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PEACE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Sri Lanka Unites: Future Leader's Conference: 7th - 11th August 2009, Thulheriya, Sri Lanka

A report by Rosamund Bale, a medical student at Leicester.

“We will not let the hatred of the past control the present and destroy our future”

Youth and Reconciliation

Thanks to the R. J. Barker fund I was able to attend the first Future Leader's Conference (FLC) organised by the Sri Lankan youth movement Sri Lanka Unites (SLU). The movement aims to encourage and empower youth of Sri Lanka to take their part in reshaping the future of their divided nation; to become a voice for change, hope, and reconciliation. A five day residential conference held in the central location of Thulheriya, Sri Lanka, was an opportunity for diverse young people from across the country to come together to learn and participate in peace and reconciliation activities. It was the first conference of this scale organised by the movement with the hope it will become an annual event.

Beautiful Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a gem of an island with outstanding natural beauty, flora and fauna, and an extraordinarily welcoming people. The ‘Sri Lankan smile’ characterises vitality and warmth of so many of its people though its history has been marred by long-standing civil war. The country remains understated on the global stage; to many people it is even unknown. In the shadow of India it is a small drop in the Indian Ocean with palm-lined sandy beaches and hot sun, beautiful forests, hills, national parks and tea-plantations and, of course, a fervent following of cricket. Sadly, despite the potential of Sri Lanka as a tourist destination – an industry that tries to sustain the livelihoods of many – its destructive history has prevented it from flourishing, not aided by the devastating effects of the 2004 South Asian tsunami.

A Country at War

It was following the tsunami that I first made my connection with Sri Lanka. Through a joint venture between Durham University (where I was a student at the time) and Sarvodaya (a Sri Lankan NGO) I became irrevocably linked with a community on the south coast of Sri Lanka – travelling out to work there for periods of two months in 2006, 2007 and 2008. Following this latter period of work I stayed in Sri Lanka for an additional four months to work primarily with Sarvodaya. My base was the country's capital, Colombo.

During my visits the ensuing conflict was largely contained in the northern and eastern parts of the country. Though I was personally aware of it, Sri Lanka's long and bloody civil war could easily have passed unnoticed to any visitor to the south of the island. Indeed it was only after moving up to Colombo and when work took me out to the east and north-central parts that I could really see the impact of the war on day to day life and some of its tragedies became much more apparent. In the city army checkpoints seemed to be on every corner and suicide bombings were a reality. On roads out towards the north and east checkpoints continued to line

the way and bus journeys were regularly interrupted to check every traveller's identity and to search the vehicle.

The comparatively peaceful south was not, however, free from tension. In the communities in which I worked it was evident that many people harboured stereotyped and prejudiced attitudes towards the 'other' and that ethnic tensions infiltrated everyday life. Ignorance and misunderstanding was commonplace, in turn fostering hatred in this otherwise beautiful country.

Voices for Change

About this time last year Sri Lanka began to feature in the British headlines more and more as the civil conflict – concentrated largely in the north of the country by then – was progressing towards a climactic end. Horrific stories of civilian casualties flooded our newspapers and Sri Lankan diaspora around the world mobilised in protest. Within Sri Lanka, the youth movement Sri Lanka Unites was preparing to take its message to a large number and range of young people by way of its conference – to inspire youth to grasp the ideals of toleration and reconciliation and to equip them with skills to become young leaders with voices for change.

I came to know of SLU through a Sri Lankan university friend, co-founder of the movement and subsequently vice-president. Often in discussion about their plans both whilst I stayed in Sri Lanka and once I had returned to England, I was keen to continue involvement. Following the official end of the conflict last year the timing of the conference could not have been more pertinent so I was thrilled to have the opportunity to go back to Sri Lanka in August last year to volunteer my services.

The 2009 Future Leader's Conference

SLU granted scholarships to students aged 15-19 from schools from across the country to join the FLC, all expenses paid. SLU is targeting youth from far reaching geographical areas and diverse ethnic, religious and economic backgrounds. The current youth are the so-called 'war generation' – having grown up knowing only a country at war (whether directly affected or not), and the movement recognises the potential for this generation to impact the future for the better. The youth of today have a unique opportunity in the history of their country and SLU is endeavouring to support and encourage the best young leaders to step out in hope. The students selected were those considered by their schools to have greatest potential as future leaders – often prefects, sports captains or other top-performers. Around 350 students were able to attend, with an additional number of accompanying teachers, Sri Lankan youth volunteers and international volunteers. The main themes of reconciliation and hope for a better future ran throughout, crucially intertwined with practical leadership material to enable the young people into action in their own communities and schools following the conference.

Following arrival, registration and formation of 10 multi-ethnic teams on Day One, Day Two of the conference tackled 'The Chaos of a Divided Nation and the Results of Division'; Day Three looked at 'The Potential of Sri Lanka'; Day Four focused on 'The Leader in You'; and Day Five followed the ultimate theme of 'United We Stand'. An emotionally charged session, focussing solely on reconciliation, saw Sinhalese and Tamil students embracing each other to regret past wrongs and make a united stand for a better future. It was a poignant climax to the five days before a closing ceremony sent the excited young people back to their respective communities.

Throughout the conference various talks were led by eminent Sri Lankan figures political, business and humanitarian backgrounds. Smaller group sessions provided space for discussion of key ideas and focussed activities including art, drama and music. Experiential learning sessions led by a visiting team from India encouraged change in individual and team perceptions regarding success and achievement whilst sports sessions helped to evoke friendly rivalry between the multi-ethnic teams – breaking down the barriers they were used to in their own communities in favour of new and diverse friendships. Students were split up from their school friends for the duration of the conference: where possible the teams ate and slept together but most importantly learnt together. All teams were challenged to communicate and bond despite language barriers and to create lasting friendships despite their ethnic, religious, cultural and economic differences. Many found that their differences were far outweighed by their similarities. Whilst country politics had previously forced

people to stand up as Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, or Burger the youth made a stand to be first and foremost Sri Lankan – respecting each other’s differences and uniting as one nation.

Since it was once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for most of the students, the organisers also ensured top entertainment from popular music artists who supported their endeavours and secured a visit from Sri Lankan cricketing idol Sanath Jayasuriya who came to speak from his own experiences and encourage the students in their missions.

I had the pleasure and honour of being one of the team leaders, paired with a tri-lingual Sri Lankan volunteer, to mentor a group of 33. We facilitated small group discussion, driving forward topics of peace, reconciliation, hope, and ultimately action – challenging what they would do once they returned to their communities. The students were able to examine the negative stereotypes that they had often grown up with and were given the opportunity to replace them with new-found respect for each other. Each and every student took something away with them from the conference that will hopefully have some continuing influence in their lives and the choices they make.

Continuing Work

The hard work of SLU is actually in the follow-up, however, and in many ways I am disappointed that I cannot be a bigger part of it. The SLU committee and available volunteers have been visiting each and every participating school to enable the formation of SLU Clubs through which the young leaders can carry out reconciliation activities in their own communities. Contacts made between the students and teachers during the conference should also lead to school groups from across the country joining hands to assist reconciliation activities in areas other than their own, facilitated by SLU funds. Many of the young people expressed a keen interest to help the huge numbers of war-displaced people held in camps in the north and also to join with the students from Jaffna in the northern peninsular to help with potential reconciliation and reconstruction activities. Once access to the north is stabilised and secured (it had taken some effort to bring the students down from the north due to high security issues), the potential for such activities to take place should dramatically improve.

I am immensely grateful to the R. J. Barker fund for the donation that allowed me to participate and assist with SLU’s Future Leader’s Conference. I am participating in April’s Brighton Marathon to raise money for the sponsorship of more students to attend this year’s conference in August. I firmly believe in the values that the SLU movement purports and will continue to support them and follow their process.

Further information regarding Sri Lanka Unites may be found from their website: www.srilankaunites.org whilst videos from last year’s conference, including official media footage, may be found on youtube.com.

The SLU Mission and Vision:

The Sri Lanka Unites movement represents the choice of Sri Lanka's youth, from all ethnic and religious groups - to rise up and provide a new voice.

Vision:

- To unite the youth of Sri Lanka from all ethnic and religious groups in a movement which provides hope and facilitates reconciliation in Sri Lanka, paving the way for a peaceful and prosperous Sri Lanka for future generations.
- To celebrate and value the diversity of Sri Lanka’s different ethnic and religious heritages, each of which enrich our lives as common citizens of Sri Lanka. To see the combined strength of all young people in our diverse nation used to secure peace and prosperity.
- To create a united Sri Lanka where young people are intentional about working together with members of different ethnicities, religions, classes and castes for the sustainable development of our beautiful nation.

- To transform the youth of Sri Lanka into people who have hope for their future and their country; who are proactive in working for the positive development of mother Lanka.

Rosamund Bale

Prayer

Universal God you have made all nations and you have made us different. You have also willed that we should live in peace and in Christ you provided the means so “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for *we* are all one in Christ Jesus”. Bless all those who work to make this oneness a reality. **Amen.**

Note from the Secretary, Rev. Maurice Wright, (01743 873 633) mhw@surfree.co.uk, 3, Cornwall Dr. Shrewsbury, SY3 0EP).

We are grateful to Rosamund for providing this edition. We needed a window into Sri Lanka after the Civil war and Rosamund has provided it. We are therefore delighted that the R. J. Barker Fund has been put to such good use in enabling her to make this visit. If you would like to sponsor her in the marathon you can contact her by email rosamundbale@yahoo.co.uk.

The MPF membership leaflet and back copies of P21C can be found on our web site for those able to access it. It is www.mpf.org.uk.

Our efforts to find a secretary have so far failed. We believe we have an editor for P21C who will bring a bit of youth to the job. He also has desk-top publishing skills so you may expect an improvement in layout! John Cooper who works part time for in the Methodist Church International Affairs office and part-time for FOR is considering it. The secretary will deal with calling meetings, minutes, arrangements for the Conference and carrying out decisions of the Executive etc. There is a separate membership secretary.

The 2010 Conference - AGM and Conference Meeting.

Monday 28th June at Eastney Methodist Church, Portsmouth.

AGM at 4.30 p.m. followed by tea (approx 6.15 p.m.)

Public Meeting at 8.00 p.m. “Peacemaking in Sri Lanka and Peacebuilding in Sheffield”

Speakers: Rev. Dr. Inderjit Bhogal OBE, Miss Rosamund Bale and Rev. Dr. Kenneth Greet.

Chair: Mr. Denis Beaumont.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth Greet will be handing over to his successor as President. Rev. Dr. Inderjit Bhogal has been nominated but as with all appointments other nominations can be made for this and the other jobs and for membership of the Executive. Inderjit is at present Director of Yorkshire Humber Faiths Forum. Hans King wrote that there can never be peace in the world unless there is peace between religions. Rosamund of course is the writer of this paper and will give a presentation including photos from Sri Lanka. You can get more information from me about nominations for various officers and Executive membership but it should be done before 10th June.

Maurice

Donation may be sent to John Young, Shalfleet, Dunston Heath, Stafford, ST18 9AN

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