

VISIT OF SRI LANKAN PRIME MINISTER 20th – 22nd MARCH 2005

Background

INCORE, in partnership with the Sri Lankan NGO Initiative for Political and Conflict Transformation (INPACT), hosted a visit by the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, Hon Mahinda Rajapakse, to Northern Ireland, 20th to 22nd March 2005. The purpose of the visit was to brief the Prime Minister about:

- varied peace and conflict related activity carried out across the University of Ulster;
- the current state of the peace process in Northern Ireland with a particular focus on strategies for breaking political stalemate and deadlock;
- the post-conflict social, economic and physical regeneration of Northern Ireland.

It was also an opportunity to explore the potential for future collaboration between Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka. Given the Prime Minister's hectic schedule since the Tsunami disaster, it was requested that the visit be kept low key with all meetings being informal and private, and undue media attention avoided.

Members of Sri Lankan Delegation

Hon. Mahinda Rajapakse	-	Prime Minister
Mrs Shiranthi Rajapakse	-	Wife of the Prime Minister
Mr Gamini Senarath	-	Secretary to the Prime Minister
Mr Harinda Vidanage	-	Advisor to the Prime Minister
Major Manendra Fernando	-	Security
Mr Indika Perera	-	INPACT, Programme Director
Mr Tyrol Ferdinands	-	INPACT, Managing Trustee

21st March 2005
Europa Hotel, Belfast

Welcome

Professor Gillian Robinson, INCORE Director, offered a warm welcome to the Prime Minister and his delegation. She provided a brief overview of INCORE's work and highlighted the centre's role as a co-ordinating body for peace and conflict related activity across the University of Ulster. Previous and ongoing connections between INCORE and Sri Lanka were discussed, including a 1998 visit by civil society representatives to Northern Ireland and the 2004 South Asian Conflict Resolution programme. INCORE staff presented the schedule for the two-day visit to the Prime Minister (see p12-13).

Northern Ireland Peace Process - Current State of Play

Professor Paul Arthur met with the delegation to discuss the evolution of the Northern Ireland peace process and its current state of play. Paul highlighted the importance of a 'mutually hurting stalemate' and 'ripe moment' having brought parties to the conflict in Northern Ireland to the negotiating table. He noted that peace processes must be inclusive, engaging anyone who has a potential veto over their development. The roles played by diaspora populations and the international community in Northern Ireland were also discussed in relation to South Africa, the European Union and the United States.

The Sri Lankan delegation asked about the impact of the murder of Robert McCartney. Paul responded that the time was coming for the IRA to formally break with its past. He also discussed the breakdown within Unionism and suggested this could partly be attributed to the Good Friday Agreement having fudged two very different perspectives – Unionists perceiving the agreement to be final solution; and Nationalists perceiving it to be a first step towards a united Ireland. However, Paul suggested the importance of the agreement lies in it having established key principles such as equality and consent.

The Prime Minister compared the Northern Ireland experience with Sri Lanka, noting that a particular challenge lies in the LTTE not having a political wing. The group discussed the importance of the LTTE developing confidence in political processes. A 'mutually hurting stalemate' exists in Sri Lanka, however, there has been a failure to seize the 'ripe moment' beyond establishing a ceasefire. The lack of charismatic leadership in Sri Lanka was compared with that provided by senior Sinn Fein members in Northern Ireland.

Education and ICT

Dr Roger Austin, Head of School of Education and Alan Robinson, Senior Lecturer, School of Education, University of Ulster met with the Sri Lankan Prime Minister to discuss the role of ICT in bridge-building and social cohesion. Both Roger and Alan have travelled to Sri Lanka on numerous occasions.

The group discussed how ICT could facilitate contact between 'others.' Dr Austin described the operation of the Dissolving Boundaries programme that links schools in Northern Ireland to schools in the Republic of Ireland by ICT. It has been shown that this type of contact both improves the quality of pupils' work in their respective classrooms, and engenders respect for difference and tolerance of diversity. Critical factors for successful ICT contact were discussed including, 1) the commitment of head teachers, 2) ongoing co-operation between schools, and 3) appropriate support from a project team.

The Prime Minister expressed his enthusiasm for this type of contact work, noting that IT was a particular area of responsibility for him. The group discussed the possibility of piloting a programme in Sri Lanka. The main challenge here would likely be overcoming language barriers.

Dr Austin noted that he is organizing an international conference on the role of ICT in intercultural education in September 2006. This international conference will bring together academics, practitioners and policy makers to examine the theory, practice and policy implications of using Information Communications Technology to bring students together for joint work. It will include contributions from the Dissolving Boundaries Programme which is currently linking 160 schools on the island of Ireland, (<http://www.dissolvingboundaries.org/>) as well as work being carried out in the Middle East. Presentations are expected from other parts of Europe, Africa and Asia. Roger welcomed and encouraged the participation of delegates from Sri Lanka at this upcoming event.

Community Relations

Dr Derick Wilson, Future Ways, University of Ulster joined the delegation for a meeting over lunch. Derick provided a detailed background and history of work being carried out, by community relations practitioners 'on the ground' and highlighted some of the obstacles and difficulties that have presented themselves along the way. The various tasks of community relations were discussed including: promoting recognition, respect and tolerance for the variety of different communities within society; ensuring equality of opportunity and equality of access to resources, services and decision-making; and developing a cohesive society in which different interest or identity groupings recognize their obligations and commitments to one another.

While community relations work has traditionally been defined as about improving relationships between the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland, Derick suggested community relations work should address intolerance of any form of difference, including difference in terms of race, religion, disability and sexual orientation. Derick also highlighted relevant government policies, in particular, the recently published 'A Shared Future: Policy and Strategy Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland.'

Political Parties

After lunch, the Prime Minister met with senior representatives from the main political parties in Northern Ireland, including:

- Sinn Fein – Martin McGuinness MP, MLA and Alex Maskey, MLA
- SDLP – Mark Durkan MP, MLA (took place 22nd March in Derry/Londonderry)
- DUP – Gregory Campbell, MLA
- UUP – Dermot Nesbitt, MLA
- PUP – David Ervine

These meetings focused on the upcoming elections as well as various party strategies for breaking the current political deadlock. Key issues addressed included: the possibility of the IRA standing down in the coming months; the rise of the DUP vis a vis the UUP; the McCartney sisters quest for truth and justice; 'criminality' and the IRA; the collapse of the seemingly imminent political deal in December 2004; and Sinn Fein membership of the Policing Board.

Tour of North Belfast

The afternoon meetings with politicians were followed by a tour of North Belfast. The Prime Minister first visited Intercomm, an intercommunity organisation specializing in economic regeneration, social reconstruction and local and international peacebuilding practices. Intercomm staff described how civic and violent unrest has had a devastating impact on the local area with approximately one-quarter of all deaths attributed to 'the troubles' occurring in North Belfast. Various Intercomm projects were also discussed including the New Deal & Work Track Programmes, Intercomm Enterprises and the WEAVE initiative. Community leaders then took the Prime Minister on a 'walk about' of the peacelines. Members of the delegation were particularly struck by the stark, physical barriers between communities.

Evening Dinner

Barry Gardiner, NIO Minister with responsibility for the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment, Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education, hosted a dinner for the Sri Lankan delegation at Stormont House. The focus of the dinner was on the post-conflict physical, social and economic regeneration of Northern Ireland. Guests included: Anna Carragher, BBC; Wilfie Mulyrne, Methody College; Professor Fabian Monds, Invest NI & University of Ulster; Tom McGrath, NI Tourist Board; Michael Maguire, Institute of Directors; Patricia McKeown, UNISON; Geraldine McAteer, West Belfast Partnership; Pat Colgan, SEUPB; Richard Barnett, Acting Vice Chancellor, University of Ulster; and John Hume, MP, MEP.

During the dinner, guests compared the importance of promoting a positive image of Northern Ireland in the aftermath of violent conflict with that of promoting a positive image of Sri Lanka in the wake of the Tsunami disaster. The Prime Minister was particularly interested to hear about Northern Ireland's economic development. Although guests had different interpretations of the various measures of development, for example, the low rate of unemployment in Northern Ireland, there was general agreement that peace has brought prosperity to the province. The impact of European Funding, such as the Peace I & II programmes, was also discussed. It was suggested that such funding needs to be deployed carefully and strategically. The Prime Minister noted that significant aid is also promised to Sri Lanka contingent on progress in the peace process.

After hearing about the important advances that have been made in relation to sectors such as education, investment, tourism and the media, the Prime Minister expressed his surprise that barriers such as the peacewalls he had visited earlier in the day remained. Several guests discussed various community relations initiatives aimed at bringing these walls down and highlighted the role of local strategy partnership boards.

22nd March 2005
Beech Hill Hotel, Derry/Londonderry

On the second day of their visit to Northern Ireland the Sri Lankan delegation travelled to Derry/Londonderry. On arrival the delegation was welcomed by John Hume. The Prime Minister and John Hume then had the opportunity for a brief discussion of John's previous visits two visits to Sri Lanka, before and after the agreement to a ceasefire in 2002.

Security & Policing

The Prime Minister met with Denis Bradley, Vice Chairman, Northern Ireland Policing Board and David Jackson, Community Affairs Director, Northern Ireland Policing Board. Denis outlined the evolution of the Policing Board as a response to the demand for greater police accountability in Northern Ireland. He described how policing has become an increasingly important issue in Northern Ireland as the conflict has drawn to a close. It can therefore be viewed as the 'last piece of the jigsaw.' Policing is also a manifestation of the political accommodation taking place here. The model being applied in Northern Ireland is to develop one police service with a strong local identity, rooted in the community and meeting standards set in line with human rights. Denis noted that this is a model being applied in other international contexts such as Iraq.

The Policing Board plays a particularly important role in Northern Ireland because it has powers of appointment, that is, it can 'hire and fire' the Chief Constable, Deputy Chief Constable and Assistant Chief Constables. Major police reform has been undertaken successfully and is extremely visible, for example, with the new police uniforms and cars. The proportion of Catholics in the service has risen from about 8% to 18% thanks, in part to positive action measures in relation to recruitment. Denis described how important he felt it was for young Catholics and Nationalists to take advantage of positive measures while they can, and that if nothing else they should see the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) as a lucrative career option. Changing the culture of the organisation however, remains a challenge. Reducing the financial burden of policing is also a priority; the budget for security and policing in Northern Ireland currently stands at over \$800million for a population of about 1.5 million. The Prime Minister had an opportunity to further discuss security and policing with Deputy Chief Constable, Paul Leighton over dinner.

Civil Society and Peacebuilding

During lunch, the Prime Minister discussed civil society and peacebuilding with: Mary McKee, Groundwork NI; Eamonn Deane, Holywell Trust; Avila Kilmurray, Community Foundation for NI, and Laurie Randall, Mediation NI. There was particular discussion around the issues of continued segregation, polarization and inter-communal violence within Northern Irish society. Guests noted that environmental regeneration can be a useful tool for bringing together community safety, capacity building and community relations. Initiatives such as transforming areas of land into safe spaces for children to play and the removal of paramilitary murals can have a significant impact on community cohesion. The Prime Minister was also interested to learn about the history of Derry/Londonderry during 'the troubles' and why it is referred to as 'stroke city.'

Comparing Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland

Clem McCartney, Research Consultant on conflict and community issues, has a wide range of experience in Northern Ireland, Middle East, Indonesia Sri Lanka. During his meeting with the Prime Minister, Clem discussed some of the lessons from Northern Ireland he felt to be particularly applicable to Sri Lanka. These included: developing a clear strategic framework to guide peace negotiations; establishing power sharing arrangements; ensuring inclusivity during peace negotiations; providing for equal individual as well as group rights of all citizens and communities; carefully managing international involvement (Clem noted that in the case of Sri Lanka, Norwegian involvement may not always have been to its benefit); and orienting negotiations around key principles such as consent and equality.

Afternoon meetings were followed by a Tour of Derry City Walls.

Evening Dinner

Professor Tom Fraser, Provost (Magee), University of Ulster hosted an evening dinner in honour of the Prime Minister's visit. Attendees included: Gearoid O'hEara, Mayor of Derry; Ian Young, High Sheriff of Derry; Professor Alan Smith, UNESCO Chair, University of Ulster; Glen Barr, Maydown Ebrington Group; Professor Ann Moran, University of Ulster; Professor Monica McWilliams, University of Ulster; Paddy Doherty, Londonderry Inner City Trust; Richard Sterling, President, Londonderry Chamber of Commerce; Tom Frawley, Northern Ireland Ombudsman; and INCORE staff members Professor Gillian Robinson, Helen Lewis and Roisin O'Hagan.

The dinner was an enjoyable, informal opportunity for the Prime Minister to meet with key leaders in the local public and private sectors, as well as with senior academics from across the University of Ulster. Tom Fraser delivered a note of thanks and token of the University's appreciation, and the Prime Minister noted how much he had enjoyed his short stay and was looking forward to future collaboration between Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka.

Alternative activities

An alternative programme of activities was co-ordinated for Mrs Rajapakse, wife of the Prime Minister. On 21st March, Mrs Rajapakse visited the Ulster Museum. She was given a guided tour of several of the museum's exhibitions and was able to view the Museum's collection of Sri Lankan masks. As Mrs Rajapakse has a keen interest in nursery education, it was also arranged for her to visit the Fountain and Long Tower Nursery Schools in Derry/Londonderry on the 22nd March, during which she was treated to range of musical and dramatic performances by the children.

Outcomes

- INCORE staff received extremely positive feedback from INPACT regarding the programme for the visit and its efficient administration. The Prime Minister has subsequently noted that the informal nature of meetings meant he 'learned more in a day than in years' in other situations. Avoiding undue media attention also helped contribute to the relaxed atmosphere.
- INPACT are planning plan to host a reciprocal visit by key Northern Irish politicians to Sri Lanka – to take place possibly September 2005. They feel exposure to the Northern Ireland experience of peacemaking and peacebuilding may help advance the peace process in Sri Lanka. INCORE will facilitate INPACT's initial contact with the appropriate political parties.
- The visit has helped consolidate ongoing links between University of Ulster and Sri Lanka, in particular:
 - INPACT is keen for UNESCO to host a visit by educationalists from Sri Lanka to Northern Ireland. Tyrol Ferdinands is currently contacting Alan Smith, UNESCO Chair with regard to this.
 - During his visit the Prime Minister expressed a particular interest in Dr Austin's work on the role of ICT in intercultural education and the associated upcoming international conference in September 2006.
- INCORE has re-invigorated its ongoing relationship with INPACT and looks forward to further collaboration in the near future.
- The visit encouraged INCORE's Local International Learning Project (LILP) to explore the possibility of policy/practice comparative work between Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka in relation to key peace and reconciliation issues. LILP staff are currently working with the Neelan Tiruchelvam Trust in this regard.

*For further information about this visit please contact Helen Lewis, INCORE,
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Sri Lanka Visit to Northern Ireland: 20th-23rd March 2005

PROGRAMME

20th March 2005 – BELFAST

21:00 Pick up from Belfast City Airport, Flight BD092
Check in at Europa Hotel, Belfast

21st March 2005 – BELFAST

09:15 Welcome – Gillian Robinson, INCORE, University of Ulster (UU)

09:30 Overview of Northern Ireland Peace Process – Paul Arthur, UU

10:30 ICT & Social Cohesion – Roger Austin, School of Education, UU and
Alan Robinson, Senior Lecturer in Education, UU

11:30 Sinn Fein – Martin McGuinness and Alex Maskey

12:30-13:30 Lunch

Community Relations – Derick Wilson, Future Ways, UU

14:00 Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) – Dermot Nesbitt

14:45 Ulster Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) – Gregory Campbell

15:30 Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) – David Ervine

16:30 Tour of Interfaces/Peacelines in North Belfast

19:15 Depart for Dinner at Stormont House hosted by Barry Gardiner

22nd March 2005 – DERRY/LONDONDERRY

08:15 Depart for Derry/Londonderry
Check in at Beech Hill hotel

10:00 Meeting with John Hume

11:00 Security & Policing – Denis Bradley, Northern Ireland Policing Board

12:30-13:30 Lunch

Civil Society & Peacebuilding – Mary McKee, Groundwork Northern Ireland, Eamon Deane, Holywell Trust, Avila Kilmurray, Community Foundation, Laurie Randall, Mediation Northern Ireland

13:45 SDLP – Mark Durkan

14:30 Northern Ireland/Sri Lanka Compared – Clem McCartney

15:30 Tour of Derry/Londonderry City Walls

17:00 Security & Policing – Paul Leighton, Police Service of Northern Ireland

19:30 Dinner at Beech Hill hosted by Tom Fraser, Provost, Magee, UU

23rd March 2005 – BELFAST

07:30 Travel to Belfast City Airport
Flight to London, BD 085 Dep BEL 11:00 Arr LHR 12:25