



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

November 2006

The talks between the Sri Lankan government (GOSL) and LTTE in Geneva on the last weekend of October ended without result. The parties were not able to even agree to an agenda. While the GOSL wanted to discuss fundamental issues of the conflict, the LTTE insisted on dealing with what they called humanitarian issues first, namely the re-opening of the A9, the road leading through LTTE territory to Jaffna. After this failure, military action has been resumed although in November not to a larger extent than before the negotiations.

In Batticaloa district, according to figures reported in the media, there were in November between 149 and 177 civilian deaths, 85 combatant deaths, between 217 and 847 civilian injuries, and 68 combatant injuries due to violence. The discrepancies in the reported figures are an indicator of the increasing difficulty to obtain verifiable information. Violence continued to escalate with 21 days on which shelling took place, 21 incidences of aerial bombing and artillery fire, 23 incidences of targeted shooting, 5 grenade attacks and one bomb explosion. Also at sea there have been confrontations (with the Sea Tigers reportedly sinking three gunboats close to Jaffna and Trincomalee), and shelling of LTTE positions close to Trincomalee. In the 47th week there was a meeting by the co-chairs (US, Norway, EU, Japan) in Washington. They expressed concern about the conflict and the growing malnutrition problem in the North (and parts of the East), and called on all sides to return to the negotiating table and allow access for humanitarian aid.

While there has been still no aid going to Sri Lanka's North where more than 500.000 people are said to be trapped with little food left, in spite of the announcement by the government to open the A9 at least as a one-time measure, one large UN / ICRC-led aid convoy of more about 35 trucks reached the LTTE-controlled Vaharai area in Eastern Sri Lanka. One other convoy did not reach its target, and a third one was reported to have been looted by IDPs.

Much attention in Sri Lanka focused on the summarizing statement by the UN Special Advisor on Children and Armed Conflict, Allan Rock, after his ten-day

visit to the country. His statement not only talks about the continued child recruitment by both LTTE and the Karuna faction, but speaks of “strong and credible evidence that certain elements of the government security forces are supporting and sometimes participating in the abductions and forced recruitment of children by the Karuna faction.” The statement received strong rebuttal by the Government.

At the end of the month (27th November) LTTE Leader Prabhakaran gave his annual speech, for which many people waited to see if he would officially cancel the Ceasefire Agreement. In the end the speech left open a lot to speculation. Made obviously to keep options open, it was not a formal declaration of war, or a unilateral declaration of independence, but it left little to hope in terms of a soon return to the negotiating table.

An end of the month visit by the Norwegian mediator Jon Hanssen-Bauer remained unsuccessful, with an assassination attempt on Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the brother of President Mahinda Rajapaksa that happened while he was in Colombo.

### **The work of the teams**

#### *General / in all places*

In November all field teams including the Jaffna team have been operational again, with the Muthur team visiting the Muthur area but living in Trincomalee town. Three members of the Jaffna team returned in November to Jaffna, a fourth member stayed in Colombo to support the work from there.

The main issues all teams are dealing with are the IDP situation, child abductions / recruitment, community conflict, and human rights violations (particularly extra-judicial killings and disappearances). Activities that all teams have been engaging in include visiting IDP camps, protective presence, individual accompaniment cases, and accompanying and supporting local partners on different humanitarian issues mostly related to the points above. One outcome of this work at least in Batticaloa district has been that more families are taking the risk to report abductions or other human rights violations to the authorities or at least to other international agencies.

One development in Batticaloa has been that some of the families of victims of extra-judicial killings decided to make a petition to the magistrate's court to get copies of the post-mortems of their relatives. It is hoped that this will give the lawyers the information needed to challenge the labeling of the victims as LTTE cadre and to appeal for compensation. In spite of these efforts, the general picture in the East is one of increasing fear and impunity. Witnesses fear to report

incidents, and families are afraid that if they report an abduction they will be prevented from seeing their children or face increased threats and physical punishment of their children or other members of their families.

Aside from these activities, one ongoing and quite time-consuming activity in all field sites is the work with different national and international agencies on the same issues. There are many coordinating meetings with international protection agencies like ICRC, UNHCR and UNICEF (the latter two of them being main donors for NPSL) and other humanitarian organisations, as well as with local institutions like the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, Human Rights Commission, and the local Peace Committees.

Another activity happening in all sites is the linking of IDPs and other citizens (e.g. people under threat) with national and international agencies. Especially the Valaichchenai team has become a focal point in this regard. One particular problem is that NP can only operate in Government Controlled Areas which limits our ability to respond to the needs of vulnerable civilians for support and our ability to maintain impartiality in the outcomes of our reports.

In the last weeks bureaucratic challenges have developed from several sides. Travel is getting very restricted, with every vehicle having to register whenever it wishes to leave a district. The national bank now requires all organisations to document the way money is spent in great detail. (This is a consequence of the intention to stop any funding going to the LTTE.)

A member of the Batticaloa team represented NPSL at the Forum Asia – Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) conference in Thailand. Approximately 200 human right defenders from across Asia attended this meeting to share strategies and work towards regional cooperation. Participants included National Human Rights Organisations, Human Rights NGO workers, activists, UN special rapporteur on HRDs, Ms Hina Jilani, and one government representative from South Korea. Many of the participants expressed an interest in NPs work and requested information on how to contact the organisation.

### *Jaffna*

The closure of the A9, prolonged displacement, food scarcity, restricted mobility (road closures and curfew), reported harassment at checkpoints, fuel shortages, and economic decline are the main contributing factors which have raised tensions throughout the peninsula. Armed hostilities have continued during the days and nights. Additionally, white van abductions, extra-judicial killings and confirmed reports of torture have also increased fears substantially among various communities.

Upon reentry to Jaffna, NP Jaffna met almost all of its international and national partners in order to assess the possibility of resuming programmatic activities within the area, identify and prioritize activities responsive to the needs of the current context; and implement a limited programme mindful of human resources constraints. The team slowly resumed traveling throughout Jaffna Town and the surrounding district in order to reestablish a visible presence among the communities, armed actors, GoSL and international agencies. The Team also visited two IDP camps as community outreach and confidence building measures. In both camps, the IDPs originating from Allaipidy and Mandaitivu have resided in the camps since the events of 11 August.

Other issues the team dealt with are disappearances, meetings with international delegations, and accompaniment requests.

#### *Trincomalee town*

Forced return of IDPs was a significant focal issue for the month and protection issues for the IDPs at a certain church in Trinco engaged the team's attention and efforts. Regular protective presence at IDP camps was maintained in the course of the month and significant collaborative efforts with the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission were initiated with a meeting with the Protection officers of the Trincomalee office of the HRC.

Monitoring and joint advocacy of detained persons was conducted when the team, in collaboration with the ICRC and HRC, addressed the issue of two IDPs detained by the security forces after a round up. The team constantly reminded the ICRC (who had significant access) and the HRC about the case and kept abreast of the facts till the IDPs were eventually released. Under the heading of community violence reduction fell activities like attending peace committee meetings, accompaniment and protective presence at IDP.

#### *MuturValaichchenai*

The Valaichchenai team has been dealing aside from what is described in the general section with issues like the  
Need of safe places for youth who have escaped following forced abduction, trainings or threats;  
Need for international presence in the Valaichchenai IDP Camps. The team is regularly visiting camps, and discusses options for a more permanent presence.  
Safe return back to Vakarai, mainly for separated families or injured persons from the shelling incident on the 8th.  
Resumption of regular meetings of religious leaders from the area.

### *Batticaloa town*

Activities of the team in Batti town are mostly described in the general section. Main issues here are the support and accompaniment of families of victims of abductions or other human rights violations, work with community-based support structures, accompaniment of local activists when they take affected families to seek legal advice, support and consultation with IDPs and host communities, and supporting families affected by violence.

### *Colombo*

Aside the administrative work, Colombo has become for some time a part-time field office of its own, in particular in the time when the Jaffna team was still relocated to Colombo, and started to connect to human rights groups and activists in the capital. In Colombo the number of reported political disappearances is on the increase. There also have been accompaniment cases in Colombo itself.

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