



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

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The Political Context of Sri Lanka

With tens of thousands of civilians caught between warring forces, throughout February the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) continued to push the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) into a progressively proscribed area of the northeast corner of the country. The goal is to finally eliminate both the LTTE's military capability and the territorial control they have exercised over a large area of the North and East for a generation. By mid-month the government reported they had the LTTE encircled in an area of land of less than 2 percent of what the separatists had controlled two years ago.

The GoSL reports that it is continuing to work on a political solution to the conflict as well, and is trying to reach consensus among the political parties in the south. An offer of a ceasefire by the LTTE was rejected by the government this month as the LTTE would not meet the pre-condition demanded of them that they unilaterally lay down their arms.

The Context and Work of the NP Teams

After months of planning, networking, consolidation and reorganizing, February marked the phasing out of the **NP Trinco Team's** full-time work in Trincomalee District. International staff have been gradually shifted to other districts to provide needed reinforcements to other field sites, along with some members of the national staff. Several community-based projects facilitated by NP Trinco and supported by the Niwano Foundation of Japan will continue under the auspices of local Peace Committees, with NP national staff remaining in the district monitoring their progress to completion. With the closure of one district office, exploration continues, pending additional funding and in response to requests of local stakeholders, into the possibility of NPSL expanding into other districts in

the second half of 2009, namely Vavuniya in the North and/or Ampara in the Southeast.

In Colombo, the **Colombo Response Team (CRT)** supported vulnerable civilians and human rights defenders, providing international presence in a number of instances including, upon request, making regular visits to points of detention and to the courts. The team maintains good relationships with all stakeholders, with government authorities and with civil society, and team members attend a variety of fora that meet regularly in the capital.

In **Jaffna**, displaced civilians from the areas of fighting to the south and east continue to come into the Jaffna peninsula. The IDPs (internally displaced persons) are currently staying in four main locations, with access to them limited. The ICRC is working on reuniting separated family members. Save the Children is supporting pre-school education activities, but older children thus far have not generally been able to access continued education in the local area outside the camps. When the **NP Jaffna Team** visited one transit center in mid-month, the 15 families they met with said they had not been visited by any agency since December and were grateful for the team's presence. They shared their concerns and requested the team to convey their needs to the other humanitarian agencies. Permission to visit another resettlement area took two weeks to secure. The 83 families temporarily housed there were suffering from fishing restrictions and other livelihood issues, and promises of being returned to their home area were repeatedly delayed. Due to its capacity, the Jaffna Team is focusing its protection work on four communities in Point Pedro, Chavakachcheri, Allaipiddy, and Jaffna town. The media reported six people were killed this month in Jaffna. A rival Tamil party, the EPDP (Eelam People's Democratic Party), held a protest march against the LTTE's holding of civilians in the war zone; and there also was a hunger strike by the Jaffna Catholic Church Society.

In the East, the **Batticaloa** and **Valaichchenai Teams** continued their focus on Child Rights and Protection work, IDP Camp and Resettlement Area monitoring, and community capacity building for enhanced protection of Human Rights. The context in Batticaloa District remained relatively stable but with heightened security checks and frequent cordon and search operations, especially in the first half of the month. Suspected infiltration of combatants fleeing from the fighting in the North may have contributed to the insecurity in the District. A feared upsurge in clashes within the TMVP between loyalists of Parliamentarian Karuna and those of Chief Minister Pillaiyan did not materialize following Karuna's abandonment of the TMVP and his joining with the ruling coalition in the President's Sri Lankan Freedom Party. Several incidents of attacks on TMVP cadres were reported, however, but assailants were unidentified. Such attacks continue to bring trauma to some families NP has worked with, as their sons or

husbands, who were earlier forcibly recruited into the group, are still not released from the party.

Two young women at Eastern University were found hanged in their hostel rooms but reports of precipitating circumstances of their deaths were not clear. There have been numerous reports of the anguish university students both in the East and the North are experiencing due to the unknown condition or fate of their families trapped in the Vanni where the fighting is at its most intense level and where widespread civilian casualties continue to be reported.

The teams completed 36 field visits this month, handled 16 new or follow-up protection cases, and accompanied 6 at-risk youth and/or family members to increase their safety or access to needed services. Vulnerable youth and their families, and the community structures that are housing or supporting them, continue to rely on NP's emergency response in times of need. Whether it is support to approach the police or other authorities, the re-unification of a mother and son after a long separation, or access to government mechanisms to gain proper documentation for an identification card or a land deed, such 'simple' transactions are often not easy in a conflict environment. In too many cases people fear to pursue their rights, and NP's presence can increase the confidence of vulnerable people to accomplish such 'normal' activities. Sometimes to act as if life is normal is the first step to it becoming so.

Local human rights defenders also requested NP Batti's accompaniment on three occasions to carry out their work, and NP Valaichchenai worked through the local Sri Lanka army commander when requested to provide additional presence in a remote area where Muslims landowners are attempting to reclaim their lands. Six monitoring visits were made to IDP camps and resettlement areas where more than 700 families are living. Providing regular international presence in these areas increases the confidence of people to stay in these locations and to not displace again, despite some areas not being entirely secured and infrastructure and services still inadequate.

All NP teams participated in the launch this month of a new national campaign against the use of child soldiers called "Bring Back the Child," a joint effort led by the Government and UNICEF. This campaign marks the fulfillment of a dream NP field team members had from the beginning of our service in Sri Lanka. The silence NP teams faced when we first arrived in our communities and raised uncomfortable questions with responsible authorities, facilitated scores of conversations with war-affected mothers and fathers, strategized with community human rights defenders, and attended countless meetings of a variety of stakeholders—that silence has finally been broken. And NP, over more than five

years of solidarity on this issue, shares in—and celebrates—this historic turning point in Sri Lanka's long and bloody conflict.