



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

January 2009

The Context in Sri Lanka

The new year was off to a difficult and violent start in Sri Lanka in 2009. Following the government's taking of Kilinochchi, the previous administrative center of the LTTE in the north, a suicide bomber killed at least three and wounded more than 30 others outside an air force headquarters in the capital. As the government forces advanced throughout the North, an estimated quarter of a million people were being repeatedly displaced as they attempted to find safety from the escalating fighting. While the world's attention was focused on the Middle East and the conflict in the Gaza, at least 50% of the people in the large area known as the Vanni were said to be on the move, with an unknown number of daily casualties.

The Government's security forces progressively narrowed the area in the northeast corner of the country where the LTTE were making what appeared to be their final stand. Condemnation of the LTTE came from many quarters, with accusations they were using civilians as human shields and conscripting children as young as 14 to bolster their depleted ranks. The death toll for both combatants and non-combatants was rising. Independent verification of the extent of the suffering was not possible due to continued lack of access by the media and the bulk of humanitarian agencies. The ICRC has been able to facilitate some exchange of combatant bodies, to evacuate some of the injured civilians, and to get humanitarian aid to others. Some civilians were also making their way into government-controlled areas from several directions, and beginning to share the stories of their journeys and the destruction they left behind.

January was also marred by the killing of a prominent journalist in Colombo, the editor of a leading English newspaper, gunned down on his way to work by unidentified men on motorcycles who surrounded his vehicle in traffic. The assassination followed an attack by grenade-wielding gunmen on the country's largest private TV broadcasting company the week prior. At least 10 media personalities have been killed since 2006, with many others reportedly leaving the

country for their own safety. Security was tightened throughout the country, and particularly in the capital, at the end of the month in the lead up to Sri Lanka's Independence Day celebrations slated for the first week of February.

The Environment for the NP Teams in the Field

For the Jaffna Team in the north there were frequent power and mobile phone cuts this month, and an observed increase in military presence as approximately 2000 displaced civilians made their way into Jaffna from the Vanni. The students at Jaffna University called for a week's boycott of classes in reaction to the ongoing fighting in the Vanni, where many of their families are and with whom they lost touch. It is not known if the shooting of one of the university wardens was related to the protest.

Security was tight in Trinco in conjunction with a visit of the Special Peace Envoy from Japan; and for demonstrations by Muslims who turned out to protest the attack on Palestinians in Gaza. Clashes were reported in several areas in Batticaloa between factions within the TMVP political party, and between the TMVP and LTTE cadre operating clandestinely throughout the eastern districts.

Summary of the Work of the NP Teams

The activities of the NP teams are focused on the beneficial role internationals can play in promoting civilian security and human rights, particularly in relation to vulnerable civilians such as children, internally displaced persons and resettlement communities, human rights defenders and other community-based structures that seek to solve problems nonviolently, improve human security, and promote access for civilians to human rights mechanisms and protection under the law.

* In Colombo, the *Colombo Response Team (CRT)* supports the work of the field sites and the civilians referred by the teams for various needs and resources in the capital. The team also regularly attends several capital-based forums, and meets with a variety of stakeholders to further the mission of NP. The team facilitated the stay of two young human rights interns from Jaffna, who were undertaking their second internship with an NP partner organization in the capital. For the first time, a sweep of the NP Guesthouse was carried out by police under the government's Emergency Procedures, and the intern, along with an NP driver and two other partners, were taken into custody for questioning. The NP driver and one of the three others were released, but the intern and the other partner remain in custody for further inquiry. The CRT, as well as management staff, have engaged in frequent international presence at the local police station and there is hope for a successful resolution, with the help of human rights lawyers engaged in the cases.

* In **Jaffna**, the NP team carried out 18 field activities and inter-agency coordination meetings during January, recorded five new cases of families seeking assistance and advice, and accompanied two families to access authorities and/or improve their safety. Families were reporting a variety of concerns, including confiscated identity cards, harassment, or requests for safer places for threatened family members. The team received requests from both a local and an international partner to collaborate on some kind of trainings around conflict resolution and conflict transformation skill-building in the future. Despite some confusion over current procedures for government permission to access various areas, the team did travel to several communities to meet with child protection or human rights partners. Concerns were raised in district protection forums that there has not been consistent data collection of the newly displaced coming into Jaffna from the Vanni, including the needs of children, which will be addressed by UNICEF and its partners in the coming weeks. The team also visited the university following the student unrest there and the shooting of a hostel employee.

* In **Trincomalee**, the team continued to work on strengthening the linkages between and among the district Peace Committees and other NGOs, INGOs, government departments, and community based organizations (CBOs) and institutions. The team is facilitating the implementation and evaluation of 12 small initiatives identified by the Peace Communities and funded by NP supporters from Japan. These initiatives are aimed at impacting all three ethnic communities through peace and harmony activities and access to justice initiatives, affecting as many as 1000 individuals in six divisions in the district. Ten to twenty key religious leaders have also been engaged. The team also continues to receive new cases of human rights abuses and attempts to connect the families immediately with other potential supports both in and out of the district.

* In **Valaichchenai**, the team assisted 19 families throughout the month requiring various interventions, including two accompaniments, and continued regular monitoring of IDP camps and resettlement areas affecting at least 290 families. Through the Early Warning Network developed by the team in collaboration with local CBO partners, 98 contacts are readily reachable in times of crisis or to verify rumours in times of tensions that can spark communal violence. The team has been asked by the CHA (Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies) to join its Human Rights Forum, and by UNHCR to become the focal point agency for monitoring two IDP/resettlement areas, including one considered to be the district “hot spot” at this time. Child Protection work remains an important part of the team’s activities each month.

* In **Batti Town**, the NP team also carries a large family caseload and recorded seven new cases this month, with two of them involving threatened children. They also followed up on 14 other families from the previous month. The team provided

emergency response and monitoring, with support from the Valaichchenai team, when a prominent Muslim businessman disappeared and tensions rose immediately in the area. Fortunately, the man was released from unknown captors the following day and the tense situation was defused. Batti Team fielded 18 activity reports, and attended a total of 14 coordination and information-sharing meetings with a variety of partners, inter-agency forums, and the government sector, including the opening of a new Child Welfare Unit set up for children affected by armed conflict under the government's Action Plan with UNICEF. Both teams enjoy a strong working relationship with many local government servants and security force representatives in Batticaloa District.

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