



WE SRI LANKA 2012

The conflict in Sri Lanka has ended. "We Sri Lanka" was launched in the UK by APSL to reach out to all Sri Lankans – Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Malay and Burgher – so we may understand one another's concerns and aspirations, recognise the humanity common to us, and work together for a bright future for us all.

WE SRI LANKA aims to nurture a plural and inclusive national consciousness that instills a sense of equality and shared purpose among all Sri Lankans, irrespective of ethnicity or religion. We do this by,

- **Reconnecting** people from different ethnic communities within the UK - Sri Lankan diaspora
- **Rebuilding** lives of people living in war affected areas in Sri Lanka, and
- Encouraging understanding, tolerance and **reconciliation** among different ethnic groups, upholding the dignity of all Sri Lankans, and celebrating our rich, cultural diversity.

WE SRI LANKA 2012 was held at Birkbeck College, University of London on October 6th drawing over 100 participants from Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher communities in the UK. The event commenced with a 'Pooja' dance, playing of national anthems, and lighting of traditional lamps. This was followed by silence to remember war victims, and holy readings from Sri Lanka's main religions – Buddhism (Maitri Perera), Hinduism (Priyadarshini Shanthakumar), Islam (Dr Nizar) and Christianity (Antonia Selvarajah).

APSL President, Rohan De Alwis welcomed the gathering with an introduction to APSL and its activities. We Sri Lanka Team Leader, Don Gihantha Jayasinghe called for a personal commitment to remove prejudice, to address alienation, and to uphold the dignity and equality of all Sri Lankans. Compere and APSL Vice President Mervyn Silva then shared the news that Nobel Laureate **Archbishop Desmond Tutu** had enthusiastically commended the 'We Sri Lanka' initiative for the crucial work related to reconciliation. Next, H.E. High Commissioner, **Dr Chris Nonis**, spoke about affirming our 'Sri Lankan' identity, the rapid economic progress in Sri Lanka's North & East of Sri Lanka since the war, and the key role professionals could play in shaping the island's post war future.

Next, **Diaspora Dialogues**, a group of young professionals from Muslim, Sinhala and Tamil backgrounds who visited Sri Lanka in March 2012 accompanied by UK parliamentarians, spoke candidly about their visit. Among the key aims of the group are to identify reconciliation and development needs in Sri Lanka, forge links with local people on the ground, and encourage more UK-Sri Lankans to become actively involved in reconciliation. The group spoke about their experiences, issues affecting Sri Lankan youth like education and unemployment, problems in healthcare, and challenges of resettlement. They demonstrated how reconciliation in Sri Lanka was a complex and gradual process, and that it should include everyone with a Sri Lankan background, regardless of status, age, race or religion - residing in or out of Sri Lanka. They also elaborated on health, arts and culture based projects they were currently engaged in. The group draws inspiration from other Sri Lankan diaspora initiatives, as well as the insight and determination of Sri Lankan people. The group also highlighted the value of appreciating the uniquely personal narratives and diversity of Sri Lankan communities – a source of great strength and potential in post conflict reconciliation. Ayesha Abdeen, Dr Shevanthi Nayagam, Jayan Perera, Nilmini Herath and Dr Asanga Fernando presented for Diaspora Dialogues. Ranjan Perera moderated the Q&As.

Amitav Banerji, Head of Political Affairs at the Commonwealth Secretariat gave the keynote address, 'Nurturing Plural and Inclusive Societies.' He described the Commonwealth as an incredible mosaic based on inclusiveness, consensus, and unity in diversity. He quoted Nelson Mandela who famously remarked, "*The Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity,*" and touched on its core values such as tolerance, democracy, human rights, rule of law, gender equality, freedom of expression and good governance, as well as socio-economic development, health and education, and space for civil society. He then mentioned that transitional justice issues included resolving divisions caused by human rights violations, contributing to the healing process, accountability, restoring rule of law, promoting human rights and a stable peace, preventing recurrence of atrocities, and a sincerity to deal with the truth. He said most reconciliation processes dealt with actions of former governments, so establishing the LLRC, and making the report public were very welcome. However, scars of war take long to heal, and they will never heal if underlying alienation and marginalisation are not addressed, and every Sri Lankan is not able to live a life of dignity and fulfilment. He also said that wounds will remain fresh if accountability is not established to the extent needed, and justice is not seen to be done.

Mr. Banerji pointed out that implementing LLRC recommendations are key to building a durable peace in Sri Lanka, and it was noteworthy there is an Action Plan for this now, as well as a National Human Rights Action Plan. Mr Banerji recognised a lot is being done to rebuild conflict ravaged areas and rehabilitate those uprooted from their homes such as clearing of mines, building infrastructure, resettlement of IDPs and a return to growth. Yet, rebuilding and rehabilitation are not the same as reconciliation – the former involves providing homes and livelihoods, and the latter winning hearts and minds. A durable peace, he concluded, will come from not only building roads, hospitals and schools, and creating jobs, but also by providing political space and representation, applying rule of law, protecting human rights, appropriate devolution of power, and empowering both the majority and minorities, i.e. *by making Sri Lanka truly safe for diversity*. Prof I. M. Dharmadasa moderated the Q&A session, and an exquisite Bharatha Natyam dance by Sharlina Kirubaraj followed.

WE SRI LANKA 2011 raised £1,700 to help rebuild lives in conflict affected areas. Dr Marc Dissanayake handed over a donation to Tyrone Namasivayam of Batticaloa Underprivileged Development Society to support war affected children and widows. A further donation was made to God's Own Children's Foundation to help educate war affected children in the Vanni. Finally, Jaffna Library received two new computers thanks to the generosity of Sir Sabaratnam Arulkumaran and Dr Indrajit Coomaraswamy. Mahesh De Silva then spoke about the upcoming APSL Research Seminar in Sheffield.

Following a break for tasty Sri Lankan refreshments, the audience were treated to a 'Fusion' dance by Sayuri Serasinghe, Erandi Harshini and Indula Bopitiya. A panel discussion on 'Road to Reconciliation' with Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Burgher community representatives followed. **Mr Dai Liyanage** said there is nothing wrong to be proud of your country or language, but narrow minded extremism and exclusion of other communities was unacceptable. He added it is now time to put away differences and work together for a common purpose. **Mr Vairamuttu Varadakumar** said reconciliation is critical for Sri Lanka having experienced intense political violence, but it is not about just forgiving and forgetting. Accountability, transparency and honesty were needed to counter fear, uncertainty and anger. He felt it was imperative to build trust at grassroots level, bringing together ordinary citizens, educators, scholars and social/cultural workers. He asked for victim centred initiatives to heal wounds and help traumatised communities towards reconciliation and stability. Sri Lankans expect compromise, collaboration and creative peace-building from political leaders of all communities, he added. **Mr Amjad Mohammed Saleem** asked the diaspora to fully explore their role in reconciliation, revisit the LLRC, and articulate practical steps, mindful of issues around governance, religious tension and identity. He said people should no longer think in ethnic silos but ask difficult questions while realising our limitations as a diaspora. **Ms Rochelle Mortier** advocated a Sri Lanka where benefits of development are evenly distributed and violent conflict - Sri Lankan killing Sri Lankan - never takes place again. She added that if Sri Lankan identity is reduced to only Sinhala Buddhism or Tamil Eelam, it would reduce us all. The priorities are an inclusive State, strengthening independent rule of law, and justice for all, irrespective of income, race, religion, caste or class. Dr Andrew Nayagam moderated the Q&As.

The final item were audience break-out groups facilitated by **Diaspora Dialogues**, Dominic Perera and Nikini Jayatunge of **Voices for Reconciliation**, and **APSL's** Mohan Siriwardena, Suraj Wijendra and Chandima Sriwardhana. **Key learnings** included addressing poverty and basic needs like clean water, working with local people, appreciating language barriers and diversity of opinions, gaining broader perspectives, need for an inclusive identity, the complexity of reconciliation, and that it is everyone's responsibility, and the inspiration drawn from the visit by the young professionals. **Key actions to support reconciliation** included creating livelihoods, infrastructure development, demilitarisation, asking right questions, more honest, regular interaction between the Sinhala and Tamil diaspora, collaboration between 1st and 2nd generations, dialogue with the Sri Lankan government (to influence policy), good governance, challenging current political parties, educating others and reducing misinformation, spreading positive news about projects in Sri Lanka, sponsoring children, and having a roadmap for reconciliation – like South Africa. Gayani Senaratne officiated the raffle draw in the presence of **Deputy High Commissioner, Mr M R K Lenagala**. The event concluded with APSL General Secretary Leslie Dep making the vote of thanks, and the playing of the beautiful song of reconciliation 'We are Sri Lankan.'

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