



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

December 2006

The end of 2006 seems to have marked the end of the peace process. Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, the brother of the President, barely escaped in December a suicide bomb attack on his motorcade in the heart of Colombo. Following this murder attempt, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) re-imposed the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), a tough anti-terrorism law meant to help fight terror threats but that were also seen to lead to serious human rights abuses in the past as well.

A series of attempts by the Norwegian envoys to bring the parties back together failed, and the present international set-up to facilitate a negotiated settlement may be seriously flawed. Some observers think that failed process not only complicates matters but stands in the way of securing a sustainable solution.

Another blow for the peace facilitators is the death of Anton Balasingham, the man who led the LTTE into negotiations with the Sri Lankan government in September 2002. The 68-year-old, who passed away in London suffering from cancer, was considered a moderate within the LTTE. Being the chief political strategist and chief negotiator of the LTTE, Balasingham was with the Tigers for more than 30 years. Some analysts believe his death could contribute to a full scale war. Already more than 3,500 people have died in 2006 alone. The current situation has forced the Scandinavian Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) that is overseeing the ceasefire agreement to reconsider its presence and strategy in the country.

On the military front, the Sri Lankan Security Forces has vowed to "flush out the LTTE" from the East. It has stated that it will capture Vakarai by March. This small coastal area in the East has been under LTTE control but has suffered military operations for months now. As a result, hundreds of people are reported to have died and 15,000 people have fled, while another 15,000 remain trapped and face severe food shortages according to a recent report by the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), the only relief organization active in that area. Those people who take the risk to get out by walking for days through the jungle areas end up in

one of the scores of IDP camps or are arrested by the military or taken by other armed groups who suspect them as LTTE sympathizers.

Jaffna is still facing serious food shortages, and other basic needs are not addressed. Abductions by paramilitary groups continue which has led dozens of youth to opt to go to prison and seek safety behind steel bars. The curfew in Jaffna has been relaxed and mobile phone system is partly working after a visit by the US ambassador to the North who expressed his frustration about the situation.

As expected, the heavy military pressure on the Tamil people both in the East and North has provoked the LTTE to strike back. The LTTE recently warned of a full scale war if the GoSL continued to target Tamil civilians in Vakarai. In a further development in the first week of January, it told the Sri Lankan government that it could face "serious repercussions" after an air force raid on a small IDP settlement in Mannar killed 16 Tamil people including 8 children. These repercussions manifested themselves on the first weekend of January in the form of two bus bomb attacks on two main roads leading to Colombo. Dozens of civilians were killed and many injured in these attacks. While the LTTE has denied any involvement, this development could mark the beginning of a campaign to hit civilian targets in the South followed by significant economic targets. Meanwhile, an experts' panel set up by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse called in December for wide-ranging "genuine power sharing" to end the ethnic conflict, suggesting among other things a bi-cameral legislature and two vice-presidents chosen among the minorities. The report by the experts was however not received well by the Sinhalese nationalist parties.

The work of the teams

The end of 2006 was also marked by a Chikungunya outbreak in Sri Lanka which, besides tens of thousands of other people, hit the NPSL staff hard. This viral fever, spread by mosquito bites, and the holiday season affected the capacity of NPSL to respond to the latest developments. At the time that many of the staff were either ill in bed or on home leave outside the country, IDP's from the Vakarai area continued to arrive in both Valaichchenai and Trincomalee area.

NPSL Trinco and Mutur teams provided presence in and around the IDP camps on several occasions to help ensure that the rights of IDPs were being upheld according to international standards, and to prevent physical violence that occurred in other places where NPSL had not been present. NPSL's flexible and rapid response is having a comparative advantage in dealing with protection needs of IDPs. There have been many instances in which NPSL's quick monitoring and assessment ensured a response by humanitarian agencies to address the needs of IDPs in remote areas. Protective presence by NPSL Mutur on Mondays at the Serunwara market place has helped reduce reports of abductions and violence

against the IDPs who come there to buy food. This initiative is considered to be a confidence builder and means to reduce the vulnerability of IDPs.

NPSL Mutur has also addressed the security situation regarding IDPs with the local SLA commander. At times, NPSL is serving as bridge-builders between the host community and the IDPs. In one instance, NPSL Mutur mediated a dispute between one of its local Christian Aid partners operating in several IDP camps and the local government authority. Due to the spread of IDPs over many places in the district and to ensure its nonpartisanship, NPSL Mutur has widened its reach far beyond Mutur town and Mutur division and includes Muslim, Tamil and Sinhalese areas in various divisions. For the time being, it will continue to operate from Trinco town which enables it to cover these areas.

In the Batti district alone there are currently 61 IDP camp sites holding over 72,000 IDPs. Aid agencies have been stretched to the limit and are often unable to respond properly to the flow of IDPs, while the Tsunami reconstruction has virtually stopped. Due to increased shelling in the Vakarai area, IDPs have been trying to get to safety to the south in Valaichchenai. Some who attempted to come by boat drowned when the boat sank.

An increase of armed group activity in and around Valaichchenai while thousands of IDPs from various different communities have settled in the area is gradually creating an unmanageable situation. Requests for overnight international presence in IDP camp sites have been repeated (now also in Trinco) as abductions of IDPs by armed groups increased, although most abductions are reported to happen outside the camps.

NPSL Valaichchenai visited various camp sites and communicated the protection needs to local authorities and international agencies. In addition, a protection meeting is being organized by the Valaichchenai office to come up with some new cooperative approaches to become more proactive rather than reactive.

Fewer families recently have come to report to NPSL on missing children although the actual number of abductions is generally believed to be increasing, despite the pledges by both Karuna and the LTTE to release them. Few children have been released and in almost all cases it has been the family that was able to put pressure on the abductors. In response to several requests for safe places, NPSL Valaichchenai contacted different international and local actors that are working on child/youth issues to assess the possibility to create a "safe place network". The initial response from religious leaders who play an important role in the safety of civilians was positive. NPSL Batticaloa continued the accompaniment of local HR activists in Batticaloa to meet families and document

cases of abductions and it facilitated visits by IDPs to the police and the ICRC including one person who was under serious threat.

Overall the attitude of civil society actors is changing. They have become very cautious. This is related to the increase of activity by armed groups. The Karuna group, for example, has taken over private houses and forced several community organizations to move. NPSL Batticaloa and Valaichchenai as well as the Mutur team are hopeful that their increased efforts to engage with the police and security forces and continued dialogue with some local actors to work together on new strategies will help to respond to a lack of accountability by some of the armed actors.

Due to the security situation, the NPSL Jaffna team was forced to move its office to another location. Its efforts in December concentrated on visiting people under threat and the accompaniment of one of its local partner organizations, which is one of the few organizations still functioning in terms of HR monitoring in Jaffna. NPSL Jaffna continues to be involved in the security of IDPs from Allaipidy who remain vulnerable.

At the request of wider NP an assessment on international presence in IDP camps was carried out among the field teams. In another event, members of the staff in Colombo took part in a workshop on Confidence Building and Stabilizing Measures organized by the UNHCR which involved representatives from both government and nongovernmental institutions and agencies. The Colombo office is increasingly receiving requests to get involved in the many civilian disappearances in Colombo. Together with two members of the Jaffna team who are currently staying in Colombo, it has been working on cases of missing and attempted abductions of several youth.

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