



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

May 2008

Violence rocked Sri Lanka from all sides in May 2008, from military engagements in the North between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the North; to election-related and communal violence in the East; to random acts of violence against civilian targets in and near the capital in the West. Combined with run-away inflation and monsoonal flooding in parts of the South, there was hardly a constituency untouched by some adversity this month.

Eastern Provincial Council Elections

The work of Nonviolent Peaceforce-Sri Lanka (NPSL) was dominated for most of the month by the lead up to and the aftermath of the Eastern Provincial Council elections, where three of NPSL's teams are situated. Declaring democracy restored to the East following the May 10th polls, the coalition led by the President's party claimed victory in the elections and a mandate for the continuing military strategy to rid the north next of "the scourge of terrorism." The Government now intends to replace emergency humanitarian and recovery work with long-term development and infrastructure projects to re-build the East, presuming that it can also win the confidence of financial institutions and donors.

Many such promises were made in the lead up to the elections, with the President reiterating that all the peoples' aspirations would finally be met in the East, including for livelihood development and food security, a growing problem given a 26.2% inflation rate, according to one economic analysis. But the government's assessment of the election and its outcomes did not go unchallenged. The Opposition party condemned the poll as irreparably flawed and several election monitoring organizations reported widespread elections violations, including the murder of two police officers who were killed in separate incidents several days after the Election.

In the aftermath of the election, the Government was faced with the equally difficult process of deciding who would now be the Eastern Provincial Council's

Chief Minister: the main TMVP contender and former LTTE child soldier, Sivenesathurai Chandrakanthan, also known as Pillayan; or Muslim minister M.L.A.M. Hisbullah. Ultimately it was announced that the post would be rotated amongst the three community leaders elected, with Pillayan starting out as the first Chief Minister of the Eastern Province. After a period of two years, he is to be succeeded by Minister Hisbullah for two years, and then a Sinhalese elected from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party within the President's party, the UPFA, will be given the Chief Minister post for the balance period of one year.

Attacks on the Media and Other Rights Violations

The importance of the media in conflict situations is well-established, but members of all media in Sri Lanka continue to be highly vulnerable. This month saw the brutal killing in the North of the ninth journalist in the last two years, and another high profile attack on a journalist in Colombo who was abducted and assaulted, the associate editor of The Nation. Senior journalist J S Tissaianayagam's arrest and detention continues into its third month without charges being made against him.

A government minister reported seventy eight people have disappeared since the beginning of this year. According to the Human Rights Commission in Trincomalee, fifteen people have disappeared in that district during the first half of May. The government has also been pressed to introduce witness protection mechanisms, considered a necessity for any credible probe of rights violations.

Further threats to Sri Lanka's standing in the world community lie ahead and could adversely affect the country's international position. Chief among these is the possible removal of Sri Lanka from the General System of Preferences (GSP+) that gives the country exemptions from significant tariffs for trade with the European Union, Sri Lanka's largest trading partner. Losing these benefits would worsen an already critical economic situation, which has brought drastic increases in fuel, electricity and food costs and is further destabilizing the political environment.

Violence Spreads Unpredictably

In addition to the full-scaled prosecution of the war in the North, the LTTE is accused of continuing to carry out suicide missions and other bombings targeting civilians in other parts of the country, including attacks on buses, trains and at ports. LTTE is said to have bombed and sank a navy cargo ship in Sri Lanka's eastern port town of Trincomalee just before the voting for the Eastern Provincial Council elections.

A bomb on a train in Dehiwela, near the NP headquarters, killed at least 10 civilians, with scores more wounded. NP national staff on their way to catch that train ran back to the office at the sound of the explosion. A flurry of phone calls ended with all staff safely accounted for. Several powerful bombs in various locations have been detected and defused prior to their detonation.

In addition to the government/LTTE clashes, in Batticaloa the last week of May and into the beginning of June, violence between Muslims and Tamils suddenly reached alarming proportions. The immediate trigger was the targeted killing of a local TMVP leader and his bodyguard, and the retaliatory killing of 3 Muslim civilians. Over several days, some Muslim shops and lorries were burned; two policemen were killed; and several men were beaten or reported abducted. Hundreds of families on the border areas of two of the three main Muslim centers in the District (Kattankudy and Eravur) displaced to churches and other centers for fear of clashes and attacks. NP visited the displacements and helped link humanitarian resources to meet immediate needs. Shops were closed and curfew was imposed in some areas.

While high level meetings and calls for calm were being held between Tamil and Muslim political leaders, the two NP teams in the District were engaged in almost non-stop activity to try to find ways to help mitigate and reduce the violence at the grassroots level. NP was the only international organization invited to a meeting at the Bishop's House that brought together area representatives of the two communities.

Subsequently the teams facilitated further meetings in two locations, bringing together other local actors, religious leaders and security force representatives from among their contacts, and using their networks to help reduce rumors. A government representative in Valaichchenai told the NP team there that their presence in the community helped to keep violence from erupting in the Tamil/Muslim areas of Valaichchenai and Oddamavadi.

The Work of the Teams

Colombo Response Team

The Colombo Response Team (CRT) worked this month on expanding its knowledge of the resources available for cases of vulnerable individuals and families seeking asylum. The asylum process is often the path of last resort, and only a small percentage of people who apply to various countries are successful in their asylum appeal. NPSL does not have the resources or capacity to respond to all asylum requests or to undertake the intense work needed to pursue that process. Further help has to come from the UN Office of Human Rights, the Center for

Victims of Crime, the Human Rights Commission, and other resources in the capital, including psychological and counseling services for traumatized victims. The team continues to help individuals and families to access such services.

Follow-up plans to the successful March training of human rights defenders in the North and East is underway, with further discussion with one of our partner organizations to extend internship opportunities in the capital for young people wishing to work in the human rights field. Follow-up plans are also underway to host a second Partners Network meeting in the coming months in order to connect NPSL partners across districts for mutual support, sharing and sustainability.

Jaffna District Team

As the focus of the military engagement between the Government and the LTTE has shifted to the North, the Jaffna Team continues to be under restricted movement. Planning the work of the team is sometimes a challenge as it is difficult to reach contacts in remote areas ahead of time, and the Government requires 72-hour notice to travel to some areas, making timely response to developing situations difficult.

The team received three new family cases this month regarding security clearance issues, harassment and threat concerns. Two previous cases required immediate follow-up, with some families still attempting to leave the peninsula. Widespread fishing restrictions on civilians, and other limitations and displacements, continue to cause hardship and loss of income for thousands. The team continued to provide international presence and trust-building in two vulnerable areas of the District, meeting with government servants in those areas, a new religious leader, and a local NGO that the team would like to develop more collaboration with regarding peace and nonviolent conflict resolution activities. The team was invited to the passing out (graduation) ceremony of another partner organization that trains youth to become human rights defenders.

Some of these youth have gone on to participate in internship opportunities in the capital facilitated by the Colombo Response Team and other partners.

The team visits regularly five other NGOs that do not have international staff on site, to check on any concerns or staff security issues, but all reported that they have been able to carry out their programs this month. A visit was made to the University campus, following a request from the warden of the student hostel for NP presence after a grenade was thrown near security personnel across from the university. Visits were also made to monitor the situation at the Jaffna prison and at two rehabilitation centers where women and children have sought safety. These families feel unsafe to be in their homes following the arrest or disappearance of their husbands, or have themselves received direct threats.

As all INGOs and local organizations are required to keep in close contact with the Government regarding their activities, the team did a presentation on the work of the team to the Government Agent, local Security Force representatives, and other INGOs. The presentation was well-received, with the General Commander suggesting that NP visit another vulnerable area that the team has not yet developed contacts in. He also suggested the team visit another rehabilitation center where “surrenderees” are housed. These are reportedly former LTTE cadres who have sought the protection of the government. The team will further explore the advisability and opportunities of involving themselves in these areas.

Trincomalee District Team

As part of the Eastern Province, Trincomalee (along with Batticaloa and Ampara to the south) were focused on the Provincial Council elections throughout late April and the first half of May. (See Context section above). In the course of supporting NPSL’s election monitoring partner organization, PAFFREL, the team met with many election stakeholders, including government officials, security forces, political party representatives and civilians. Security levels increased due to elections, with more road blocks and search operations being conducted. In some operations grenades, weapons, and anti-personnel mines were discovered. NP supported local monitors provided by Sarvodaya in observing the pre- and post-election environment, and a number of meetings were held with other international actors throughout the month regarding the security situation.

Armed activity seemed to increase the first part of the month, with a Black Tiger suicide mission accused of sinking a Sri Lanka Navy ship in the Trinco harbor just hours before the polls were due to open. The Human Rights Commission received 11 reports of abductions in a 10 day period before and after the election, with other killings and missing persons cases reported to other agencies. Reports were that abductions for ransom were on the rise. While more people and shops were observed to be open in the early evenings, people reported limiting their movements to their own ethnic areas, especially after 7 or 8 pm. Some Sinhalese expressed fear to go to Trinco Town; Tamils expressed fear to go to Mutur town.

Trinco team continues to monitor regularly two IDP camps, one at Cultural Hall and the other at Alias Garden, visiting others as field work takes them to other parts of the district. Safety and security issues are monitored and identified needs are conveyed to appropriate agencies and authorities. Current concerns voiced are lack of good nutrition, accessibility of schooling in some areas, domestic violence, and security. Working with a number of active Peace Committees, NP supports community-based efforts aimed at bringing different communities together across issues and boundaries. This month they met with four Peace Committees to

discuss any early warning signs of communal tensions erupting in Trinco, as was occurring in Batticaloa District to the south.

Peace Committees were able to defuse some tensions in Mutur; and a one-day hartal in protest of fishing restrictions affecting Muslim fisherfolk resulted in an easing of restrictions the following day, but not to the extent that the fishermen say is needed. Prevailing insecurities precipitated one NGO to request NP accompaniment for their local staff to a remote area to carry out their activities. In many cases, Peace Committees remain relatively inactive except in times of crisis or violence; the challenge is how to build their capacity so that they can become more consistently pro-active, and not just reactive.

Child and family protection activities continued, with five new cases of abduction or extortion being recorded. Linkages for a variety of family needs and follow-up were made to other service providers and resources, including NRC, UNHCR, ICRC, HRC, and a local NGO. NP Trinco has been asked to spearhead child protection meetings in Kantale where there is limited awareness and organization on the issue. The establishment of a district 'Safe House' for youth is still progressing, with multi-agency participation and the District Probation Office coordinating. Trinco Team was joined by a member of the Jaffna Team to participate in a special all-team training on child rights, child participation, and child protection strategies, the result of a collaboration with Save the Children/Sri Lanka, through an expert in child rights from Save the Children/Norway. Following completion of the 3-day training in Trinco, the training was repeated for NPSL staff in Batticaloa District.

Batticaloa District Teams (Valaichchenai and Batti Town)

In Batticaloa District both NP teams were busy with election-related activities, including observing at 26 polling stations on Election Day, and responding to several violent incidents the first half of the month. The latter part of the month saw a spike in post-election Tamil-Muslim violence that spread alarm throughout the District and into Trinco District to the north. Throughout the latter part of the month, both District teams worked tirelessly to bring stakeholders from all sides together so that discussions reported in the media to be happening at the upper political levels between party leaders could have a parallel hearing at the grassroots levels. Numerous individual contacts and meetings were held to lay the groundwork to bring representatives together in larger forums--forums that included Tamils and Muslims, religious and community leaders, government actors, police and the Security Forces.

The focus of the communal violence was in communities on either side of Batti Town, in and around two of the three main Muslim towns in the District, Eravur

and Kattankudy. For several days the violence restricted movement to and from Batti Town, causing disruption to many civilians, including NP local staff, who were unable to travel through either Eravur or Kattankudy at various times to get to or from the office. Hundreds of families living in border areas between the two communities fled their homes and sought safety in churches or other community centers. NP was able to visit several of these make-shift camps and convey to other agencies the immediate needs for relief the families shared.

The third main Muslim community is located further to the north in the Valaichchenai/Oddamavadi area. Tamil-Muslim violence did not spread to the north, thanks in part to the active involvement of networks that are functioning with the support of NPSL. The Valaichchenai Traders Association, made up of Tamil and Muslim businesses, requested NP to host a meeting where 30 traders came together to discuss how to prevent violence from spreading in their area. The Community Information Network (CIN) that NP has been facilitating also came together and took their first joint Tamil-Muslim action, which was to write a joint letter of appeal and elect a delegation to approach the police and Security Forces, with NP accompaniment, to request more patrols in the border areas between Tamils and Muslims to reduce the possibility of violence erupting and displacement of families. The team also has made a practice of providing visible presence every Friday after prayers in the areas of the main mosques in and around Valaichchenai.

Other NP work continued as well throughout the month, including five family visits and five new cases of underage recruitment being recorded. Twelve requests for accompaniment within the district of threatened individuals were met. Numerous security meetings were called with other INGOs and UN agencies, as well as regularly scheduled meetings regarding Child Protection and Children Affected by Armed Conflict (CAAC) meetings, and IDP Protection and Resettlement meetings where important information is shared and coordination discussed. Numerous meetings were also hosted in both NP offices, including of families seeking missing relations who were forcibly taken earlier this year. A group of seven mothers made plans to visit newly elected TMVP leadership in the District, including the mayor of Batticaloa and the new Chief Minister of the Province, in the hopes that they will advocate with others in the party for the release of their loved ones.

NP plays a vital role in making linkages and communication networks function within the District, making full use of a variety of referral mechanisms and options to improve people's security and the realization of their rights. By partnering and communicating with a wide variety of actors, knowledge of and access to resources is increased. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), for example, has legal staff that rural clients in the northern part of the district can more readily

access and NRC can access the courts in Valaichchenai by making use of office space in the NP Valaichchenai office one and a half days a week. Such collaborations and relationship-building is paying dividends for families and communities despite the ongoing tensions and instabilities.

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