



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

December 2007

December 2007 has seen the continuation of hostilities in the North and East and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) reiterating its push for a military solution prior to negotiating a settlement. The All Party Representative Committee (APRC) which is tasked with formulating a political solution has been in limbo much of the month and not able to reach an agreement by the end of the year, as had been promised.

During December the Pillayan element of the TMVP continued its consolidation on the East Coast with reports of attempts at political agreements with other Tamil political parties, in preparation for the forthcoming local government elections in the East. At the time of writing it appears from media reports that the TMVP will run in the elections without any coalition arrangements.

Sadly another member of the Sri Lankan Red Cross was assassinated by unknown persons. This killing took place in Jaffna on 18th December. The European Union has condemned the abduction and killing of the Sri Lankan Red Cross volunteer and urged the Government to do everything possible to protect humanitarian workers in the country. Worryingly there was an incident in the compound of a humanitarian organization in Batticaloa District on the evening of 21st December whereby a grenade was thrown and three vehicles destroyed.

The media has come under particular attack during this time period, including killings, disappearances, abductions and arrests, as well as the burning of the Sunday Leader newspaper presses, the banning of a consortium of radio stations, and an aerial bombing of the Voice of the Tigers radio facility. The Emergency Procedures enacted more than a year ago continue to be renewed by Parliament on a month-to-month basis.

The Work of the NPSL Teams

NPSL's mission continues to provide protective presence and to help limit or reduce the effects of violence on individuals and vulnerable communities.

Our work is currently organized under three major objectives:

1. To increase the level of safety and options for recourse for vulnerable groups affected by violence in the communities.
2. To develop the involvement of community actors in peace and human rights initiatives that address threats and violence in the district.
3. To stimulate the level of involvement and (coordinated) action on the human security situation in Sri Lanka at the community, district, national and international level. Some of the highlights of December team activities are given below.

Teams in the East continued to provide protective accompaniment, and continued to actively support families and children under risk of recruitment/abduction. This also involves support to local partners to set up safe places for these children. Our Trinco team helped a local CBO to ease tensions between two villages, and also worked to help set up a peace committee between Muslim and Hindu groups in a particular area.

The Trinco team also commenced work with UNHCR on creating a joint understanding on creation of Peace Committees, with both doing separate needs assessments for discussion on roles and responsibilities. The team facilitated a joint group of Tamil and Sinhalese women with their request to UN FAO on a fair and community balanced allocation of boat engines that was causing tension in the area, and the team also attended regular coordinating meetings of the Child Protection and Inter- Agency Protection agencies

In the Batticaloa district, our teams in Valaichchenai and Batticaloa town continued their work with vulnerable communities, and their support to strategic partners. The Valaichchenai team supported both the Tamil and Muslim communities as they grapple with inter- and intra -community violence, especially as the impact of the conflict violence has escalated on the Muslim community in the past two months. Space was also provided to the Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies for their community legal services. The rural location of the Valaichchenai office makes it a gathering spot for organizations and agencies serving the northern part of the District.

Information sharing between NPSL and other protection agencies, including ICRC and SLMM in the District was coordinated, resulting in increased accurate human security reporting and rumour control. This work was facilitated through the Human Security Working Group of which NPSL is a member along with other international agencies. At the request of the local Civil Affairs Major of the Sri Lanka Army, both district teams facilitated the contacts needed for another

organization to provide training for senior military staff in Peace and Human Rights

The Batticaloa town team provided numerous accompaniments to at-risk individuals, and coordinated with UNHCR to provide protective presence at two IDP camps on a weekly basis. The team met with religious leaders from both Tamil and Muslim communities to address tensions following the recent abductions of young Muslim men. Consultation also took place with Rural Development Societies to plan cross-community village nonviolent protection strategies.

In Jaffna, the team focus was on providing international presence for various vulnerable groups. No violent incident was reported at the university indicating that NPs routine presence might have had some positive effect on reducing violence. The Team hosted a Colombo-based human rights worker during his visit to Jaffna for the Religious Summit on Peace.

Despite the low level of civil society activity possible for civilians in Jaffna, NP was able to provide protective accompaniment on several occasions during the month. The announcement in late December that NPSL would very likely have to close its Jaffna office in March due to lack of funds is causing considerable concern in NGO and community-based organisation circles in Jaffna and Colombo, especially as the focus of the conflict is now concentrating on the North. Fundraising efforts are underway to address this shortfall.

The Colombo Response Team (CRT) continued supporting the other field teams on advocacy and organizational linkages at Colombo level. Throughout the month the Team also provided international presence and accompaniment in response to requests.

NPSL began discussions with its key elections partner PAFFREL regarding pre-election monitoring during early 2008. At the time of writing preliminary arrangements are being planned with PAFFREL whereby up to ten NPSL international staff will assist with pre-election monitoring for six weeks, in nine local authority areas, in the Batticaloa District. The elections are planned for March.

As a number of current international field workers are ending their one or two-year contracts at this time, 7 new international field team members arrived in December. They received In-Country Training and were deployed by Christmas-time to the various NPSL Field teams.

By ppathak