



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

April 2008

Living and Working in the Context of Sri Lanka

Almost every day of April brought one more alarming tragedy or another sad story to those with an eye or ear to the news coming from Sri Lanka this month. Escalating battles in the North between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are said to be the worst fighting with the most numbers of casualties the country has seen in at least 18 months. The government forces, however, continue to speak confidently that the LTTE will be defeated before year's end.

Among the dead this month were two prominent figures who were assassinated in separate incidents. The first Sunday morning of the month, an explosion took place just as the popular Minister of Highways, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, was flagging the start of a marathon race in the western district of Gampaha. At least 11 other people were killed and many others injured in the suicide bomb attack. Two Sundays later, a Roman Catholic priest and Tamil human rights activist returning from church in the Wannu was killed by a roadside bomb in LTTE-controlled area. Fr. Kili, as he was known, was director of NESOHR, the Northeast Secretariat on Human Rights, headquartered in Kilinochchi. Both deaths were widely mourned on different sides of the country.

Indiscriminate violence was also visited on civilians near Colombo as they were making their way home on the last Friday of the month when a bus bomb was detonated during rush hour, killing more than 20 on the spot and injuring scores more. It was the worst civilian attack since the terrible 16 January bus bomb in the southeast in Buttala, where civilians who escaped the initial blast were then killed by gunfire as they were trying to escape the burning wreckage.

The lead-up to the first-ever Eastern Provincial Council Elections, as a separate political unit, dominated the latter part of April, as parties geared up for May 10th elections. NPSL has again assisted PAFFREL by providing international presence in the accompaniment of its local election monitors to observe the pre-election

process. With Colonel Karuna still in detention in the UK on false travel documents and his ultimate legal fate still unknown, his chief lieutenant and the party's candidate for Chief Minister of the Eastern Province, Pilliyan, is now keen to present the TMVP strictly as a political party subscribing to democratic principles and the rule of law. To bolster their claim of democratic and political transformation the group publicly released a total of 39 under-aged children in April. (See below for more information on child soldiers).

The Work of the Teams

At the end of April, NPSL had a total of 55 international and national peace workers and support staff in five field sites in four Districts providing international presence, accompaniment, monitoring, emergency response, confidence-building, nonviolent engagement, facilitation and network support, and advocacy. None of this work would be possible without the national staff and the world-wide network of administrative and fund-raising support provided by hundreds of NP staff, volunteers, governing council members, member organizations, and individual, organizational, and agency donors.

The Colombo Response Team (CRT)

Our small CRT was made smaller this month due to Provincial Council election observation needs in the East, with one of the two international field staff redeployed for monitoring work in Batticaloa and Ampara Districts the second half of the month. The CRT coordinator and field officer did six accompaniments both within Colombo and in support of vulnerable people from the east. Advocacy efforts continued at the national level, both for individuals suffering from human rights violations and security fears, and with national level bodies.

As follow-up to the successful capacity-building workshop for human rights defenders in March, reports from the four young defenders from Jaffna who completed two-week internships in Colombo were submitted to the partnering agencies. One of the agencies has requested that the program be continued and that an additional intern be identified for June. CRT is continuing to plan for identifying and facilitating Colombo training resources to meet requests coming from the Valaichchenai team in support of local partners there. Efforts to improve IDP advocacy at the national level are also under review.

The Jaffna District Team

Travel to and from the Jaffna peninsula continues to be an involved and unpredictable process, with flights being delayed or cancelled at a moment's notice. Only in the third week of the month was a third FTM finally able to be deployed to Jaffna, having been shifted from Batti Team at the beginning of the month in order to reinforce the team in Jaffna.

The security situation in the north disrupted some of the team's movements in April, and shelling limited access to some areas and interrupted scheduled visits. There was an increase in activity near the Forward Defense Line (FDL), which peaked on 23 April. The team continues to do a thorough security assessment when going to various sites, as there is a risk that they could be caught within shelling range if military maneuvers suddenly shift. Contact is made with the UN radio facilities prior to going to the field. The team secures a monthly curfew pass and the national staff has government security clearance to carry on their activities.

The team was able to visit some of the very vulnerable communities in the district, including Allaipiddy, where there was a resettlement exercise on 21 April. On the visit to Allaipiddy, where NP has a history of support, the team was told that their presence provides a feeling of security and 'sense of normalcy' in an otherwise tense and insecure situation. Advocacy and linkages were requested on pressing needs of housing and sanitation.

More visits to provide international presence were made to the Jaffna prison and to rehabilitation centers in Allaipiddy, Chavakacheri, and in Jaffna town. Such visits provide an opportunity for people who have 'surrendered' to the government because of threats to their security an opportunity to share on-going concerns and needs, and allows for the monitoring of the conditions under which they are living. NP works in close collaboration with UNICEF and UNHCR in monitoring activities. The team was not able to meet this month with the head of the Navy but was able to meet his second in command. Such regular contact with military stakeholders is important for the team's acceptance in the area and for their security.

The Trincomalee District Team

The Trinco team consisted of only four internationals for most of the month, with our newest FTM joining the team towards the end of the month to assist with the election monitoring activities. Due to the spotlight on the district because of the Provincial Elections, the overall atmosphere in the area gave the appearance of improvement as shops were open later, and there were more civilians visiting beaches and youth on playing fields.

Despite such appearances of normalcy, however, there are many reports of voter harassment and threats regarding voting preferences, including of local INGO staff. The focus on the elections for most government actors and others diverted attention away from ongoing activities and community issues. As happened in the Batti District local elections, the involvement in the Provincial Council election monitoring process does facilitate the ability of NP teams to meet with and engage

many stakeholders and to access areas that we are otherwise limited in reaching. The team met police and security forces at many levels, government agents at all levels, including 5 GS's and the GA, political party representatives, and others in civil society.

The Trinco team recorded eight individual protection cases this month, related to extortion, threats or abductions; four being new ones, and the rest stemming from on-going relationship with vulnerable families. Five IDP camps were visited and the situation monitored for resettlement, which was observed not to be properly prepared. In one case 165 families were forced to stay in a school as no temporary shelters had been provided. A Rural Development Organization, led by a monk as its president, also discussed with NP IDP security issues in their area, including lack of shelter. Identified needs were coordinated with UNHCR and ICRC, along with other meetings with these agencies related to on-going human security issues for civilians of killings, abductions and disappearances.

Several accompaniments were handled this month. One was of a local NGO partner doing community awareness programs in a vulnerable area who sought NP support to travel with them to and from the area so they felt safe carrying out their program. Another accompaniment was of a Buddhist monk in fear of armed group activity in an area where he was meeting. Groundwork was also laid with a Hindu kovil leader regarding planning for an intended meeting with a Muslim mosque in Kinniya after the elections. A joint issue with UNHCR is land issues between Sinhalese and Muslims in the south of the district, a potential flashpoint for violence.

Positive feedback from the previous month's capacity-building workshop of Peace Committees facilitated by NP, with funds from the Niwano Foundation in Japan, continued to be received. Six of the PC's have begun focusing on creating a common platform for joint and collection action, as well as others talking about the need for a district-wide network that NP could help catalyze.

The Trinco team also attended ten Child Protection meetings of various district actors, including UNICEF, Save the Children and others. A district child protection initiative is planning a July awareness campaign on child abuse. The team also participated in a district meeting with UNICEF to assess our 2007 partnership and to look ahead to 2008. The Trinco team also reports regularly to the GA, the Inspector General of Police and various Divisional Secretaries.

The Batticaloa District Teams (Batti Town and Valaichchenai)

In Batticaloa District the teams also balanced towards the end of the month their on-going work with election monitoring support for PAFFREL, with three international staff for most of the month in Batti town and two in Valaichchenai.

As the month progressed, the situation became more tense and there were incidents of election-related violence particularly in Muslim constituencies. For the most part, party politicking took the form of door to door canvassing as opposed to the traditional large rallies. As in Trinco, many government actors and stakeholders were met with in relation to the elections and police and military presence was heightened. These meetings included the Minister of Education for the East, various police officials, the Senior Superintendent of Police for the Special Task Force, and key political parties.

Field work for the teams was sometimes affected by heavy rains but much work was accomplished. The Batti team received six new protection cases and 8 follow-up visits; with 8 accompaniments handled within the district, and one outside the district. Follow-up visits were also made to 11 families to assess their current protection concerns and to help link them to needed services and resources, including to other agencies and the Human Rights Commission for follow-up. Such referrals unfortunately do not often result in tangible results for the families, as several of the cases this month involve abductions of family members for which no news has been received, despite the involvement of other agencies, the Human Rights Commission, and government mechanisms.

Child protection work included eight at-risk youth facilitated to find a safer location; a meeting at one of the youth training facilities with a small group of parents and the administrators to air mutual concerns was facilitated by NP; district child protection meetings were attended for better information sharing and coordination; and attendance at the passing-out ceremony of 180 youth at one of the training centers NP has worked closely with. NP's support of conflict affected youth and the Center was publicly recognized for several hundred attendees and their families at the ceremony. More coordinated efforts with Save the Children's reintegration program are also happening. Other actors who also work with CAAC issues (children affected by armed conflict) were also included, such as ILO, WUSC, and Sarvodaya, to improve district coordination and identify gaps or overlap. Both teams participated in 2007 UNICEF partnership evaluation meeting and district plans for 2008.

Four IDP camps and several resettlement processes continued to be regularly monitored, and bi-weekly Protection Working Group coordination meetings are regularly attended by both teams. Nutrition has been identified as a major issue, especially among children and infants. Other issues around adequate shelters, availability of drinking water, and the danger of wild elephants in some areas are also affecting the resettlement processes. At a Ministry of Resettlement meeting, food and welfare disparity between IDP camps was also raised. In one camp visit, the team was presented with a situation of a man with serious knife wounds; the

team was able to secure emergency ambulance service through communication to the team base and subsequent contacts at the Italian Red Cross.

In work at the community level, both teams continue to meet with local organizations in listening sessions on community needs and realities, as well as in helping to build relationships of trust among local groups for better information sharing, establishment of early warning networks, and to strengthen existing community-based mechanisms and institutions, such as the Rural Development Societies and Women RDS's in the southern part of the district. In the northern part of the district the fourth monthly network meeting of 17 local Tamil and Muslim community groups also met. The goal is to try to eventually shift the focus away from NP's facilitation role and to the local groups themselves for long-term capacity building and development of sustainable community-based protection mechanisms.

Because of the rural location of the Valaichchenai office and the fact that other international organizations do not maintain offices in the northern half of the district, NP has been approached to share space in our Valaichchenai Annex with ASB and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) 2-4 days per week to reach rural civilians and the court system in offering legal services and other support on human rights cases. NRC has been focusing on the many documentation needs that civilians had in the post-tsunami environment but now wishes to shift that work to the government mechanisms and to focus more on human rights. A collaboration with NP would facilitate this work for the northern part of the district and underscores the benefits of our presence in that part of the district.

By Rita Webb, Programme Officer