
Bringing people together to build new infrastructure for Batticaloa

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Steady progress has been made in restoring normalcy to the Eastern Province in the two years since combat operations ended. Infrastructure is a priority, because of the damage and neglect suffered during the conflict, and various projects in the road, power, irrigation and other sectors are underway.

One of the key needs identified, soon after the local elections, by the Municipal Council in Batticaloa, headed by the young and dynamic Mayoress Sivageetha Prabhakaran, was for more sports and recreation facilities for young people. They felt that giving back to the youth their opportunities for sports and recreation would be very important in helping them move on from the long years of fighting. This would contribute to building a really sustainable peace in the Eastern Province, the Municipal Council decided. Weber Stadium has been chosen as a flagship development for the area. Set amidst the historic St. Michael's Boys' School and St. Vincent's Girls' School, the old Fort and Kachcheri, as well as the new Courts and Municipal Council complexes, and overlooking the picturesque Batticaloa lagoon, Weber Stadium is used for a variety of purposes, from the Inter-Provincial Sports Festival held there with the collaboration of the Peace Secretariat in January, to leisurely cricket matches on Sunday afternoons. It has a distinct community feel to it. During the conflict, Weber Stadium was under military control, and was shelled by the LTTE many times. It was also the scene of an audacious strike on diplomats from Germany, Italy and France during the Ceasefire Agreement, when the LTTE fired mortars at the helicopter in which they were travelling to Batticaloa to meet local politicians. It is therefore only recently that the youth of the area have been able to reclaim Weber Stadium for their own use. In developing the facility, the Municipal Council felt that it would be useful to involve young people from other parts of the country, to bring them together with their compatriots in the Eastern Province. It could be an opportunity for the youth of the West and South to come to understand the situation being faced by their contemporaries elsewhere, the Municipal Council thought.

The Peace Secretariat has been facilitating this initiative, bringing in both private and public sectors. As the first step, arrangements were made with Moratuwa University for students of the Level 4 Bachelor of Architecture course to submit design proposals for the renovation. The Department of Architecture has been very supportive, agreeing to take it on as a special project at the beginning of the current semester. To that end, five students visited Weber Stadium in late April, accompanied by the Peace Secretariat, to conduct a site review. They were assisted by enthusiastic members of the Municipal Council planning and engineering units, and were given access to existing site development plans, town sheets, digital mapping of the area and other useful documents to assist in their work. Having returned to Colombo, the young people are leading five teams of ten in preparing designs, which will be competitively judged by a team of renowned architects and planners, as well as the Mayoress of Batticaloa. Efforts will be made to engage with Batticaloa youth and other users of Weber Stadium, to ensure that their needs and ideas are incorporated. Later on, the winners will be partnered with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry or an individual firm to ensure designs are workable. Holcim Lanka have agreed to share with the young people their concept of 'Sustainable Construction', pioneered by Holcim in Sri Lanka, in order to incorporate cutting edge ideas in the final plan.

One of the main challenges will be finding the money to implement the project. The Municipal Council has been discussing the refurbishment of the pavilion with the Football Federation, but further investment will be needed to develop Weber Stadium into a truly competitive sports venue for the Eastern Province.

Economic Affairs Unit Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process
Courtesy: SCOPP