

33rd Niwano Peace Prize awarded to Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka

Our present world is characterized by continuous and new conflicts, some fueled by the misuse of religion, by tensions between communities, and by many natural and man-made disasters. In the face of these many challenges, the need for intra- and inter-religious dialogue and co-operation among diverse religious societies is more critical than ever.

The Niwano Peace Prize was established to honor individuals and organizations that contribute significantly to interreligious cooperation, and to encourage similar efforts across the globe. Those honored have often worked in a self-sacrificing manner. The Prize seeks to recognize their persistent, but sometimes little recognized and appreciated, and courageous efforts to promote peace and to stir hope in the midst of violence and cynicism.

The Niwano Peace Prize is now being awarded for the 33rd time. During the past five years the Prize was awarded to three noble women and two men, reflecting the growing recognition of the role of women religious leaders in peace building and peace-making. It has been ten years since the Prize was awarded to an organization.

The task of the eleven members of the Niwano Peace Prize International Selection Committee is no doubt a challenging one. This year, as every year, there were many merited candidates in different categories: male and female individuals, and organizations and institutions. In making its decision, the Committee carefully considered the criteria of Niwano Peace Prize winners: peace orientation, spirituality and religious faith, commitment to interreligious cooperation, and qualitative and quantitative activities advancing peace.

According to the Committee's unanimous decision, the 33rd Niwano Peace Prize will be awarded to the Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation, cpbr, in Sri Lanka.

While a relatively small island of twenty-two million people, Sri Lanka is a diverse country, home to multiple religions, ethnic groups, and languages. The country has suffered decades of violence and a civil war, which was ended only in 2009. Making things worse, Sri Lanka was hit by the deadly Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. Despite several efforts through the years to do so, the government has not succeeded in advancing lasting reconciliation among Sri Lanka's main communities, the Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim and Christian.

The end of the war brought new hope for sustainable peace, but the challenges to its achievement remain large, including historical grievances, institutionalized injustices and corruption, and the traumatic legacy of decades of violence, disappearances, and displacement. Efforts to advance peace are made complicated by ongoing and new

forms of violence and bigotry in recent years, especially targeting Sri Lanka's Muslim community.

The Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation was founded in 2002 by Dishani Jayaweera and Jayantha Seneviratne, who are also life partners and Sinhala Buddhists by birth. Dishani Jayaweera, a dynamic attorney from Colombo, quit her profession in order to answer to a deeper calling. Through cpbr, she now works closely with people throughout Sri Lanka in order to create a peaceful and just society. She works alongside university professor Jayantha Seneviratne, who is a recognized expert on conflict resolution.

According to Dishani, reconciliation is best advanced by a group of people from diverse backgrounds coming together to lead the way through example and encouragement, rather than only through social movements led by and dependent on a few individuals. The diverse staff and wider community that constitutes the cpbr family represents this diversity, and it is their collective efforts that have had an impact in Sri Lanka and provide an inspiration for peacebuilding in the wider world. Therefore, the whole organizational team of cpbr is being awarded the 33rd Niwano Peace Prize.

Cpbr is a non-profit organization promoting peacebuilding, peace-making and non-violent conflict transformation. It supports personal and societal transformation within and between ethnic, religious, linguistic and regional communities in Sri Lanka, working at all the grassroots, local and national levels. To achieve goals of national reconciliation, the cpbr focuses those considered to hold the greatest influence and promise for transformation: religious leaders, women, and young people.

Cpbr was formed to address the root causes of conflict by first building trust and friendship among people from diverse communities to rebuild the social ties destroyed by decades of war. When fruitful dialogue brings about appreciation of the "other," only then can true and sustainable conflict transformation occur through collaborative action effecting wider societal and political transformation. Cpbr also worked on post-tsunami community re-building efforts by bringing together people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds for training in collaborative problem-solving and livelihood skills.

Cpbr aims for a united Sri Lanka built on a democratic state based on power-sharing, decentralization and heterogeneity in which all people can live in peace, harmony and dignity, and where distinct ethnic and religious identities are appreciated and celebrated equally. Cpbr's process of building peace, and even the manner in which the team makes decisions, reflects these wider goals. The work of cpbr is underpinned by a head-heart-hand approach, enhanced by a strong belief in

participation and local ownership. Cpbr believes that local people have the power to find their own solutions to their conflicts. The mission of cpbr is to help make this happen.

Cpbr's methodology and operating principles have led them to win the trust and respect of diverse actors and communities throughout Sri Lanka, even during periods when those involved in peace activities faced sharp public criticism and government scrutiny. This trust, and their commitment to the cause, has ensured their persistent collaboration with communities even when cynicism and polarization between communities was high, the space for peace activities was small, and the risks to peacebuilders were big.

The current initiatives of cpbr are:

1) Interfaith Dialogue (IFD) initiatives – Diversity, Dignity, Democracy

While religion can be a spiritually healing power and a vital resource of consolation for human beings caught in the midst of violence and suffering, so too can religion be an instrument to fuel hatred, distrust or brutality. Understanding this reality, and the influential role of religious leaders from all faiths within Sri Lanka to shape society, this cpbr initiative works with religious leaders throughout the country to draw from their traditions inspiration and resources for reconciliation and peace among all communities. Male and female clergy in this initiative engage in both intra- and inter-faith dialogue and collaborative action for peace, in a sustained manner that allows for honest, deep, and transformational engagement.

2) Voice of Image (VOI) initiative – Represent Your Presence

Freshness, originality, spirit and novelty are the utmost characteristics of youth. Youth have a different view on the world and life, seeing the world with new eyes, and able to envision a new future for Sri Lanka. Cpbr's Voice of Image initiative is designed to give a voice to the often unheard stories and dreams of Sri Lanka's youth of both genders.

3) WOMAN initiative – Spirit, Soil, Soul

The WOMAN initiative is a powerful and creative approach for women ready to explore and discover themselves and their hidden power to build peace and new forms of life in Sri Lankan soil. The initiative combines relationship-building between women from diverse backgrounds, sharing their common loss and suffering experienced during Sri Lanka's war, with skills training in peace and sustainable living through eco-friendly gardening and practices.

As demonstrated especially by the last initiative, along with its noble approaches and brave activities for peace and reconciliation, cpbr's efforts reflect also the vision and

goals of the Paris Climate Change Agreement and of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

Let us hope that many more groups and actors in different parts of the globe will follow the example of Sri Lanka's Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation.