



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

March 2008

The Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) continues its military engagement with the LTTE in the northern part of the country, with reportedly rising casualty figures and civilian displacements. The spate of suicide bombings the country experienced in January and February diminished this month. A number of interesting political developments occurred as well during March 2008.

On the national level, a leading civil society group issued a preliminary report, "Under Fire: Humanitarian Persons in Humanitarian Service in Sri Lanka," which details 67 cases of killings or disappearances of humanitarian workers in Sri Lanka in approximately the last two years. Their full report will be issued in the coming months in all three national languages.

By month's end the Government embarked on a campaign to seek international support to get re-elected to its seat at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), which comes up for review in May. Sri Lanka is, among other countries, scheduled for its Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process in Geneva in May, and both the GoSL and concerned Sri Lankan human rights defenders have prepared briefs to defend their opposing perspectives on the human rights situation in the country.

Also announced this month was the departure of the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP), which had been formed at government request to oversee the Presidential Commission of Inquiry. The Commission had been established in November 2006 by order of the President to investigate 16 incidents of alleged serious violation of human rights that occurred since Aug 1, 2005. IIGEP members claim that their recommendations and observations were largely ignored or rejected throughout the time of their tenure, and that the Commission will not be in position to pursue its mandate transparently and in accordance with basic international norms and standards.

The work of the teams in March

For NPSL, March was an active month, responding to the request of our national election-monitoring partner, PAFFREL (Peoples Action for Free and Fair Elections) to assist their local monitors in their observation of the local elections held in Batticaloa District for the first time in 14 years. From the announcement of the election, reservations were widely expressed as to whether the process could be free and fair. PAFFREL and NP proceeded with the monitoring, concerned to mitigate and/or discourage violence, and to document any abuses as much as possible.

Such challenges point up the difficulty of trying to responsibly perform a nonpartisan role in a highly politicized environment. While there was a drastic reduction in the numbers of armed men seen in the District during the weeks leading up to the election, and it proved to be largely (though not completely) free of violence, there remains much controversy as to whether it was indeed free and fair, especially as some political parties did not feel they could safely field candidates for various posts and therefore sat out the election altogether.

Managing the Work of the Teams

This month a transition was made to organize the work of the NPSL teams under Heads of Field Offices (HFOs). Through this new structure NPSL intends to improve coordination, efficiency and effectiveness, as well as to progressively devolve more responsibilities and accountability to the field level.

The Work of the Colombo Response Team (CRT)

The Colombo Response Team (CRT) supports the work of our field teams in a number of ways, particularly the Jaffna Team, as many war-affected people in the north must often seek recourse, relocation, or further services in the capital. The main route out of Jaffna continues to be by air to Colombo since the A9 road has been closed for a year and a half. By participating in Colombo-level forums, the CRT can both convey timely information from the field to appropriate venues/actors and receive useful information or facilitate connections for district level activities with appropriate resource people and agencies in the capital. In March CRT met with the Catholic Apostolic Nuncio to discuss the situation of war-affected families. The team also contributed to other civil society meetings, carried out various accompaniment requests, made referrals to other support services, and continued expanding the network of Colombo resources.

In March, CRT also worked with the Jaffna Team to organize and host a Human Rights Defender workshop (see below under Jaffna Team for a fuller description

of that event), and assisted four young people to get 2-week internships in Colombo with several human rights organizations. The interns were able to understand much better avenues of advocacy and recourse, and were able to observe a hearing of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into some of the high profile human rights cases currently before them. As one of the sponsors wrote to us later: “Dear Friends, I take this opportunity to thank all of you for taking a massive task to (help) train my people. We feel proud to say that we are not alone to fight against the violence.”

The Work of the Team in Jaffna District

The Jaffna Team remains under the Operations Category of “Restricted,” and curfew passes continue to be required on a monthly basis. Two field team members will shift to Jaffna in April to strengthen our team there during this critical period. Sounds of outgoing shelling that have been constant in recent months diminished considerably in March, providing some measure of relief to those living and working there. The team continued with accompaniments, protective presence to vulnerable areas, and/or referrals and linkages. The Jaffna Team continues to be part of strong coordination between and among the agencies working in the north, meeting regularly with them to share information and strategize combined actions to better support civilians isolated on the Jaffna Peninsula. The Human Rights Commission in Jaffna has had 740 cases of missing persons reported to them since December 2005.

A coordinated effort between Jaffna Team and the Colombo Response Team resulted in a very successful opportunity for local human rights defenders in the North and East to come together to increase their capacity and network with others doing difficult human rights work in their home areas. The idea for the program came as a request from a local human rights organization. The 5-day programme focused on international standards, national laws and regulations that impact human rights, mechanisms to meet standards, and processes for documenting and monitoring human rights cases in the current context. The workshop brought together 13 people, along with two of our national field officers, and was followed by a two-week internship opportunity for four young people to work with Colombo-based groups.

The Work of the Team in Trincomalee District

The NP Team in Trinco spared one team member to assist Batticaloa District during the election period, while the rest continued their protection and international presence activities. Joint meetings with the Human Rights Commission were held on IDP issues, as well as to encourage more police investigation into abductions, killings and disappearances that sources suggest are on the rise over the past two months.

The support of local Peace Committees was taken to a new level in the district this month, supported by a grant from the Japanese-funded Niwano Foundation. Preparatory needs assessments were done with 15 activists from five areas and a follow-up workshop was held based on their identified needs. A two-day workshop was organized and attended by 24 peace committee leaders and covered an array of capacity-building needs facilitated by local activists including: mediation and conflict resolution skills; IDP rights; nonviolent communication; human rights; Sri Lankan Emergency Regulations; legal aid resources; conflict early warning indicators; and government services, including from the Probation Department and Child

Protection authorities. The workshop was also an opportunity for the NP team to build relationships and share our mandate with special invited guests, including senior religious leaders from all faiths, the Chief Secretary for the Eastern Province, and the assistant to the Government Agent (GA) on IDPs and natural disasters. Government servants at the grassroots levels and many local police authorities in divisions where we work seem to well understand and appreciate the presence of the NP Trinco Team.

The team continues to coordinate with others on child protection work and is part of a network of international, national and local bodies that is working to establish a safe place for at-risk youth within the district. The team also continues to work from their base in Trinco Town, traveling to the field office in Mutur and serving the very vulnerable areas of Seruwila and Echalaipattu, where Tamil-Sinhala land disputes are a potential flashpoint for violence.

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

The two teams in Batti District are situated 32 km apart. This allows them to cover a substantial portion of the district, as well as to collaborate and support each other in a variety of activities. Both teams were heavily involved in this month's pre- and post-election monitoring in Batticaloa District, as described earlier.

Despite its challenges, the elections also provided NPSL with an opportunity to be in relationship with a number of stakeholders in the District that they had minimal or no opportunity to contact in prior months, including a variety of Security Force personnel, police, political parties, and government officials at many levels. Such relationships can now be built on in the coming months which, if they work well, can serve to improve the safety and acceptance of our staff and the NP mandate, as well as provide an opening for the civilians NP serves to also have more access to

these authorities with our facilitation and networking in order to improve their security and advocacy as well.

Work with children and families is a large part of the activity of the teams, strengthening existing safety nets and increasing self-advocacy, as well as identifying safer options for them when remaining in their home area is not the best option. Nine accompaniments were required this month. Twelve mothers from the northern part of the district were accompanied to the main town of Batti at the beginning of the month to join more than a hundred and fifty others for the launching of a book of mothers' poems and readings published in all three languages. Facilitated by local peace activists, the booklet marked a milestone in almost two years of meetings and activities. Two staff also participated in a 4-day UNICEF-sponsored workshop on Children Affected by Armed Conflict, an important national initiative that will bring additional information and coordination back to the districts to improve the available resources and services to children being directly impacted by the conflict in the North and East.

In March there were continued reports of adults affected by threats, arrests, killings, abductions, forced recruitment, disappearances, and sexual/gender-based violence. NP provides support to help people to report their cases to agencies, for example the Human Rights Commission, or to access legal advice.

The teams regularly monitor four IDP camps weekly and Batti Team participated in monitoring two instances of resettlement to the western part of the District, following "Go and See" visits to determine if the area and available resources and infrastructure were adequate for safe resettlement. While many internally displaced persons have been resettled over the past year, approximately 20,000 people are still awaiting resettlement, including families who have still not been able to return to Trinco District to the north. The teams regularly participate in forums at the district level, including the IDP protection working group, and the Emergency Child Protection group. Batti Team was invited to attend a Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA) discussion in Ampara District. NPSL has gotten repeated requests to deploy a permanent team to Ampara District, but the most we can offer is periodic visits.

The team is encouraging development of a Community Information/Early Warning Network that brings 17 cross-ethnic organizations together in the northern part of the district, with their third meeting held in March. This group represents the first time that many of these Tamil and Muslim organizations have met together to discuss shared community interests. Slowly the groundwork is being laid for more trust and information sharing among the members and for future joint activities across differences and geographic areas.

Written by Rita Webb