



## **FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT**

January-February 2008

The start of 2008 in Sri Lanka was not auspicious. On New Years Day a Tamil parliamentarian was assassinated while at prayer at a prominent Hindu temple in Colombo. His bodyguard was also killed and other worshippers injured. The following day the Government of Sri Lanka gave the required 14-day notice announcing the formal abrogation of the six-year old Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) signed in 2002 with the LTTE. A week later the Minister of Nation Building was killed while traveling north of Colombo and others were injured. In the following weeks and the lead up to Sri Lanka's 60th Independence Day celebrations, reports of suicide bombings (often targeting civilians), killings, disappearances, civilian round-ups and detentions, and displacements of populations in the wake of full-scale military engagements in the North peppered the daily news. Sri Lanka seemed to be quickly sliding into full-scale civil war.

While the documented violations of the Norwegian-brokered CFA were many (with the vast majority of violations leveled against the LTTE), and its critics were increasingly vocal, it was also widely acknowledged that the on-going involvement of the international community and the presence of the international monitors operating as the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) made a significant contribution during this time period to the confidence and security of civilians, to the recording and reporting of human rights violations on all sides, and to the perception that a negotiated political settlement was still a shared stated goal. In mid-January that goal was officially replaced by all-out military engagement, which quickly escalated to a level not seen during the ceasefire period. Over the next weeks a series of devastating counter-attacks and suicide missions attributed to the LTTE erupted in many parts of the country, killing and wounding many civilians, including children.

Numerous civil society groups within Sri Lanka, as well as many international actors and foreign governments, expressed regret and concern over the abrogation of the CFA and the anticipated rise in human rights abuses and both military and civilian casualties. In the period following the government's announcement, the advisor to the President on the Peace Process, Jayantha Dhanapala, resigned his

position. The Commander of the Sri Lankan Army, Sarath Fonseka, spoke for many when he expressed his belief that the LTTE could be eradicated within the year and that a final political resolution would be more attainable following their defeat.

While the security situation has progressively deteriorated as far back as the end of 2005, the formal abrogation of the CFA and withdrawal of the SLMM monitors is seen by many to further diminish the human security on the ground for civilians and increase the vulnerability and danger for all segments of society. According to SLMM figures there were fewer than 130 deaths attributed to the conflict in the first 3 years of the ceasefire, compared to at least 5,000 since the end of 2005. Since the beginning of this year, full-scale military battles and aerial bombings in the north have intensified, combined with an increase in targeted attacks and indiscriminate suicide bombings throughout the rest of the country. These have left scores of civilians dead and hundreds wounded.

Emergency Regulations that came into effect in December 2006 continue to be renewed monthly and give the security forces widespread powers of arrest and detention. Many civil society actors contend there has been under-reporting of key issues by the media, who have increasingly come under threat themselves. International media watchgroups have reported that Sri Lanka is currently ranked the third most dangerous place for journalists, behind Iraq and Somalia. The Court did not respond favorably to a fundamental rights petition seeking postponement of local elections in Batticaloa District, scheduled for March 10. Because of on-going violence and instability, local elections had not been seen to be feasible in the district for many years and were last held 14 years ago.

While many positive actions were taken during the Ceasefire period to support vulnerable communities in the north and east, especially after the December 2004 tsunami, current funding constraints and the challenging political environment are affecting humanitarian operations throughout the country. In some areas of the country there remain rising tensions and fear, and mistrust between different ethnic communities. The protection of vulnerable individuals and communities under threat is more important now than ever before, with the humanitarian consequences of the war being experienced most intensely in the north and east.

Despite an increased war situation, Nonviolent Peaceforce teams continue to provide international presence, monitoring, and accompaniment to individuals and communities in the four districts where we live and work, especially for civilians who have suffered the most direct effects of the conflict over a long period of time. In the absence of a Cease Fire Agreement, numerous of our local and national partners have commented that NP's presence is more valued, more

important, and more appreciated than ever. As one wrote to us: “NP’s presence has an extreme value in the current context which cannot be overestimated.”

Nowhere was this more immediately apparent than after the announcement was made at the end of 2007 that NP would have to close one or more of its field site offices due to international funding constraints. NP partners throughout Sri Lanka rallied and helped NPSL identify sources of potential funding that are already proving beneficial. As a result, NP’s ability to maintain our northern office in Jaffna has been gratefully extended for at least several months into the future.

### **The Work of the Teams**

Programme Coordinators from all field sites came together in Colombo in January to reflect on our work in 2007 and clarify programme objectives for 2008. Project Aims and Objectives were reviewed and the following articulation of our working framework was outlined:

The Aim of NPSL in 2008 is to support local and national partners working to increase the safety of civilians and protect the human rights of all vulnerable groups; and to help them open up space for dialogue and community participation so all conflicts might be resolved through nonviolent means.

#### **Key Objectives:**

1. Build the confidence of local organizations and individuals to address issues of human rights, peace and justice with authorities at all levels.
2. Provide space and opportunity for formal and informal networks to form and to function effectively at the community level to prevent, resolve, or limit the effects of violence.
3. Facilitate coordinated action on human security at community, district, national, and international levels.

Programmatic Strands (integrated throughout NPSL’s work):

- Early and/or Emergency Response
- Confidence-building and Nonviolent Engagement
- Facilitation and Network Support
- Advocacy and Awareness

With this guiding framework, a second meeting was held in February to discuss team workplans for 2008 and key activities that promise to help us reach our Objectives. It is clear that funding agencies will require more results-based monitoring of activities and more project accountability, including both quantitative and qualitative data to document our impact.

### The Work of the Colombo Response Team (CRT)

One focus of the CRT's work in this period has been supporting the accompaniment needs in Colombo of cases referred to them by the field sites, as well as additional referrals from local partners and a growing network of civil society actors. Intensive work is required at times on high risk cases. In one case, after many attempts by CRT trying to find a safe location for a mother and two young children, the women's organization that had finally pledged to help withdrew at the last moment due to their own security concerns, and it was back to the beginning for a very traumatized family. All too often it is single women who have lost their husbands, with children who have lost their father, who find little support and no good options. Such setbacks are to be expected from time to time when working with the many challenges confronting vulnerable families.

Another focus of the Team is to help develop a more coordinated response from Colombo actors and civil society to address threats to human rights and the security concerns of such vulnerable people. CRT also plays an advocacy role with its involvement in and relationship-building with a variety of Colombo-level contacts, agencies, local and national organizations headquartered in Colombo, and other stakeholders. CRT attended a media brief organized by civil society organizations and various meetings of international humanitarian agencies. The team also is part of the UNHCR Protection Working Group, an initiative that parallels similar working groups at the district levels. Currently the Working Group is working on an Advocacy Strategy for 2008, which promises to increase the efficacy of combined advocacy efforts.

### The Work of the Team in Jaffna District

The Jaffna Team continues to focus its protection efforts on the following groups: individuals and families under threat or fear, surrenderees, children and women, human rights defenders and community animators, INGO's staffed without expats (i.e., only national staff), University students, and a number of vulnerable communities.

In the area of child protection, NP and UNICEF are collaborating on drafting safety tips for children while traveling to school and at home, which will be used as part of an awareness campaign in local schools and child friendly spaces. Joint monitoring and visits of women and children 'surrenderees' both in the prison and the rehabilitation center have built stronger coordination between the two agencies. Additionally, it has allowed persons under threat to review ALL of their safety options with both agencies. NP has been able to build more trust with the authorities at both the prison and a new rehabilitation center. NP has also accompanied UNICEF national staff into the field when no UNICEF international protection officer was available. And NP co-sponsored a two-day district level

meeting regarding child protection mechanisms, referrals and gaps. Participants included NGO, INGO, CBO and GoSL representatives.

Individual cases received by the team were all related to fear and threats. The team refers many to HRC, ICRC, and/or accompanies people to surrender, upon request. In one case, the Team's quick response to the abduction of one man and immediate assistance to the wife and children were instrumental in getting the man released the same day.

NP Jaffna is working with our Colombo staff to design a Partners' Meeting and workshop regarding rights and advocacy, enabling national partners to speak with various national and international agencies in Colombo, and UNDP offered to conduct a workshop regarding human rights principles and documentation standards. Supporting the creation of a network between relevant actors in both the North and South of Sri Lanka provides a healthy exchange of information and potential alliances, which can hopefully continue long after NP leaves.

#### The Work of the Team in Trincomalee District

The Trinco team's priority remains providing presence and accompaniment, as needed, to threatened individuals and families, and to the many vulnerable communities, local organizations and peace committees established (but not always fully functional) in all three ethnic communities (Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim).

Many groups, including the local Human Rights Commission (HRC), depend on the Team's presence and accompaniment for their field investigations from time to time, including in contested border areas where land disputes can quickly turn violent. Though based in Trinco Town, the team continues to visit the Mutur office site two to three days a week, maintains relationships with key stakeholders and NP partners there, and provides regular presence in the southern part of the district.

Relationships with police are generally strong as NP maintains engagement with the many Peace Committees historically established in the District under Police auspices. Without NP's encouragement, nurturing and networking, many of the Peace Committees would remain dormant or relatively inactive. The Peace Committee work has been supported this year by a capacity-building grant from NP-Japan, and the team hosted a two-member delegation from Japan for a visit to seven Peace Committees in February. The HRC will also support the capacity building of these committees by offering human rights training to them. In other child rights and protection work, the team has built relationships with the Women and Children's Desk officers of several police stations and accompanies families and individuals, as needed, to approach the police to report violations.

Working with UNICEF and other agencies, NP has been designated for the division of Kantale for specific child rights monitoring in the coming months.

In this and other areas in the south of the District, the team regularly visits a number of refugee camps of war-displaced IDP's (internally displaced persons), and collaborates with UNHCR, NRC (Norwegian Refugee Council) and other agencies to ensure basic needs are communicated to relevant providers, and human security and protection is addressed. And, as if the challenges of displacement and poverty were not enough, in some areas it's wild elephants that prevent families from staying safely in their newly resettled areas overnight, forcing them to return nightly to more protected camps, disrupting their lives and livelihoods, and further destabilizing already fractured communities.

The Work of the Teams in Batticaloa District (Batti Town and Valaichchenai Field Sites)

Our two teams in Batti Town and in Valaichchenai have also faced a challenging period with pre-election monitoring the major activity for four district staff in the lead up to local elections to be held on March 10. They were also joined by two staff in February on loan from other field sites. The monitoring teams cover all areas involved in the election of local officials that will serve at the Municipal Council and Pradeshiya Sabha levels, and have met with all stakeholders of contesting political parties, security forces and police, elections commissioners and other government officials, and concerned civil society. Election monitoring has provided opportunities for NP to be introduced, or re-introduced, to many actors and the nonpartisan and protective mandate of NPSL to be widely shared.

The work in Batti District, however, was not all about the elections and the teams managed to carry out other significant community-based protection activities during this period. Teams continued to field many individual requests from threatened individuals and families, although the number of killings and reported abductions has been less in this period. Some youth continued to escape from armed groups and families sought NP's help to assist them. Relationships were strengthened with government agencies mandated to help protect children, such as the Probation Department and the National Child Protection Commission. While NP facilitated initial meetings with government servants, the confidence of parents increased and they were able to subsequently advocate on their own behalf. Such activities help empower local communities to be more active agents for the protection of their children. NP teams also participated in the planning and groundwork for both a district level meeting to involve more local actors in such community-based child protection measures for 2008, which will be further explored at a UNICEF-sponsored national meeting to be held in March in Kandy.

Vocational training centers that have been a source of help to many vulnerable youth in the District are facing their own capacity limits. NP subsequently facilitated a meeting among representatives of three centers so they could share information and strategies. In collaboration with local civil society, NP also supports the Centers and the families in addressing re-integration issues for the youth once their training programs end. A workshop was held to assist the parents in identifying needed actions to begin laying the groundwork for a safer return home for their children or in developing plans for other longer-term solutions.

Apart from other psycho-social impacts and persistent trauma that some ex-combatants may experience, lack of education and financial resources, as well as a language barrier when youth speak only Tamil, all severely limit available options.

Both teams are also developing wider networks to build more extensive “early warning networks” when and where violence might occur. Batti Team brought together ten representatives of Rural Development Societies in their areas and developed new relationships in the Muslim area of Kattankudy. Valaichchenai Team also has gained additional partners in the Muslim community and regular support of small CBOs is helping to lay the groundwork for a strong Early Warning Network on the northern half of the District as well.

And continuing the slow but powerful work of creating community out of despair and isolation, two meetings were held in Valaichchenai with mothers known to us for more than a year a half, war-affected women who have lost children to an armed group. Facilitated by local activists, the meetings (one with almost 100 participants) were to plan a public event for early March to launch the publication of a long-awaited booklet of the women’s testimony gathered over time, in poetic form. The booklet also highlights some of the other activities they have shared: tree planting ceremonies when a family member has been killed, road painting to publicly call for Respect for all Life, a vigil for peace outside the NP office and a plea for the safe return of the children, ALL children, on International Peace Day last September. As shared in the summary report of the event at the time, the most remarkable outcome of this event was the heart-connection developed over time between parents whose children have managed to leave an armed group, and their standing in solidarity with those parents whose children have still not returned.

NPSL is making a difference in Sri Lanka.

Written by Rita Webb