

The Association of Professional Sri Lankans in the UK (APSL)



WE SRI LANKA



WE SRI LANKA 2011

Reconnecting & Rebuilding for Reconciliation

MI Centre, Euston Street, London, NW1 2EZ

Saturday 1st October, 2011



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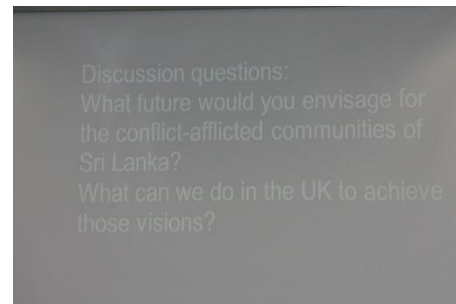
'Voices for Reconciliation' and D G Jayasinghe contributed to this write-up

On 1st October 2011, a capacity crowd of 150 packed the MI Centre, Euston, London for WE SRI LANKA 2011. The event commenced to the beating of 'Magul' drums, lighting of traditional oil lamps, and readings from the holy scriptures of Sri Lanka's four main religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

Speaking eloquently, Chief Guest, HE High Commissioner Dr. Chris Nonis emphasised the vital role of the Sri Lankan Diaspora to **invest in Sri Lanka, and address the thirst for education, jobs and trade**, especially in the North and East.

Then, the group 'Voices for Reconciliation' (VFR) whose aim is to create a multi-ethnic, multi-religious network of British Sri Lankans to bring about **open communication, active engagement and constructive contribution to Sri Lanka** addressed the gathering. Their insightful presentation detailed their trip to Sri Lanka in January 2011, and their personal reactions to what they saw and heard during their week long visit.

A break for refreshments showcasing the **mouthwatering, multi-ethnic cuisine of Sri Lanka** followed. Then, the diverse and lively audience was divided into six groups - each with a VFR facilitator - for a set of **interactive breakout discussions**. The stimuli for discussion were two questions prompting dialogue on the vision for Sri Lanka, and the potential contribution of the Sri Lankan Diaspora in the UK. The ensuing discussions were both engaging and thought-provoking. Key themes that ran through these discussions formed important 'bridging' values across the different ethnicities. For instance, it was broadly agreed that now is the moment to **encourage an inclusive national identity**, built on foundations of mutual acceptance and forgiveness, and shared by Sri Lanka's different communities.





Economic development to raise employment opportunities and living standards, was seen as an essential component of a longer term vision of reconciliation. Many felt that the **media** could serve as a useful platform to broaden awareness of Sri Lanka's pluralist nature as well as promote cross-ethnic dialogue, and should be used more effectively to those ends. **Young people**, both in Sri Lanka and within the Diaspora, were seen as powerful agents of change. It was widely suggested that peace-building initiatives in conjunction with educational bodies such as schools, universities etc., could do much to inform the youth about reconciliation, and inspire them to contribute tangibly and productively to the country's future. It was also felt that as members of the Sri Lankan community in the UK, **the Diaspora** could, and should engage constructively with Sri Lanka on a number of different levels.

It was heartening to hear a diverse range of opinions. However, the important lesson lay less in the many thoughtful individual contributions, and more in how all participants **respectfully interacted** with each other. The discussion highlighted the importance of **appreciating differences of opinion** in order to promote more tolerant communal relations. The **respectful tone** that dominated the discussions was encouraging and inspiring, and left plenty of scope for further activity of this kind, both within interested members of this group, and others in the wider community.

The 2nd half of WE SRI LANKA 2011 featured projects to assist in the **re-building of Sri Lanka's North & East**. They were namely, new computers for the Jaffna Library, scholarships for underprivileged children in Batticaloa, solar power for a village in the North & East, and uplifting war affected children in the Vanni. A **£1,000** was raised in aid of these projects through a combination of ticket sales, donations, pledges and sponsorship. The We Sri Lanka team gratefully acknowledges the sponsors – International Alert, Sri Lankan Airlines and the Bank of Ceylon without whose generous support this event would not have been possible.

WE SRI LANKA – Our Purpose

For over 30 years, Sri Lanka was torn apart by ethnic strife. Now, after the ceasing of hostilities, we look forward to a new era of peace, stability and prosperity. The **absence of war, however, is not the guarantor of a long lasting peace.** Prejudice, mistrust, and racial animosity aggravated by wounds of war remain deep within the psyche of our people.

For a long lasting peace there needs to be a **healing of wounds**, a coming together of the hearts and minds of all Sri Lankans, irrespective of ethnicity or religion. Woodrow Wilson, 28th President of the United States addressing the League of Nations said: **‘Friendship must have a machinery.** If I cannot correspond with you, if I cannot learn your mind, if I cannot cooperate with you, I cannot be your friend, and if the world is to remain a body of friends, it must have the *means* of friendship, the *means* of constant friendly intercourse, the *means* of constant watchfulness over the common interest ...’

Likewise, reconciliation in Sri Lanka needs **strong engagement** between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities especially here in the UK. **You and I** can do so much to encourage openness, good will, dialogue, and understanding among our Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim brethren. **We can help to build trust** and gradually remove the barriers that divide our communities. This is why ‘WE SRI LANKA’ was conceived.

WE SRI LANKA has three key facets. The first is **‘Reconnecting’**, and I salute the **VFR team** for supporting WE SRI LANKA on this front with their path breaking work in promoting **cross ethnic dialogue.** The second is to support partners on the ground in the **‘Rebuilding’** effort in the North and East of Sri Lanka. The third and overarching aim is **‘Reconciliation’** including development of a pluralistic, inclusive ‘Sri Lankan’ identity, hence the theme, **‘Reconnecting & Rebuilding for Reconciliation.’**





Just as Martin Luther King, Jr. dreamed of a day when his children would be judged by the content of their character, and not by the colour of their skin, the **vision for WE SRI LANKA** is a nation where all her children would be judged by the content of their character and contribution, and not by the *language* they speak. I close with the last 3 verses from **'The Call of Lanka,'** the soul stirring ode to Mother Lanka by Rev. W S Senior, Vice Principal, Trinity College, Kandy 1906-16.

*"But most shall he sing of Lanka
In the bright new days that come.
When the races all have blended
And the voice of strife is dumb
When we leap to a single bugle,
March to a single drum.*

*March to a mighty purpose,
One man from shore to shore;
The stranger, becomes a brother,
The task of the tutor o'er,
When the ruined city rises
And the palace gleams once more.*

*Hark! Bard of the fateful future,
Hark! Bard of the bright to be;
A voice on the verdant mountains,
A voice by the golden sea.
Rise, child of Lanka, and answer
Thy mother hath called to thee."*

Don Gihantha Jayasinghe, Ex-Co APSL
Team Leader, WE SRI LANKA



WE SRI LANKA aims to foster reconciliation among all Sri Lankans. We encourage goodwill, dialogue, understanding and mutual trust to remove the barriers that divide us. We affirm the equality, promise and dignity of all our people so we can forge together a shared destiny and a brighter future for our common homeland. We also cherish and celebrate our vibrant cultural heritage and diversity.

If you wish to support us, contact wesrilanka@apsl.org.uk