



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

June / July 2008

Brief on the Situation in Sri Lanka

Progress of the execution of the Government of Sri Lanka's war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the North of Sri Lanka continued to dominate the news, if not the lives, of all within the country. The Government appeared to remain convinced that the LTTE has been severely crippled the last two years and can be eradicated as a fighting force by the end of this year. Many other voices, nationally and internationally, are voicing their concerns that the plague of terrorism could continue in clandestine forms for many years to come in Sri Lanka, regardless of what happens on the battlefields, unless a political solution to Asia's longest-running civil conflict is also pursued along with the military strategies.

Despite entering into political coalition with the President's party and winning Provincial Council elections in the East in May, the TMVP political party, which broke from its affiliation with the LTTE in 2004, has claimed that they will not disarm until the LTTE is wiped out, despite the government's official position that only police and security forces are empowered to bear arms. According to repeated reports, the LTTE are said to be operating in scattered cells throughout the East, carrying out periodic attacks on government forces and creating instability throughout other parts of the country. A bus bomb in Moratuwa, south of Colombo, in the first week of June, killed at least 23 and wounded dozens. And a suicide bomber in Vavuniya killed 12 policemen and wounded a couple dozen others, including four civilians.

Independent journalists continue to be banned from areas where the fighting is being carried out and from access to combatants, so verification of either side's reported casualty figures is impossible. Also dominating the news was the continued assault on media and defenders of a free press, with defense columnist Iqbal Athas calling this "the worst period in my 42-year career." He suspended his defense column in the Sunday Times in June. Mr. S. Tissainayagam, another prominent journalist and human rights activist (along with two other colleagues),

remained in custody for more than four months without charges, and national and international pressure was mounting in the case. In response, the President has appointed a ministerial level commission to investigate into the many allegations of threats, harassments and attacks on journalists.

Despite having lost its coveted seat on the UN Human Rights Council, the Government continued to reject the concept of international Human Rights monitors to document alleged abuses, claiming it is an unacceptable infringement of sovereignty. Concern from many sectors has been raised that this could also lead to loss of GSP+ tariff concessions of the European Community, especially for the garment industry. EU requirements for such favourable status require that countries adhere to as many as 27 international agreements, including protection of human rights and labour rights. The European Commission also reported it will withhold development aid funding to Sri Lanka, until the government addresses concerns about its human rights record. The EC says future funding will depend on resolving issues of access and security for humanitarian aid workers from the Red Cross and United Nations. Coming at the same time, Action Contra le Faim (AcF), the French humanitarian aid agency that lost 17 Sri Lankan staff in a massacre in Mutur in 2006 and withdrew from Sri Lanka in protest in March, is pressing their case in Europe for an international inquiry, citing failure of the Government of Sri Lanka to conduct a proper investigation until this time.

The cost of prosecuting the war and other global economic indicators are taking a toll on the whole society with inflation more than double any of Sri Lanka's neighbors. A general strike called by the JVP on July 10th was of mixed result in galvanizing national attention on the country's economic plight.

The Local Context and Work of the NPSL Teams

The Colombo Response Team (CRT)

The situation in Colombo was generally calmer in June and July than it had been in earlier months when there were numerous bus and train bombings in and near the capital. For the CRT, referrals from various stakeholders and from the NP field sites are expanding and resulted in an increase in demands on the team. The team has done more than 40 accompaniments during this time period, supporting at risk and threatened individuals and families to access a wide variety of resources and services, pursue legal or human rights channels, and improve their immediate or longer-term security. CRT was also asked to provide international presence in court in one human rights case.

The team worked closely with local human rights partners and the UN Office of Human Rights, and established contacts with a number of governmental and non-

governmental agencies. NPSL's relationship with the national Human Rights Commission is strengthening, resulting in more pro-active involvement and advocacy by the headquarters of that important national institution. Contacts within the Christian community were also expanded when the team met again with the Anglican Bishop and a representative of their

Reconciliation and Peace Desk.

The team participated in a National Peace Council (NPC) program on "Promotion of Peace Through Peace Education and Peace Activism." An outcome of the programme was the formation of a South Asia Peace Alliance, which may prove of interest to NPSL work in the future. CRT also regularly attends the Protection Working Group on IDPs (internally displaced persons) and hopes to contribute, with the input from our field sites, to a "protection gap analysis" that the PWG will undertake.

Jaffna District Team

Although the fighting between the government forces and the LTTE continues to be focused in the north with increasing intensity in various areas, the Jaffna Team remains able to carry on its work, despite limited or no access to some parts of the Jaffna peninsula. Families report fear of imminent displacement, as the progress of the war is unpredictable. With a gradual diminishment in the number of international organizations on the Jaffna peninsula, the NP team seeks to show consistent international presence in several vulnerable areas, but field visit plans are often delayed or changed depending on the security situation. In addition to the heavy military presence and activity, the lack of health and legal services in many areas, the on-going restrictions on fishing and the high security zones, the high cost of living, limited mobility and livelihood options, and high rates of alcohol-related domestic abuse, all conspire to make life a continual challenge for war-affected families in the North.

The international organizations and UN agencies that remain in Jaffna are in constant contact with one another, and NP is an integral member of all forums. NP Jaffna members attended a program for World Day Against Child Labour, an island-wide concern as families get pushed further into poverty. The focus of the team's work continues to center on human rights and human security, with frequent meetings with local human rights defenders and HR organizations. The team is also following up with human rights defenders who participated in the NP-sponsored training on international standards of human rights reporting and documentation in Colombo last March.

Trincomalee District Team

The political situation in Trincomalee has been somewhat more stable in the post-election period following Provincial Council (PC) elections in May, although news reports continue to be posted regarding extortions, intimidation, some reported abductions, and the killing in Trinco town of an insurance business man. The Tamil-Muslim violence that plagued Batticaloa District in May and early June did not spill over into Trinco District, as had been feared. To that end, the Trinco team continued to help bridge relationships between Hindu and Muslim groups in the post election period in Kinniya.

In the beginning of June security was heightened for the Provincial Council inauguration ceremonies. Security Force presence was increased in Trinco Town, and several explosives and weapons caches were reportedly found in search operations at various times. North of the district is a Forward Defense Line, demarcating a line of military engagement between the government forces and the LTTE. Some people fleeing the fighting to the north and making their way to Trinco are reported to have been sent by boat to IDP camps on the west coast in Mannar District. Nighttime movements of civilians are limited but shops and 3-wheelers are generally operating until 8 or 9 at night. Fishermen can now go out to fish at 5 am instead of 6, a slight improvement from previous fishing restrictions.

NP Trinco Team continues to be based in Trinco Town, with regular visits to the NP office in Mutur and key divisions in the south of the district. The team does regular monitoring of several IDP camps and is providing regular presence in remote areas in the south of the district, particularly in the areas of Seruwila and Mutur, and in Sinhalese-Tamil border areas where land issues are simmering. The UNHCR requested NP's participation in monitoring four IDP camp resettlement operations, and the IDP section of the district Human Rights Commission is seeking regular collaboration with the team for follow-up monitoring. The team attended a district forum with the local commanding officer to discuss mutual interests and needs and improving civil-military relations.

The team facilitated linkages with two Peace Committees to UNHCR and UNICEF to encourage stronger protection links in their communities by UN agencies. For two other Committees, NP facilitated a meeting with a local peace activist and a British minister visiting the district with representatives of the British High Commission. The local actors from different areas seemed to increasingly recognize the benefits of collaboration, and visibility was given at higher levels to grassroots initiatives by local Peace Committees.

Batticaloa District Teams (Valaichchenai and Batti Town)

While the government has worked hard over the past year to stabilize and secure the East, there is much work still to do and reported widespread civilian

insecurities. The teams are not able to fulfill all the requests made of them due to capacity limitations. The post-Provincial Council election violence between Tamils and Muslims that erupted during May and early June thankfully diminished thereafter, but tensions remain and political rivalries often take a violent turn. There were grenade attacks on the homes of at least two political party leaders, with two security personnel injured in those attacks. Intra-Tamil political rivalries appear to be contributing to destabilization of the district, with visible weapons reappearing outside some political offices following a number of tit-for-tat killings. Police have also been targeted, with four being killed in a brief period in Battu town. Reports of extortion are frequent, even of government employees, and many businesses are suffering under repeated extortion demands by armed actors.

In Valaichchenai the Team continued to help develop and support the Community Information Network, a consortium of more than 20 small Tamil and Muslim community-based organizations initiated by NP at the beginning of the year and which is steadily gathering in strength and confidence. Additional outreach to religious leaders, Security Forces, and the Union Traders Association also appear to have been positively received and helped to minimize Tamil-Muslim tensions in the northern part of the district.

Heavy family casework and numerous accompaniment requests dominate the teams' schedules. Strong partnerships with government agencies, security forces, national and international NGOs, as well as tapping local resources and national networks, allows the teams to provide early and emergency responses which help families address their pressing protection and human rights concerns. These involve assistance with safe access to resources or services, to reporting or advocacy mechanisms, to responsible political or military authorities, or to safer locations. Work related to Child Protection is ongoing, with continued work with some families who, until now, have been unable to secure the release of their children or other family members from armed actors.

IDP camp and resettlement monitoring is a regular part of the teams' work as well, including participation in a number of national and international protection and coordination forums. In conjunction with the Ministry of Disaster Management & Human Rights and the GA's office (Government Agent's), UNHCR has also invited NP to be part of "Confidence Building and Stabilization Measures" discussions and activities for IDPs in the district.

NP staff from all districts were able to enhance their technical skills during this time period through a Child Rights/Child Protection/Child Participation training from a Norwegian expert seconded to NP from Save the Children/Norway. Several staff were also able to participate in a UNICEF-sponsored workshop on reporting

and monitoring mechanisms under UN Resolution 1612, which tracks at the international level human rights violations against children.