

Project Harmony – Building a Harmony Center in Sri Lanka

Background

Sri Lanka has been embedded in ethnic conflict for more than two decades. Tensions between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamil minority in the northeast, coupled with separatism are main causes for the civil war. Since the civil war or the 2009 defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), stability has been regained in the county although peace has not been completely restored. The armed conflict lasted over two and a half decades, and cost over 70,000 lives and displaced millions. Reconciliation in Sri Lanka continues to be a difficult and complex process as misunderstandings between the major ethnic groups – Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims have resulted in mistrust, fear and perceptions spilled over from “battles of the past”.

Purpose and Aim

Sri Lanka is now in the stage of post-conflict and is in the process of re-integration. As such, the core message of harmony – along with a keen appreciation for language, race and religion to rebuild and re-engage its people – should be emphasized to strengthen this process. Against this backdrop, a harmony center is proposed to be built in Sri Lanka to complement its reintegration efforts.

Presently, there is currently no harmony center in Sri Lanka. The purpose of this center is to address past “narratives of conflict” to educate local communities and engage in dialogue. This project is envisaged to include stakeholders across civil society and it will adopt a participatory and collective approach. These are five key objectives of the harmony center: (1) Build trust and common understanding among ethnic groups and communities (2) Develop a platform for harmony-building (3) Create a higher level of trust among stakeholders (4) Empower communities via education on past conflict to prevent future violence (5) Build social capital and within communities.

Implementation

Modeled after Singapore's harmony center, the Sri Lanka harmony center is envisaged to be set up by August 2013. This project is spearheaded by Prof. Rohan Gunaratna, Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University with two Young Global Leaders of the World Economic Forum¹ namely: Asanga Abeyagoonasekera, Executive Director of the Sri Lanka's National Think Tank, the Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute for International Relations and Strategic Studies, and Yap Kwong Weng, Singapore's first Rotary Peace Fellow who is also the Secretary-General of the United Nations Association of Singapore.

Once operationalised, the center will conduct programs to promote inter-faith dialogue and engagement at these levels: leadership, community, grassroots, youths and students through seminars, workshops and community visits. This allows Tamils and Sinhalese to discuss past and current issues using an interest-based approach. It will focus on the message of peace and blessings to all Sri Lankans. The center will also promote a greater understanding of the true meaning of cooperation and harmony using universal values, i.e. kindness, sincerity and honesty. Historical descriptions, coupled with items and objects are also used to showcase of cultural heritage and diversity.

International organizations, grassroots, business and community leaders are encouraged to support the center in developing meaningful inter-faith activities that promote education aimed to bring about greater peace to Sri Lankans.

¹ Young Global Leaders represent the future of leadership, coming from all regions of the world. Nominated under 40, these young leaders are proposed through a qualified nomination process and rigorous selection criteria accepting only the best leaders in the world.