



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

March 2009

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The Political Context of Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, throughout March 2009 the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) tightened the noose around the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in an increasingly narrow strip of land on the northeast coast of the island, perhaps as small as 10 square miles, hoping to put a final end after 25 years to the separatists' armed resistance.

According to government figures, about 61,000 people have fled the combat zone and are housed in a dozen "welfare camps." The government has accepted the UN's recommendation that the camps be administered by civil authorities as opposed to the military, and will make that transition as soon as feasible.

The government was reluctant to agree to a pause in the fighting, asserting it would only allow the LTTE to regroup and consolidate their positions, causing continuing harm and an extension of the suffering. At month's end, denying they are on the brink of defeat, the LTTE again appealed for a halt in the fighting but, as they refused to unconditionally and unilaterally lay down their arms, the government refused the call.

The Context and Work of the NP Teams

With the NP team in Trincomalee District having phased out their operations last month, the NPSL teams in Colombo, Jaffna, Valaichchenai, and Batticaloa continued their humanitarian efforts and participated in more than 75 coordination meetings and field activities in March, and handled more than 40 new and follow-up cases documenting protection concerns and alleged human rights violations. The work of the teams continues to focus on reducing violence and improving the

safety and security of vulnerable civilians and can be viewed as falling into four overlapping programmatic areas, as summarized below.

Child Rights and Protection

NP works with families and community structures to improve the safety and security of children, youth and their families living in situations of vulnerability and fear due to the armed conflict. In all field sites NP also partners with other child protection agencies, such as UNICEF and Save the Children-Sri Lanka, as well as government structures, such as the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) and the Probation Department. This month the teams attended the regular district coordination meetings on Child Protection, attended a UNICEF partners' meeting on their 2009 Action Plan, and participated in planning sessions for the programming and services needed throughout the Release and Reintegration process for children affected by armed conflict (CAAC). Various collaborative efforts are underway in response to the need to help reintegrate former armed cadres back into society and establish livelihoods for them. Various options will be assessed and explored, including job placements both in Sri Lanka and overseas, self-employment opportunities, and the creation of other income-generating and training activities. In Batticaloa, community-based vocational training centers continue to play an important role in partnering with NP to offer some additional security and training options to vulnerable youth. The teams were also part of coordination meetings hosted by SCOPP (Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process) to discuss the design of a national framework for reintegration activities following the resolution of the armed conflict.

Some families continue to search for their children formerly taken into an armed group, with many families throughout the country in anguish over what their relatives are facing in the Vanni region where the fighting, casualties, and civilian displacement is focused. NP is following up with all families with children who have sought NP's support. In Batticaloa the teams registered more than 20 new family cases, and did follow-up visits with 18 more. In Jaffna the team participated in a workshop on child rights violations under UN Security Council Resolution 1612, which documents child rights violations in 6 categories of concern. The conclusion reached is that more training of military, police and community leaders is needed on 1612 violations, which continue to affect Sri Lanka's children. For sexual and gender-based violence, NP coordinates with UNHCR, which assists UNICEF in officially reporting on these 1612 violations, such as the reported rape this month of a 14 year old girl taken to Batticaloa Hospital.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and their Resettlement

Partnering with the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and others, NP teams monitor IDP camps in their areas of operation and assist with the safety and security concerns of IDPs, and their rights to safe, dignified and voluntary return to their places of origin as soon as possible. In Jaffna, the NP team is monitoring the situation at some of the Transitional Accommodation Centers, where there is some tension between people who have been staying in centers for a year or more, waiting for government permission to return to their home villages, and those newly arriving in the Peninsula who are currently getting the attention from government and aid agencies.

In Batticaloa, the teams conducted 5 monitoring visits to IDP camps and resettlement areas. In three villages in one resettlement area, the Valaichchenai team will help community leaders engage in a mapping activity to help assess their protection needs and resources, with an eye toward identifying and strengthening community-based mechanisms and resources. Good relationships with government servants and community leaders in the areas where NP operates enhance the teams' ability to gain access to remote areas and provide protective presence and confidence-building measures to the civilians struggling to re-establish their families and livelihoods in their home communities. Coordination with other agencies also improves the access rural people have to needed resources.

Human Rights Protection and Promotion

Many of the activities touched on above that affect children, youth and families, or that support Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), also involve the protection and promotion of their human rights. In addition, NP supports the work of a number of human rights defenders (HRDs) by providing international presence that opens up the political space for them to carry out or extend their human rights work into vulnerable areas or with at-risk populations. To a large extent, many activities of the teams serve more than one objective, such as: the safe accompaniment of a local peace activist to a remote area can also assist them in making needed community connections in the area so that in the future their confidence and network might allow them to continue or extend the reach of their work.

NP teams also collaborate with others, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or the national Human Rights Commission, in advocating for improved access to or implementation of human rights mechanisms. In the districts, the teams accompanied several vulnerable or threatened people to the local police or other authorities this month.

In support of vulnerable populations in the districts where NP works, other collaborative and joint awareness and advocacy efforts are possible through strong

relationships with a variety of other stakeholders, including embassies, international and national humanitarian organizations, local government structures, and community-based organizations.

Strengthening Community-Based Structures

Working with and through existing community structures is a large part of NP's strategy to move beyond emergency response and to positively impact the field of the conflict for longer-term sustainability of nonviolent strategies. Such work is built on long-term relationships of trust in communities where NP lives and works and in strict adherence to nonpartisanship and nonviolent principles.

In Colombo, the team continues to build awareness around the need for better networks, and in Jaffna the team supports the human rights community that continues to carry out awareness activities despite geographical limitations.

In Batticaloa strong relationships with all stakeholders allows the teams to facilitate the coming together of actors across ethnic, religious or community divides. The Batti team is engaged in outreach to interfaith leaders, including facilitating the inclusion of the one and only Buddhist monk in Batti Town into conversations with Hindu and Muslim religious leaders nearby. Local government structures at the grassroots level (through the Grama Sevakas) are also offering in some instances to assist in the outreach to community-based organizations (CBOs), like the Rural Development Societies (RDS), including Women RDSs, that could play a pivotal protection role at the community/family level in rural areas.

In Valaichchenai a growing Early Warning and Information Network continues to meet, along with the Organisation for Coordinating Peace and Coexistence (OCPC), which added a new Tamil-member CBO this month from the north end of the district. Eighteen Tamil and Muslim organisations met together this month in the NP office and decided to pursue joint Sinhala and English language learning so that they can better communicate across their differences.

Each month the Batticaloa teams make a practice of delivering a monthly summary report of their activities not only to the head Government Agent (GA), which is required, but also to more local government servants at the divisional level (DSs), as well as to local police chiefs and officers-in-charge, and to Army commanders in two brigades. Such transparency allows NP to gain acceptance despite the often sensitive nature of the protection and human rights work they undertake in a fragile security environment.