



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

August 2008

The first week in August saw the completion of the 15th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Conference, amidst intense security causing havoc with Colombo transportation. The eight SAARC countries include: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Sri Lanka was keen to assume the chairmanship and host the conference, deploying 19,000 extra police and soldiers in the capital. The Tamil Tigers, classified as a terrorist group by many countries, including India, had declared a 10-day unilateral truce starting from July 26 as a goodwill gesture for the summit but the Sri Lankan government dismissed it, saying it had received no official notification and was skeptical about the declaration.

Of particular significance for Sri Lanka was the meeting between President Mahinda Rajapaksa and India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, where the Prime Minister was to raise a number of issues of concern to New Delhi. Chief among them were India's stated position that there is no military solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the need to evolve a political solution through the All Party Representative Committee (APRC) process.

As an observer to the SAARC proceedings, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher reiterated that Sri Lanka must act to prevent human rights abuses, including abductions, the intimidation of media personnel, and the recruitment of child soldiers as it fights a long-standing civil war against Tamil Tiger rebels. "We have been concerned about the continuing reports of abductions, disappearances, the detention of some people, and reports of intimidation against the media," Boucher said. This year alone, 12 journalists have been attacked, and one hacked to death. Media groups say there has been a failure of adequate investigations or apprehension of any of the attackers.

In one of Sri Lanka's several high profile freedom of speech cases, journalist J.S. Tissainayagam has been held by the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) with two of his colleagues for more than five months before being charged with publishing and distributing a magazine and editing a news website alleged to have

brought the government into disrepute. He is also accused of collecting money from non-governmental organizations for running the magazine. The Committee to Protect Journalists condemned the Colombo High Court's indictment of the journalists on terrorism charges for articles published in 2006. He was denied bail and will go to trial in mid-September.

The government's military strategy continues to be pursued in the North, buttressed by the President's party having won crucial Provincial Council elections held in two more of the country's nine provinces. Their victory was called an "endorsement" to carry on with the military offensive aimed at recapturing rebel-held areas. The main opposition party, however, categorically rejected the results of the elections, saying they did not portray the true aspirations of the voting public.

In the meanwhile, the Sri Lanka Army (SLA) continues to pursue a major offensive and is now closing in on the LTTE's political headquarters of Kilinochchi, held by the Tigers since November 1999. It is said the fall of Kilinochchi would likely be a tremendous blow to the LTTE, both in terms of lost territory as well as morale. Kilinochchi houses the LTTE's administrative infrastructure, including its judicial and police headquarters and peace secretariat. The LTTE have tacitly admitted they are losing ground. In terms of casualties, with no independent monitoring or access by media, all reported figures are essentially unverifiable and both sides dispute the other's figures.

Predictably, it is again the civilians, caught between the fighting forces and within the contested territories, who are finding it impossible to keep out of harm's way. An estimated 200,000 persons are reported to be on the move in the Vanni, looking for places of safety from artillery and air bombardments on the one hand, and enforced arms training and conscription on the other. Aid agencies say 134,000 displaced people are in Kilinochchi district alone, and more than half of the population has abandoned their homes in the last three months.

Humanitarian groups have urged both parties to allow civilians to move to safer areas and to receive needed assistance. As a recommended first step needing to be taken now, it is suggested the government of Sri Lanka, the LTTE and the International Committee of the Red Cross agree on opening up a humanitarian corridor to enable the people to leave. A number of religious leaders also made a similar appeal. A second step in the process of ensuring safety to the civilian population would be to establish a safe sanctuary to which people could go. Entry into this place of safety would be open to anyone, so long as they are unarmed.

The last Saturday of the month at least 45 persons were wounded when a bomb exploded in Colombo around noon in a busy market area. Saturday's bombing was

the first in the capital since May 16, when a suicide bomb attack blamed on rebels killed 12 people, including eight policemen, and wounded 85 others. On June 6, another bomb hit a crowded passenger bus just outside the capital, killing 21 people. The August bomb was concealed under a roadside stall displaying fake designer watches in the busy Pettah area of the capital, a short distance from the main bus station and the railway terminal, and came a day after the rebels accused government forces of setting off a roadside bomb and killing two civilians inside rebel-held territory.

A Washington-based think tank, Fund for Peace, and Foreign Policy magazine moved Sri Lanka up in its rankings on their Failed States Index (FSI) for 2008. Sri Lanka's scores dropped in most of 12 indicators on the FSI, moving the country from 25th to 20th position. Five of the eight South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries, accounting for one-quarter of the population of South Asia, are ranked among the 35 critically failed states of the world in this year's Index. Scores on the Index are based on tens of thousands of articles from different sources and reviewed by experts.

The Work of the NPSL Teams

In the four districts where NPSL has its field offices—Colombo, Jaffna, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa--the work of the teams is currently organized into four focal point areas, and is shared in monthly reports to government representatives in the districts. While work in one of these areas sometimes crosses over to other areas, what follows is a summary of some of the key issues and activities under NPSL focal areas in August.

Children, Youth & Families

Despite the best intentions of many individuals, organizations, agencies and other stakeholders in and out of government, the Sri Lankan conflict continues to take a huge toll on children, youth and families, especially on the protection needs of the rural poor in the north and east of the country. Much of NP's early and emergency response work centers on children, youth and families. NPSL works in weekly, even daily collaboration with others to support families and mitigate the effects of the conflict on their lives and the lives of their children.

In August, NPSL teams responded to a variety of requests. In some cases individuals and families were assisted in reaching a safer location to address both shorter- or longer-term insecurities. Too many under-aged children continue to be targets of armed actors, including in government-controlled areas, such as a 13-year-old who was able to reach safety with NP's accompaniment following his escape from an armed group. In some cases, other family members are targeted

following the escape of someone; for example, a younger sibling was threatened when his elder brother escaped from a camp. NP was able to help the family find an alternative solution to protect the younger child with the help of networks within the district.

One family chose to report the abduction of their under-aged son, but feared to raise their profile and suffer possible further repercussions. In another case, an under-aged boy with developmental disabilities was reported by his family to have joined an armed group voluntarily, but his family sought to get him released with NP's and ICRC's support. In another family, a sister received direct threats following the escape of her brother, forcing the family to relocate both their children. In yet another case, a father who had been forcibly taken into an armed group's camp was able to get released due to combined action by NP, ICRC, and the local police.

Helping families build their confidence and experience in advocating directly themselves with various authorities is another support that NP teams provide. This month several mothers were assisted to approach directly a camp in a remote area where they believed their sons were being held. They were not allowed to see them that day, but they at least received confirmation that their sons were there, one step in relieving their ever-present anxiety about the fate of their children. In some cases, NP has worked with mothers over a long period of time, building their capacity for nonviolent engagement. These mothers continue to grow in their confidence for self-advocacy with government and political authorities to demand that their children and families be protected. While the mayor in one town promised assistance earlier to a group of mothers but did not take any concrete action to follow-up on the women's requests for assistance, the mothers made their own phone calls and gained an appointment this month.

In another district, NP will assist children under the UNICEF grant living with their mothers at a Rehabilitation Center, with the permission of the Court Magistrate, to travel securely to and from a school outside the Center. These are largely children whose fathers have disappeared and whose mothers entered the Rehabilitation Center programme for their family's protection. Thousands of families face similar difficult decisions day after day to try to keep their children safe.

Displacement and Resettlement

All the teams continue to be involved in protection needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the monitoring of resettlement areas for those who have been returned to their original villages or to another location if it is still not possible to return home. While this area of work sometimes requires emergency response, it

also requires ongoing activities of nonviolent engagement and confidence-building, protective presence, and advocacy and awareness at multiple levels. While the greatest displacement is currently happening in the north central part of the country, NPSL continues to be part of advocacy and protection networks at district and national levels serving this vulnerable population in the areas of our field sites. The government authorities, and supported primarily by UNHCR, are the lead entities on IDP's. NPSL coordinates and cooperates with them and other protection and humanitarian agencies to help maintain and monitor international standards for the care and protection of internal refugees. NP's role is to provide regular protective presence in identified camps and resettlement areas, as coordinated with other actors at the district levels, and to share information among the protection working groups and coordinating mechanisms.

Issues in August were somewhat typical of issues that always need attention, including varying levels of lack of access to livelihoods, health care, and education. In some cases, IDPs report that they were not properly consulted before resettlement, not given enough information on what the conditions are in the areas they are to be resettled, nor a choice of return. In one instance this month IDPs reported they were improperly "de-registered" in an IDP camp and their supports cut off in order to compel them to move to another area. Advocacy at the Colombo level allowed them to be re-registered. Often fear of what they will find when they are moved, or lack of infrastructure and security in the areas of return, create endless anxiety for people who have already suffered so much. In some areas in the East, there are repeated reports of LTTE re-infiltrating some areas, so being returned to some of the remote areas is seen to be quite insecure. In some situations people get reasonably settled in an area, their children enrolled in a local school, some source of food and a small income arranged, so being told to again shift and start over in yet another place can be disheartening.

NPSL staff capacity in one district was enhanced this month in collaboration with the Norwegian Refugee Council working with us on sharing experiences, interview techniques, documentation and review of protection needs. NPSL also facilitated a meeting in which UNHCR and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights was able to share information on Confidence Building and Stabilization Measures directly with a network of grassroots organizations brought together by NP. One government agent told NP that international presence is needed in all resettled areas and he acknowledged NP's role in that process.

When it comes to displacement and resettlement issues, everyone works under difficult limitations, knowing that the only satisfying outcome for families is a quick return to a safe and stable situation in their home areas. But it is often a slow and unsatisfactory process to get there, and some conflict-affected families have been displaced for more than one or two decades in Sri Lanka.

Community-Based Structures

In all districts where we work, NPSL seeks to facilitate and support networks of community-based structures, particularly those networks composed of civilians who wish to participate in activities that promote and sustain peace among all communities and ethnicities and engage in nonviolent problem-solving at the grassroots level. Networks of human rights defenders in Jaffna, peace committees in Trincomalee, grassroots community organizations in Batticaloa have all benefited from the slow but steady work of confidence-building and nonviolent engagement that NP has emphasized in its grassroots activities.

In two of our districts in August, a major focus of community involvement came in the form of support for a variety of actors preparing community events to celebrate International Day of Peace on September 21st.

Events, large and small, will be held in many places in Sri Lanka, supported by many actors, with NP being a key partner in several of our field sites. NP is working, often behind the scenes, to coach and support these local actors who are “out front” every day bridging differences and building alliances in their communities. In Jaffna, key human rights actors and partners are planning a week long celebration of various activities in five vulnerable communities. In Batticaloa District both teams are working on both ends of the district with networks and partners planning to bring hundreds of people from all religious communities and ethnic groups for a day-long celebration that will feature a combined call for peace and the protection of human rights in Sri Lanka. Through its continual presence in the communities where NP lives and works, such networks, such grassroots collaborations, such celebrations are more possible in 2008 than would have been possible when we first arrived in 2003.

Human Rights

A final focal area of work for NPSL is the broad area of human rights. Human rights is often a cross-cutting issue, affecting many individuals, families and communities in a variety of ways, as reflected in the preceding three focal areas. In addition to NPs work with children, youth and families, with IDPs, with war-affected and vulnerable communities, NPSL also works closely with a variety of local actors who help those suffering fundamental and human rights abuses of various kinds, as well as advocate for and build awareness of the need for institutions and mechanisms that can promote and protect human rights for all Sri Lankans. NPSL provides accompaniment and presence for many vulnerable and threatened people, helping to enhance their immediate human security, and providing linkages to other resources and mechanisms that can both work to support them specifically and to engage actors at multiple levels for improving the

human rights situation in Sri Lanka. This includes some journalists, human rights defenders, and ordinary citizens who wish to enjoy the full benefits of living in a thriving democracy.

Rita Webb, Programme Officer