community perceptual differences are anticipated and diffused before they become flash points and ensure that, in the future of this country, war will never have a place in resolving disputes of any form.

It is to this end that NEIFR's human resources are invested. A country that can truly belong to all within which, all the diverse human and natural endowments can be harnessed for the enrichments of everyone are what NEIFR aspires for. That should be the ultimate point in our journey of reconciliation. Once again we thank you very much.

Yours Truly

Executive Committee (Interim)

North East Inter Faith Forum for Reconciliation (NEIFR)

2011 June



## **The Executive Committee (Interim)**

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2. **Ven.Ranmuhthugala Sangarathana Thero-Buddhism**  
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3. **Rev. Thevakumar – Christianity**  
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4. **Moulavi U.L.M. Mohamed Mackie –Islam**  
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9. **9-Yohi.Shri Sivachandri SivaKumarantha Swami- Hinduism-**  
C/O, Post Master, Kiran
10. **10-Ven. W.Piyarathne Thero- Buddhism**  
Swarna Thilaka Ramaya, Horopothana
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