

A Better Sri Lanka is Possible!

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“Organising and participating in an event like this is also about overcoming the fear psychosis that has paralysed us since the resumption of war” — Nimalka Fernando, International Movement Against Discrimination and Racism (IMADR)

Over 1 300 people from all parts of Sri Lanka converged on Colombo on Saturday 26 January for the global day of action as part of the World Social Forum process (WSF).

The Call for Action addressed itself to all those who oppose war, militarism and racism; neo-liberal attacks on living standards and livelihoods of the poor; and imperialism dressed up as globalisation.

The all day gathering in and around Vihara Mahadevi Park’s open air auditorium, convened by Peoples Space (Janavakasha / Jana Avakasam) in concert with a range of other organisations, marked the end of a week of mobilisations and actions in districts across the island.

For example, the Movement for National Land and Agrarian Reform (Monlar) conducted awareness raising meetings on the WSF as well as agricultural issues in several districts. The womens’ network Savisthri held meetings on alternative concepts of development in several towns and villages. The National Fisheries Solidarity Organisation (NAFSO) organised a day long programme to inform coastal communities of threats to livelihood from capitalist globalisation. The Plantation Sector Social Forum had previously organised actions in Up-Country areas highlighting the housing crisis and private management’s indifference to tea workers basic needs.

In addition to the WSF 2008 theme of ‘Act Together for Another World’, the organising committee selected an additional theme: “A Better Sri Lanka is Possible” to focus actions and mobilisations and to orient participants on the desired goal.

Three sub-themes were chosen with the national context in mind: “No to War”, “Stop Rising Cost of Living” and “No to Capitalist Globalisation”.

The national convergence took the form of parallel workshops in both national languages, Sinhala and Tamil, with an opening and closing ceremony featuring regional and local speakers with the support of Action Aid and Cordaid.

In the morning, Sarba Raj Khadka of South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) shared the tumultuous experiences of the pro-democracy movement in Nepal; Sarath Fernando of Monlar spoke of those excluded by the present world order and the scientist and campaigner Ajantha Perera reminded of us of the looming global environmental crisis and the Sri Lankan dimension.

In the evening, Karamat Ali of Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research (PILER) spoke of the threats to working people from US imperialism, nuclear-bomb fixated elites and reactionary forces of religious fundamentalism. He was followed by international women’s rights activist, Nimalka Fernando and anti-poverty practitioner Susil Siriwardhana, who touched on the issues of war and civil society activism respectively.

In between, some thirteen parallel spaces raised challenges facing and alternatives from trade unionists, plantation sector workers and communities, women resisting war, disaster preparedness,

health rights for women, violence against women, forcibly evicted Northern Muslims, fisheries and farming communities, people affected by mega-development infrastructure projects, inter-religious leaders for peace and reconciliation and many others.

The venue was colourfully decorated with exhibits from the Green Movement of Sri Lanka and the radical youth of the November Movement and with banners, posters and photographs of other participants.

Cultural items included music by renowned performer Jayathilake Bandara and his troupe as well as the young activists of the Heritage Association. There was street theatre from a community based women's organisation in Puttalam, a demonstration by the 'women in black' group from the East protesting against war and violence; bicycle parade by children with messages on global warming and the costs of war.

The event was organised amidst much uncertainty and pessimism among civil society organisations. Sri Lanka's formal return to war following abrogation of the Cease-Fire Agreement between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam on 16 January 2008 has worsened violence against civilians by both sides.

Many out-of-Colombo participants especially from ethnic minority communities feared travelling to the city where they are subject to arbitrary identity checks, questioning and suspicion by security forces and fear of suicide attacks.

That this first Social Forum-type event happened at all under the prevailing conditions and considering the weakness and divisions in civil society in Sri Lanka is an achievement in itself. However, there is much room for improvement in achieving greater diversity and representation of all social sectors and struggles. Above all, the social forum model or process remains poorly understood and internalised by many.

"Reasonably good" pronounced veteran political activist, Vasudeva Nanayakkara; and his assessment would be shared by organisers and participants alike.

P.S.

* B. Skanthakumar works for the not-for-profit Law & Society Trust in Colombo and is on the Working Committee of Peoples Space Sri Lanka.