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Untiring Grassroot Efforts for Peace-building

*From your Editor
Ms. Joy A. Bastian*

Peace has a broad definition and a wide semantic range that comprises the notion of totality, wholeness, completeness, success, free from fear and disturbance, harmony, security and well-being.

According to the 2018 Global Peace Index, the average level of peacefulness has declined for the fourth consecutive year, falling by 0.27 percent in 2017.



Lighting of candles for the united prayer during the Interfaith Festival. Photo courtesy of Ms. Khawn Taung, Myanmar.

To initiate more effective and suitable situation-based peacebuilding efforts is urgent. Here, a handful of experiences for peacebuilding by Ms. Tohmeena (Thailand), Sr. Christine (Sri Lanka), Mr. Wahab (Afghanistan), Ms. Taung (Myanmar), and Ms. Watanabe (Japan) could hopefully inspire the world to keep on going. They tried approaches like inclusion of interfaith activities, mental health services in mobile clinics, literacy, advocacy, networking, and stakeholders collaboration. The role of the government, non-government, faith-based groups, self-help groups and the ordinary people is very crucial to attain peace.

Let us remind ourselves that there is no single formula to secure peace because every case is different. Other things like culture, literacy, gender, demographics, economics, geopolitics, international laws, and foreign policies must be considered. The binding understanding is however the same: Lasting peace all over the world.

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FOCUS ARTICLES

Grassroot Initiative for Peacebuilding
Ms. Pechdau Tohmeena, ILDC 2008
Department of Mental Health, Ministry of
Public Health, Thailand

1. Background information

A 10-year-old Muslim girl witnessed a bomb incident in front of her school in Narathiwat Province. She was not physically hurt and thus was not sent to the hospital. One week after the bombing, however, her behavior began to change. She dare not leave her mother's sight or go outside the house, including to school. She was overcome with fear at the site of uniformed persons, such as soldiers and policemen, whom she angrily cursed when she saw them. After a year of such behavior, she was taken to the hospital. Had her teacher known the signs of trauma, she likely would not have suffered so long and lost a year of schooling.



Ms. P. Tohmeena

In 2004 the conflict between the Thai government and the militant group resisting to National Siamese sovereignty erupted in Thailand's four southernmost provinces where major population is Muslim. The conflict has claimed more than 7,103 lives in over 15 years. (Source: Deep South Watch, February 2020)

2. Interventions

The mental health practitioners based in the south were in no way trained to cope with trauma associated with violent conflict. The only psychiatric hospital in the region was located in Songkla Province to serve seven provinces. For the provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala, where violence was overwhelming, there was only one psychiatrist posted in the latter.

Due to the quickly escalating violence, the director general of the Department of

Mental Health in Bangkok expected immense number of mental health issues, at a level beyond the capacity of local health services to cope with. They had to deal with individuals suffering from trauma which is normally treatable. They also needed help in rebuilding community trust when the conflict subsides. Due to this enormous demand, the director general requested that I moved from Bangkok to my native province of Pattani in late 2004. There I was expected to build a mental health response unit, which was the first mental health office in the deep south.

Local staff were hired such as psychologists, social workers, and public health officers who were tasked to help identify the needs in the communities. Initially, focus group discussions were conducted among three separated groups of people: 1) patients and victims' families; 2) government officers, soldiers and teachers; and 3) health professionals. In the discussions, everyone said, "Help me, help me". They all talked about stress and their inability to deal with it.

The government officers wanted to know how to protect themselves, especially the teachers, who were perceived as being targeted by the insurgents. The health workers, especially the nurses, said they understood grief or being upset, but they were not prepared to deal with violent conflict. Severe traumatic psychology stress was a new problem for many of them.

My team decided to bring the local bachelor degree graduates in psychology to respond to the trauma that people had. However, this needed at least two years to complete the specialized training and refresher courses. During the first two years, the Ministry of Public Health deployed, on a voluntary and monthly rotation basis, psychiatrist nurses, psychologists and social workers along with general practitioners and other needed specialists. These volunteering professionals worked at the hospitals in the three



Map of Southern Thailand

provinces. However, it was hard to establish trust with patients because the volunteer staff (especially for mental health treatment) cannot really consistently work there. The patients have to take counsel from different mental health workers which made it more difficult to establish trust.



Trained psychologists to support the trauma rehabilitation process. (left, Ms. Tohmeena)

The local graduates who signed up for the two-years mental health crisis course comprised a mix of Muslims and Buddhists so that they would not have religious bias against the patients. The curriculum included psychological first aid, crisis intervention, home visits, psychological resilience, counseling and cognitive behavioral therapy. The trainees were provided with operational guideline to conduct mental health rehabilitation. Depending on the subject, individual courses varied in duration. Some parts of the training were instructed in Bangkok.

Starting from 14 trainees in the first year, 74 trained psychologists were produced by the end of the fourth year. There were no quota for any religions representation among the trainees - the only emphasis was each trainee had to be a local resident who has empathy for the patients and strong will toward peace. A total of 80% Muslim and 20% Buddhist were trained.

The trainers were experts from Bangkok. Most of them did not have direct experience in violent conflict. The useful articles from international journals were also summarized and translated into Thai for the trainees for reference. The ideas from these articles were then tested on the group of local residents, like relaxation techniques.

In 2008, after the training was completed, a Mental Health Rehabilitation Unit was set up in each of the 37 district hospitals across the three Southernmost provinces and four districts in Songkla Province. Each unit is staffed with a general practitioner, a

psychiatric nurse and at least one psychologist (depending on the population and the incidence of violence). They are technically supervised by the 12th Mental Health Center in Pattani, which in turn, is supervised by the Department of Mental Health in Bangkok.



Outreach activity at the village level.

In the implementation, however, most of the patients were not willing to visit the hospital in the beginning. There has been a stigma in the community against mental illness which discouraged the patients to access to the mental health service. Stigma involves three elements such as 1) ignorance (lack of knowledge), 2) prejudice (negative attitudes), and 3) discrimination (people behaving in ways that disadvantaged the stigmatized person).



Mobile clinic deployed to give easy access to people who need counseling and other psychosocial support.

In the deep south of Thailand where the conflict occurred, the measures to stigma alleviation have been delayed. Therefore, we provided mental health education in the community. The target was focused on the specific groups who have influence over the people, for example teachers, community leaders, and religious leaders in the affected areas. The people were made to understand that mental health problems are common and affect people of all ages, backgrounds and cultures. And that they are not a barrier to living a fulfilling and successful life.

After providing mental health care for in-patients and out-patients, the psychologists did home visit of the patients at least three times for follow-ups. It was a key to success to cure mental health. We also deployed mobile clinics to reach the people who stayed away to access the mental health services for fear of social stigma. We emphasized in the mobile clinic that they are not “crazy” patients. What was happening to them is a part of normal life — a normal reaction to abnormal situations.

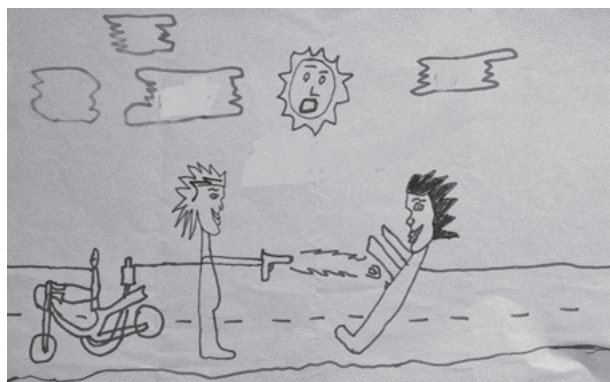
3. Trauma in Children



Children going home after school.

Children and youth have been severely suffering from the trauma related to war. Those who were victims of torture, detainees, and the family members of the victims of extrajudicial killing were also traumatized. To this end, there is a strong need to be strengthen the local mental health networks.

For the integrated rehabilitation of these children, the Happy School Model was developed with financial assistance from UNICEF in 2014. We promoted collaboration among the school, hospital and community by involving students and teachers, religious and community leaders, psychologists, parents, and other community people. They shared and discussed what is necessary to be a happy school for victimized children.



A child's drawing as part of trauma therapy.

Twenty areas were chosen and only 11 participated in the Happy School Model project because of the willingness of communities, teachers and hospital staff. They produced manuals or guidelines to be used by the school, hospital and community. These manuals contained information on how to respond to violence, psychological first aid, and activities at school to reduce mental problem. A big challenge facing us is on how to expand to other areas and who will be the host to conduct the project.

4. Self Help Group



Organizing women's club.

We organized self-help groups especially the widows. Based on their needs, we did mental health counseling (for self and family), skills training for single mothers, training for financial management, employment and job training (as needed and/or upon request) by individuals or groups, and follow-up contact. A total of 23 self groups now formed a Community-based Social Organization named Peace Agenda of Women (PAOW) in 2015. It became a social women platform aiming to help victims of violence. PAOW has been recognized and acknowledged as potential players to build peace between both parties —the Government and

the insurgent group. They demanded that all armed forces on both sides shall cease violence. They also asked for a public space as a safety zone. PAOW is hopeful that the peace talk will be held soon and the Thai new government will consider all the aforementioned demands.

Short note :

The writer resigned from the government office and got the seat as a Member of Parliament in Thailand in 2019. She can hopefully influence policies particularly to prevent violence on children in the future, eyeing on health as a bridge for peace.



Ms. Pechdau Tohmeena (standing), making an appeal to the members of the parliament in Thailand.

A Sri Lankan Nun Heals Religious Tension After the Easter Massacre
Sr. Noel Christine, ILDC 1991, Srambibani Kendraya, Sri Lanka

Note: Edited version of excerpt from Al Jazeera News August 11, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/easter-massacre-sri-lanka-nun-heals-religious-tension-190810192323005.html>

1. The tension



Sr. Christine

One Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, about 149 residents were neutralized inside the St. Sebastian Church in Katuwapitiya, Negombo, Sri Lanka. Their lives were claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS) group. The attack targeted three churches and three high-end hotels, killing

at least 253 people and injured 500 — the bloodiest outbreak of violence to hit Sri Lanka since the end of the 26-year civil war in 2009.

Over the last 40 years, Sr. Christine who is a nun and activist, has built trust with every family in Katuwapitiya. She rushed to Katuwapitiya only after the bomb blast and found chaos at the church. Sr. Christine relives the Easter Sunday carnage almost every morning. For two weeks after witnessing the bloodshed, she helped the victims who were in the hospital by providing psychosocial services.

Hours after the violence, Sri Lanka’s Catholic Cardinal Ranjith advised parishioners to remain calm and warned them against seeking retribution. As they reflected on the period since the massacre, it appeared to some Catholics that the Cardinal is not the reconciliatory figure he posed to be.

On June 3, he visited a Buddhist monk in the central city of Kandy who was on a hunger strike for the removal of all Muslim ministers in the government. They all resigned promptly. On July 21, at the commemoration of the bombing at St Sebastian’s Church, the Cardinal told the congregants: "The current leaders have failed. They have no backbone. They must leave the government and go home."

2. An activist and a nun



Sr. Christine facilitating a group discussion to make a plan of action during the 2017 Sri Lanka Reunion Seminar

According to Sr. Christine: "It was a sad event. Many of our people have lost their loved ones. But the real tragedy is the way victims have been treated. I have been attending to their needs. Many of them do not want to hear the Cardinal talking politics."

While supporting the attack survivors and victims' families, Sr. Christine now spends some of her time trying to heal divisions stoked by Sri Lanka's religious and political leaders. She talks to the members of the Catholic community in Katuwapitiya. She also holds discussions with other religious groups like Buddhists, Muslims and other Christians.

"We are calling for justice for the victims of the bomb blasts. But the government seems not doing anything to help them. These people need to be taken cared of. The government still has no plan of action," she said.

The prime minister's office has set up the Office of Reparation to compensate the victims' families. It has compensated them 283.3 million Sri Lankan Rupees (\$106m) - one million (\$5,650) to each of the 189 families who have made claims.

Sr. Christine said she is aware of cases where families feel forgotten. "I visited one home where the lady died, and her husband and two children were now without a wife and mother. They had all lived in a small one-bedroom house," Sr. Christine said. "They told me that it was sad a bomb had to destroy the community for the world to know how poor their family is."

In the aftermath of the attacks, Sri Lankan authorities have used counter-terror laws to arbitrarily arrest and detain Muslim residents. Most of them are the refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries to be secured. These refugees faced the threat of "retaliatory" attacks after that fatal Easter Sunday. They had to be relocated from their homes to local police stations for protection.

She mobilized her network to preach peace. "We formed our women's group. We want Negombo to be safe," she said. "We have to be good neighbors. If there is a problem arising in a shop or in the streets, we get a call and we go there to stop violence from spreading."

3. Not that easy

Despite her efforts to mediate and heal the wounds of terror, she is now facing discrimination from Sri Lankan Muslims — who also face threats of violence and arbitrary arrests. Some local Muslims have refused to assist her, or even serve her in their shops or restaurants, because they disagree with her helping the Pakistani refugees — the majority of whom are Ahmadi Muslim, a persecuted religious minority.

Sr. Christine said: "Some Muslims that we worked with, believed that the Ahmadis are from a lower caste. Some Catholic nuns and priests do not agree with us giving support to any Muslims. There are many barriers along the way. In fact the Pope's pronouncement that we have to be a contradiction to the world of injustice has gone by the wind."

Sr. Christine attended the interfaith meeting held in Colombo at an Anglican Church. There were representatives from the Muslim community and the Buddhist community. This meeting was helpful to assure the solidarity with the Muslims who felt insecure because of growing animosity. Furthermore, she visited the injured ones in the hospital with a Buddhist nun who also performed her religious rites for the Christians. Together with several community organizations, Sr. Christine formed a citizens committee which comprises of people of all faiths.

4. Her desire for justice



Joining campaign for land rights.

Sr. Christine's dream was to become a flight attendant until she met an Irish nun who changed her outlook on life. Her life's work began during her training period in Kaluwella, Galle in 1971 when a little girl she loved and cared was killed during insurrection. "I looked after homeless children. After this, I realized I wanted to work for justice," she said, adding that she has faced a backlash for her activism. A parliamentary select committee is investigating whether this instability in government contributed to a failure to take warnings of an attack seriously.

Back in Negombo, Father Sarath Iddamalgoda reflects on his 40 years of community outreach work alongside Sr. Christine. The two have fought on behalf of the homeless and impoverished fishermen's families in Negombo. They have also been fighting for accountability - not just for the victims of the Easter Sunday attacks but for all of

those whose voices are being ignored by religious and political leaders.



Fr. Sarah Iddamalgotla and Sr. Christine reflecting on their long years of fighting for the rights of the oppressed.

Sr. Christine credits the younger Catholic nuns and interfaith activists for giving her the energy to continue. "The church has to tolerate me. I am almost 70," Sr. Christine said. "In Negombo, we, of all faiths and races have come together as a united group. This will make it easier to reconcile while many are still dividing Sri Lanka."

Integrating Literacy to Peace Initiatives in the Perennial Armed Conflict in Afghanistan
Mr. Abdul Wahab, ILDC 2011
Your Voice Organization, Afghanistan



Mr. Wahab

1. Background

The basic human needs such as health and education are not yet met in Afghanistan due to the long time armed conflicts. Although the many kinds of international assistance brought some improvements, the constant reconstruction is still far away.

The Taliban regime (1996 to 2001), which prohibited female education, gave huge damage on the educational system. According to the 2015 Report of UNESCO, the adult literacy rate in Afghanistan is still 38.2% (52% for male and 24.2% for female), making it one of the countries with the lowest literacy rate in the world, ranked 155th out of 160. Those who could not get education and became over 15 years old have much difficulty in returning



Women are busy learning in an informal class.

to schools. Otherwise, they are busy working for the family or feel ashamed of going to school for their age. The situation is even worse in rural areas, due to the lack of school facilities and teachers, weak government administration, weaker economic base, lower interest in education, unstable security situation and strict cultural barrier against female education.

Violence has been common in daily lives. Guns, and arms have spread in families and local communities. Once a local conflict occurs, a party of the conflict asks an outsider for armed support, while the other party asks another outsider for armed support, leading to bigger violence. Children in Afghanistan are also affected by this influence. There are also cases where children are taught to fight. Therefore, peace, and non-violence education and mutual learning in the families and local communities are increasingly necessary.

2. The Your Voice Organization



Your Voice Organization training.

Your Voice Organization (YVO) has localized in March 2019 with the direct supervision and support from Japan International Volunteer Center (JVC). For more than 10 years of our community health and peace activities, we have recognized the impor-

tance of literacy skills. They need to acquire minimum literacy, guarantee their right to learn and raise their dignity for living in peace. We are implementing projects in various aspects of non-formal education, and community peace-building in the province of: Nangarhar, Khiwa, Khogani, Pachirawagam, Chaparhar, and Rodat Districts.

3. Education (Adult literacy)

The adult literacy program is following some steps for better implementation as stated.

1) Identifying Village Partner Groups (PGs)

To implement the project smoothly and safely, YVO organizes voluntary Partner Groups (PGs) for every village of our project area. The PGs select suitable places for literacy classes, potential teachers and participants. This is particularly important for facilitating female participants. Considering the traditional background, we select three male members for each PG. The Health Committees (HCs), the local group of village leaders, that we organized and had implemented community health activities are also the member of PGs. Mostly, the PGs are set up by the elder of the community. The role of PGs is to give advice for implementing the project smoothly and mental support to make cooperative atmosphere in the villages. Some of the teachers of the first year continue with YVO on the second year in the same areas where the need for literacy is high.

2) Selecting and training teachers



Health Committee members in a meeting.

YVO selects 10 teachers to implement 10 literacy course per year. They are chosen according to the five criteria with the cooperation of the directorate of education and partners group of the villages.

Teachers learn the basic skill of teaching and simple class management for the pre-class training. During the literacy classes, we provide training for class management and effective way of teaching. We also

support management of class by having meetings of teachers, PGs, and YVO in order to solve issues and problems encountered, and follow up.

3) Implementation and awareness raising



Participants received certificates for completing the Literacy Class and Awareness-Raising.

We established one male and one female class at five villages of districts. A Class runs two hours a day. Each class consists of 25 to 30 students, though we also have to expect some dropouts after starting classes. In particular, female students are required to get approval from their family as it is difficult to participate without their family's understanding. Male villagers are more unlikely to continue literacy courses, Whereas, female courses are expected to increase the number of classes.

We focus on illiterate adults above 15 years old. However, in some exceptional cases, literacy classes accept children in the ages of 9 to 14 years. It depends on the reasons why they became dropouts. We therefore consider the possibility to accept school-aged children in our literacy program, too.

We also implement awareness-raising activities on the importance of education. We launch campaigns to appeal the importance of school education to parents, children, and religious leaders, in cooperation with PGs and School Health Councils (SHCs). The SHCs are groups of teachers which have collaborated with us in health education programs since 2015. There are some responses from the graduates of adult literacy program from 2018 (first year of adult literacy program). It is also necessary to discuss it with the local community and government as well. If we give support to such school-aged children, we can prevent illiteracy in a timely manner.

4) Integration of health and peace in literacy classes

In the literacy class, we teach health message to students. In the case of female class, we encourage them to participate in the Family Health Action

Groups (FHAG). FHAGs are women in a village who are involved in the activities of community health workers (CHWs) in the village health post. FHAGs hold monthly meeting and share the health problems and raise their area health needs with female CHWs. We provide literacy students with health information, and encourage them to participate in the meeting of FHAGs. They become more knowledgeable about their village health situation. At FHAG, they are expected to write a record of their activities. We also extended the literacy class to share about peace activities, and provides peace booklet, which was produced by JVC for mutual learning on peace and non-violence.

4. Promoting inclusive peace education for the community at the grassroots level

After successful implementation of the peace and education awareness program in Khiwa district, YVO planned to extend their program to four other insecure areas, which are controlled by armed groups. They controlled these provinces few years ago. As a result, the people suffered from their presence. Recently, however, it is under the government of Afghanistan after the governmental force operation and people protest against these armed group.

1) Producing Handouts for Peace and Non-Violence

Introducing daily life examples of conflict resolutions at families or communities, protection of children from violence, respective roles to be played by families, communities, leaders, women, schools, youths and children for achieving peace. YVO is following the peace booklet of JVC entitled : Ways to Peaceful Life, with little edition by YVO. Our peace booklet covers the basic reason of conflict in our region. It highlights the essence of conflict: understanding, resolution, prevention, and mediation.

Magazines and booklet for young people with focus on peace themes have been used successfully in our last years in peace action programs. Because there is no other source of information for the villagers.

Up to date writing used to raise discussion about issues of peace and conflict. Encouraging youth, children and elders to come up with their own solutions to conflicts or problems. Which presented in magazine and booklet which helps develop skills of problem solving.

2) Anti-Violence Education and Peace Workshop

Education and mutual learning with the use of handouts and other means through collaboration.



Men representatives of unstable areas are attending peace workshop.

Participants report cases of conflict resolutions of their own and encourage one another. They also disseminate their learning to their family members and communities.

We also hold peace workshops. Participants include representatives of respective village groups in four districts from unstable areas, and concerned NGOs. They mutually exchange opinions on how to build peace through presentations by the participants.

3) Provide advocacy training

The community of Shiwa District of Nangarhar Province have undergone advocacy training on banned toy guns, physical punishment at school, female education and role in peace-building.

For the peace program, YVO improved the skills of focal points. They are responsible for the implementation of the peace and education awareness program in their catchment area, where the access of YVO staff is limited due to security reason. This focal points are people who took YVO/JVC's training and motivated to become peace messengers in the peace-building activities (ex. peace exchange workshop). The training was conducted for eight focal points of four insecure districts in Nangrahar Province.

5. For future activities

The demand for the program is high all over Nangarhar Province and even in other provinces of Afghanistan. But due to limitation in budget, we had to confine ourselves.

There were some awareness programs for women in insecure areas but not in all insecure districts. The willingness is high but there is fear of women participation because of security and cultural reason.

Thereby, no female focal points in the current year. The influence of armed groups still exist and sometimes we need to avoid using the word peace-building in the program. We instead label of course as “the importance of literacy” as it is more neutral.

As a development NGO, YVO actively encourages people’s participation and community contribution as the basic element of its approach to progress. It believes in the strengthening of co-operation and co-ordination between and among local authorities, and the NGO community in order to provide better services. Literacy class is a prolific intervention to let people begin talking what is peace for them.

Testimonies of female participants

Ms. Gullmera :

Before being literate, I faced lots of problems. But now I can solve most of them. First, I was not able to read names and did not know dates. While taking my children for vaccination, I could not distinguish their cards and used to ask the health worker (administering vaccines) to read the names. I also asked her/him to check the dates for the next vaccination schedule. As to my behavior, I used to disrespect my in-laws, and often fought with my children. I now realized that this is very harmful for my children and would only bring negativity to my family. At last I learned to respect my in-laws and kept my children away from fights, and taught them courtesy towards everyone.

Ms. Mahtaba:

I have 10 children. Razia, the teacher of the adult literacy class is my daughter. I had wanted to study when I was a teen but because of family and security problems I could not. I did not want my children to follow my path as an uneducated person. So I enrolled them in school. I used to do all the house chores by myself so that my daughters can concentrate on their education. Finally my daughter Razia finished her school. Luckily, when the literacy classes started my daughter became the teacher. She admitted me in the class and said: “You sacrificed a lot for our education. I lived my dream of getting educated by your hard work. Now it is a chance for us to bring your dream come true” I started coming to the literacy class and became literate. Now I can read and write names, letters, numbers, and I am very happy and thankful for it.

Reducing Stigma and Discrimination Towards PLHIVs Through Interfaith Movements *Ms. Khawn Taung, ILDC 2019, Myanmar Interfaith Network on AIDS (MINA), Myanmar*

1. Background

Myanmar currently has the second-highest number of People Living with HIV (PLHIVs) in Southeast Asia at 0.8% of population after Thailand. Despite of such a high prevalence, HIV-related stigma and discrimination remains as an issue like many other countries. They are still ingrained in the society and even in the mind of PLHIVs and their neighbors, coworkers and service providers. The stigma and discrimination has been a barrier for the most PLHIVs to access HIV testing, treatment, and care and support services.



Ms. K. Taung



Workshop participants creatively expressing support to PLHIV and raising HIV-AIDS awareness.

Myanmar is also a multi-religious country. The HIV-related stigma and discrimination has often been spread by the different faith communities and others. PLHIVs have been kept away from participating in the religious events and places. They are often refused to take a funeral service by the faith community.

2. Activities of Myanmar Interfaith Network on AIDS (MINA)

In order to tackle the issue, the role of each faith-based organization (FBO) is crucial for mobilizing different faith communities. The religious leaders

can become important influencers to minimize or eliminate stigma and discrimination among community people and health service-providers. FBOs can promote greater awareness among religious leaders about the modes of HIV transmission. They can also help prevention through advocacy to government. Religious leaders can then convince their followers through correct information on HIV transmission and encourage greater tolerance to PLHIVs and Key Affected Persons (KAPs) such as people who inject drugs, men who have sex with men (MSM), transgender and female sex workers and their clients, thus reducing stigma and discrimination.

Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC) has started initiating HIV & AIDS Program in 1993. According to the suggestion of the Christian Conference of Asia and the Asian Interfaith Network on AIDS, MCC has taken lead to form Myanmar Interfaith Network on AIDS (MINA) in 2009 with 13 FBOs. The major activities of MINA are as follows:

- 1) Interfaith meetings and festivals
- 2) Prevention and awareness raising programs in/for each faith community on HIV/AIDS, Universal Health Coverage and Human Rights,
- 3) Interfaith prayers services, provision of nutrition, donation and financial assistance for orphans and women at hospitals and shelters,
- 4) Networking with other 9 HIV NGO networks at the regional and national levels,
- 5) Advocacy to Parliament members, religious leaders, donors and all stakeholders in the law reform process with other HIV networks, and
- 6) Relief activities for the disaster victims



Interfaith representatives visiting hospitals to offer prayer service for the patients.

3. Achievements

Through our activities, over 100 interfaith leaders of the different faith communities were aware on HIV/AIDS. They started to support PLHIVs and their families in 9 regions by home visiting, counseling

and psychosocial support.

PLHIVs and KAPs were invited to the forum, where they received HIV awareness and counseling from the health service providers. They also gained acceptance and love from the religious leaders in the forum. PLHIVs and KAPs gradually gain access to treatment service and HIV prevention.

The empowered PLHIVs and KAP started to come out in the community. They now get involved in promoting prevention and care program. They came to disclose to the public that they want to be healthy and value themselves.

The youth now seized new hope for their generation. MINA mobilizes interfaith youth (age 15 to 30) including PLHIVs and KAPs to participate in volunteer works in the community. Through the activities, the youth were more motivated and could build awareness on HIV/AIDS and support each other.

Stigma and discrimination are gradually fading in the community, that eventually boost the advocacy for legal reforms such as Drug User Law, Sex Workers Law, and HIV Law. Nowadays, many PLHIVs are actively leading the fight against the discrimination against AIDS. They also demand for their rights to the government and the community that they live. The Myanmar Positive Group, a National Network of PLHIV initiated the HIV Protection Law of which the interfaith network of religious leaders are involved in every step.

4. Conclusion

This community-based experience highlighted the important role of various leaders in the religious sector. It proves that regardless of faith, be it Islam, Buddhism, Christianity or whatnot, each has to play certain tasks in order to reduce stigma and discrimination and promote peaceful communities.

There are still many challenges in Myanmar. However, in the absence of collaborative actions to foster peace and order at the grassroot level, the people living with health issues will continue to live in fear, uncertainty and chaos. The interfaith leaders possess some degree of influence within their circles, which they can take advantage in order to fade away social stigma and discrimination. Their initiatives must be done in the same rhythm so as to achieve bigger impact.

HERE AND THERE

Speaking Tour From Sri Lanka to Japan Ms. Joy A. Bastian, AHI

From November 25 to December 9, 2019, a 1995 ILDC alumnus, Mr. Francis Priyankara Costa, Training Coordinator of the National Fisheries Solidarity Organization (NAFSO), and Ms. Surangi Wasana, a leader of the Women Peace Society (WPS) in a fishery village in the southern part of Sri Lanka toured around five prefectures in Japan. Ms. Surangi took a leadership training from NAFSO and organized women's group to solve the issues in her community. Both speakers presented their experiences to as many as 1,600 audience. Here is one of the session overviews.

1. Introduction

On November 29, 2019, one of the meetings was held in Nagoya in Aichi Prefecture, which was co-hosted by AHI and the Nagoya NGO Center, a networking NGO in Nagoya, of which AHI is also a member.



Ms. J. Bastian

The meeting participants came from various backgrounds such as the academe, NGO, POs and citizens. The common denominator of them to come to this gathering is about is their knowledge and/or involvement about Sri Lanka. The participants discussed in the small groups and chose the topics of their interest out of posted theme, namely, gender issue, alcohol and drug problems, and peace activities.



A small group discussion on a specific social issue.

2. Problems and actions taken locally

The speakers presented the profile of Sri Lanka. The internal civil war suffered by the people lasted for 26 years (1983 to 2009). As a consequence, many went missing, the number of widows reached 84,000, economic problem proliferated, burden of girl children's security (violence or sexual assault), housing, education and health issues emerged.

In the local area in Matara District, drug was a serious problem among the youth. As young as a 9th grader could get free illegal drugs at first. They have to buy it later on and they become addicted. They resort to stealing in order to buy drugs and sustain their addiction. With the support of NAFSO, WPS coordinated with the police and had linkage with a hotline at the national level. They also organized youth groups in which NAFSO provided counseling by the monks, and awareness raising education.

3. A different level of peace movement



Mr. Francis explaining the timeline of armed conflict in Sri Lanka.

In 2009 when the civil war ended, NAFSO has started to support war victims in the northern area. They had two strategies: 1) dialogue with key influential persons, and 2) inter-area visits for mutual sharing. Along with the national campaign, WPS members also visited the war affected area and had peace dialogue with the people living there. Ms. Surangi talked about the testimonies of some women in the north whose experience during the civil war was so terrible. These women said that the children cannot even cry when they were hiding from the government soldiers' attacks because it was very dangerous to be overheard by the rouges. They might be killed. Their mothers stuffed the children's mouths with clothes to prevent them from

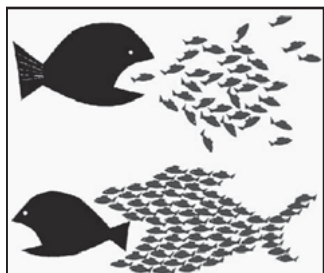
crying. Otherwise, it is easy to shoot them once they make any noise. The north to south inter-area visits paved the way to two-way sharing of experiences at the local level. The experiences of the northern people was different from the south, but the learning process itself was empowering. People to people dialogue was effective.

Since the new government administration initiated peace-building in 2015, Buddhists and Muslims started to talk. But in 2019 a bomb blasted before the peace initiatives could ever spin-off. People immediately acted on the horrible extremism. NAF-SO called for peace action among all network member organizations. Surangi's WPS responded to it. Several strategies were put into action such as candle lighting and collective prayer displaying banners, active coordination with the police, mobilization of the interfaith leaders to achieve peace.

5. Feeling empowered

Ms. Surangi was empowered in the areas of building confidence of the members, increasing economic independence, role modeling particularly in self-help and cooperation, and collaborating among CSOs-NGOs-GOs and religious groups.

The fish analogy presented by Mr. Francis to summarize their presentation was inspiring. It awakens the thinking that when one acts alone, the result is negligible. But when every small act is gathered



together, the impact is big and influential. Today, the space for CSOs are severely affected by each government around the world. Solidarity is the key!

6. Conclusion

The conflict in Sri Lanka was very severe that lasted for three decades and wrecked havoc to many individuals, families, and the government itself. Relying everything to the government was not much of a solution. Fortunately, initiatives from WPS proved to be a viable strategy to achieve the level of peace that the people of Sri Lanka are enjoying now. WPS empowered other needy people in the country with the leadership training and support of NAFSO. Both NAFSO and WPS orchestrated plans and actions to regain peace and harmony. There is now a clearer direction for the people of Sri Lanka after the 26 years of conflict and fragmentation. Peace.

Surangi's Life Story of Self-Empowerment *Ms. Naoko Tanimura, AHI*



Ms. Surangi

1. Brief background

Forty years old Surangi was born and raised in a village located at the coastline of Matara District in Sri Lanka. She is married to a fisherman, a mother of two children and an active woman leader of WPS. Although it was her first trip overseas, she always

remained calm and looked confident, even when she stood on the stage speaking together with Francis in front of 260 people. In fact Surangi is a woman who always looks resolutely forward and an advancer with strong will through her life.

2. Snapshots of Ms. Surangi's life story

Her journey to become a woman leader started with an ironic incident ...

“When I was 16 years old, I was told by my parents to stop going to school. I was shocked, sad and disappointed that I was no longer able to go to school and study. Because I was always interested in learning new things at school. But my father did not approve me to be a close friend with a boy at school whom I had liked very much then. He told me to stay away from him and school. I had no choice but to obey my father. I felt angry but at the same time I blamed myself for having done what my father did not approve.

After I quit school, I was helping my mother with her shop selling commodity goods and foods. At that time, I was not involved in any of the “community work” at all. Then at one point, a group of people who were working on water problems in the area came to my parents asking if they could use some space in our house as their office. My parents let them use one of the rooms. I saw them every day and became to know what they were doing. They were fighting to protect the community from the problem that could threaten their own lives. Seeing what they do, I learned that community problems had to be addressed and worked on by people themselves, rather than waiting the problems being solved by someone else.”

Volunteer work was not unusual in her village but she never planned to go beyond that!

“One day, they recognized that I was good at drawing and handwriting. They asked me if I could help them in creating a poster to promote their activity, so I did that art work. I also started to help them as a volunteer office secretary for the group.

In my village, most people are Buddhist. Volunteerism is widely practiced in our daily lives. My father used to give foods to the poor. I used to be a volunteer teacher at Sunday school. So it was for me not unusual to do volunteer activities. But at that time, I did not think that things would take me as far as I am now.”

Opportunities to receive various training helped in developing her leadership skills

“I learned many things from the leadership training. It was in 1997 when the training was organized by the local/national NGOs such as Savsthi or Women in Development Alternative, Southern Fisheries Organization, and National Fisheries Solidarity Organization (NAFSO). That was where I first met Francis. I still remember that he was a very good trainer. Through that program, I received training on problem-identification and solving. It taught me that the most important thing is to find what lies behind what we face and see. I thought it was a very powerful method. Still now, it is one of my core methods that I apply in my activities.

From this program, I also learned how to address issues and talk about them in front of those who are both for and against my opinions. If I analyze problems well, I can do better with convincing others. A good leader can see the situations and analyze by herself, and understand what is really happening, and be able to constructively discuss it with others. An important job of a leader is to gather different opinions, categorize and prioritize them, and lead to act with the team on the most critical matter.

Everyday, I have many challenges, even acute envy from other women in my community. However, I feel more responsible and have to do wider ranges of things. Being Secretary at the district level federation, I have to attend more meetings and write many reports. As a federation member at the national level, I have to write reports and letters to the authorities and conduct training programs, in addition to my involvement in various activities such as plastic waste management and beach cleaning. I still do



Organic vegetable market by the Children’s Club. (Surangi, standing, right)

a lot of cultural programs for my village. I have become very busy lately and never have enough time, but I am managing it somehow so far!”

Current solutions should be taken up to the next level — her journey continues for a better future.

“For the next 10 years, I would like to be promoting a small group saving system in order to improve our current economic program — to become stronger and more solid. I also would like to build wider network around our village and district to tackle issues together. We have many social, educational and environmental problems. For health, I want to train women on Ayurveda/herbal treatment. For the environment, I want to make our village a plastic-waste free area. For peace, I want to continue peace activities particularly for children, with the help of the temples.

3. Reflection

Before I met Surangi, I had no knowledge about the life of fishery villages in Sri Lanka. Having a privilege to stay closely with her for two weeks, I learned many things — the hardship and the conflicts people are facing and how women can take part in solving them, and the people’s pride in their beautiful and resourceful county and how they want to protect it for their children. Surangi is a petite, quiet and warm woman. But inside her she has a strong determination and confidence. She speaks softly yet with strong-willpower: “I have many things that I have to do and can do. And all are for children and the youth in our village who deserve to live with peace and in the pink of health.



Ms. Surangi on board a train from Nagoya to Osaka.

AHI started its first exposure visit to Hiroshima, Japan in 2009. Since then ANT-Hiroshima has been the coordinator for this exposure visit for AHI each year. I have been blessed to have had the chance to meet all the AHI participants. ANT-Hiroshima, where my mother serves as the director, is

a grassroots NGO dedicated to international peace-building, cooperation, education, and public awareness. Inspired by the resilient spirit of the A-bomb survivors, ANT-Hiroshima seeks to build bonds of trust and promote Hiroshima's message of peace and reconciliation.

AROUND JAPAN

Grateful to Meet the AHI Participants *Ms. Kuniko Watanabe, ANT-Hiroshima, Japan*



Ms. K. Watanabe

Like ants, we may have little power alone, but through partnership we can accomplish great things. With this belief, we work hard each day in Hiroshima to advance the goal of greater peace in the world. Even after the AHI trainings have finished, we are very pleased to still be working with a number of AHI participants, learning from each other and collaborating on various projects.

Around four years ago, my grandmother, an atomic bomb survivor, joined her first AHI workshop. Then on, my grandmother, mother, and myself—three generations of A-bomb survivors—wait for the ar-

rival of the new AHI participants and again share our stories.



Ms. Tomoko Watanabe (mother), Ms. Teruko Ueno (grandmother), and Ms. Kuniko Watanabe (myself), third generation Hiroshima A-bomb survivors who are committed to advocate for lasting peace. (left to right)

On August 6, 1945, my grandmother, who was 15 at that time, was a nursing student at the Hiroshima Red Cross Hospital, located 1.3 kilometers from the bomb's hypocenter. It was a miracle that she survived. Her father came for her, so they could find refuge together, but my grandmother chose to stay at the hospital and support the relief efforts, without rest. Seven years after the bombing, she was working as a surgical nurse, taking care of many survivors who were suffering from keloid scars and other illnesses caused by their exposure to the bomb's radiation.

From her survivor's testimony to the AHI participants, I learned two things about my grandmother for the first time. One is her strong work ethic, the fact that she was just 15 and chose to stay in Hiroshima and help the people in the city after it had been transformed into hell. The other thing I learned was from her remark, "When I gave birth to a healthy child (my mother), I could finally say that the war was over."

For many years my grandmother did not talk about what she experienced back then. Without this opportunity involving AHI, I would never have gotten the chance to hear her stories and experiences about the war and the atomic bombing. Each time I hear her speak, I become more grateful for mothers and what they do to take care of their children.

My grandmother's story helped me understand how she stayed strong and how she was able to overcome all the sadness and hardship from losing so much in her life. I have become more and more

aware of my roots as a third-generation atomic bomb survivor. From all of you, I have also learned how much courage and hope the presence and voice of the A-bomb survivors is giving to people who are rebuilding peace from poverty, disaster, and war.

Re-discovering my roots and the meaning of Hiroshima's experience, I was able to take another step on my personal and professional journey. Through the experiences of all the A-bomb survivors, including my grandmother, and the childhood memories of my mother's generation, I am very glad to find and declare my commitment to peace. Over the past 10 years I have met so many AHI participants and each one is working hard to tackle various problems in their society, including poverty, human rights, education, religious conflict, and war. At the same time, these trainings give me the chance to continue making progress of my own, even though I am still a small ant just learning how to walk. While carefully nurturing the bonds with all of you and AHI, I will keep learning, practicing, and growing and I will continue my grassroots peace activities with ANT-Hiroshima.



2019 ILDC participants visiting ANT Hiroshima.

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The 2020 International Course on Leadership for
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**YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FOR
MAKING CHANGE**

August 30 (Sun) to October 11 (Sun) 2020

It is targeted at two specific groups:

- (1) Community youth leaders, and
 - (2) NGO workers involved in youth empowerment
- A "team application" for a group of youth leaders and an NGO worker is also welcome.

The application deadline is on April 22, 2020.

The course outline and application form can be downloaded from our website <http://ahi-japan.sakura.ne.jp/english/html/>

If you know any appropriate youth leaders or NGO workers in charge of youth empowerment in your organizations, please share this information with them. For details of the course objectives, participants' criteria, financial requirement, and application procedure, please refer to the website.

Thank you for your cooperation. For further inquiries, please do not hesitate to contact below.

**Secretariat for the training program, AHI
E-mail: application@ahi-japan.sakura.ne.jp**

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CALL FOR ARTICLES! ATTENTION AHI ALUMNI

Please write your articles and contact AHI.