



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

November 2008

The Context for the Sri Lanka Teams

For the NP teams in Batticaloa, the second half of November was an exceptionally turbulent period. A sharp spike in targeted killings, with 15 reported in one night, included four members of the same family, with only an 11-year old boy surviving unharmed. Other members of this family later came to seek support from the NP Batti team. In separate incidents, two other children, an 8 year old and a 1 year old were reported shot by armed intruders in their homes. A Hindu priest serving at a main temple in Batti Town was killed, as well as a local staff member of a Sri Lankan NGO. A local humanitarian worker of an international NGO was taken from his home and executed. A Sinhala doctor was killed by unidentified gunmen in the southwest of Batti district. The following day medical staff from Batticaloa Teaching Hospital held a protest demonstration against the killing. Government and police offered more security and protection of all Sinhala medical staff who are working in the district. The teams were also impacted by threats against family members of one of their own local staff.

The killing near Colombo of the personal secretary to Pillayan, the Chief Minister of the Eastern Province, caused further backlash in the District. In Valaichchenai local armed cadre of the TMVP increased their presence in Tamil neighbourhoods and civilians were told not to be out on the streets after dark. The NP team liaised with the Security Forces to try to reduce the vulnerability in the areas of the NP office and residences. Several incidents of grenade and claymore attacks on the government's Security Forces and TMVP offices were also reported.

On 28th of November a protest demonstration was held in front of the Gandhi statue in Batti town to protest against the killings of civilians in the district. Around 100 people took part in the demonstration, which was called by some local politicians, and members of Batticaloa Municipal Council, including the Mayor. Demonstrators demanded an immediate stop to the killings and abductions in the district. The following day, an unexpected full day police curfew (6am - 6pm) was imposed throughout the district, suspending the work of the teams. Joint round-up

and search operations of the Security Forces were carried out in many areas of the district, with around 700 people being arrested. However, most of the people were released after few hours of inquiry or within 24 hours.

The difficulties in Batti District did not seem to spill over into Trinco District, and the ground situation was relatively stable there, as the team continued to scale back their operations in preparation for a February phase-out. No killings were observed in or around Trincomalee Town and civilian movement and family life seem generally normalized with people using public spaces.

In Jaffna, the intensity of shelling, as heard from the NP office and residence, was less than previous months. But continuous heavy fighting in the area reduced the mobility of the team. At least three people were killed and at least eight went missing in the Jaffna peninsula this month. At least one family surrendered to the Court to be placed in protective custody, and, at least two decomposed bodies were washed ashore. Some families made their way from the Vanni to Jaffna, including more than 50 adults and children. These families are being held in an IDP camp with restricted access. A former university student was killed and after that the university was subjected to intense checking. Later in the month a threat notice was issued inside the university, targeting 14 people, including 5 lecturers and the hostel warden.

During a field visit to the Varani area, team members encountered ongoing shelling and left the area immediately. Frequent cuts in mobile coverage occurred throughout the month, and heavy rains disrupted electricity, including for one 3-day stretch. The team was able to liaise with other INGOs to charge mobile phones and laptops. Later in the month, because of the floods, there were lengthy landline and electricity outages and flights were grounded.

The Work of the NPSL Teams

The NPSL teams in Jaffna, Trinco, Valaichchenai, Batticaloa and Colombo participated in more than 100 coordination meetings and field activities in November, and handled more than 50 new and follow-up cases documenting protection needs and human rights violations, including cases of disappearance, forced recruitment, abduction, death threats, and vulnerability following escape from an armed group. The work of the teams can be viewed as falling into four programmatic areas, as outlined below.

Children, Youth & Families

NPSL teams work with government authorities and local, national and international organizations to prevent harm to children, youth and families and to help increase their safety and well being. NPSL is part of networks in all districts

where we work, that address child protection and human security. NPSL works to support the effectiveness of these organizations and networks in improving the security and human rights for children and families.

NPSL responds to requests from individuals, families and other organizations on specific cases of civilian vulnerability, especially children and youth. In Batticaloa NPSL provided protective presence and accompaniment to assist families in resolving cases of underage recruitment, missing family members, and other threats to their security. NPSL uses its relationships with the police, the army, other civil authorities, UNICEF, vocational training centers, and other organizations to connect families with services and institutions that can assist them.

For instance, in one district NPSL staff accompanied a youth who escaped from an armed group to a vocational training center where life-long skills could be gained in a safer environment. When this youth received further threats, staff assisted the family in identifying another option. More than two dozen vulnerable youth were directly assisted in November. In some cases, the community structures that serve vulnerable youth are also in need of support. In one instance this month NP responded to an emergency call from a service provider when one of the youth they were trying to assist was threatening another youth. The partners NP regularly works with know that they can count to NP when they themselves are in difficulty as well, and it increases their capacity to do the difficult work of providing direct services to vulnerable youth that only they can provide.

In Jaffna, NPSL worked to support the needs of university students cut off from their families in the Vanni. While not technically youth (i.e., under age 18), these young people depend on support from their families for their living and school expenses while trying to continue their studies in a war zone. With the current fighting in the North, it has not been possible for them to be in contact with their families. In addition to the deep worry about their families' well being, the students have the very concrete problem of needing food and subsistence support. NPSL worked with other agencies to bring the needs of these students to the attention of school authorities and other service providers, who are now providing some aid to them.

As part of its on-going protective presence, NPSL visits some of the more rural resettlement communities. These communities have trouble accessing services and attention. During one visit, family members asked for help from NPSL in locating a youth who had been pressured to join an armed group. NPSL assisted them to report the incident to the appropriate authorities and made UNICEF aware of the case. While this case in particular is still unresolved, in some instances, after attention by international actors, sometimes the youth in question is able to return

home. In Batti, coordinated activities also included this month participation in a Child Rights Workshop sponsored by Terre des Hommes, along with six other partners; and participation in UNICEF's Annual Planning discussion for 2009 with Unicef staff and other child rights partners in the district. In Trinco there has been close collaboration with the government's Department of Child Protection on monitoring children's homes. Although phasing out, the Trinco team provided presence and accompaniment to several youth when no other organization could fill that need. All teams regularly participate in district level child protection forums and events.

Displacement and Resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

NPSL continues to address the situation of IDP camps and the resettlement of IDPs. People are displaced for different reasons and for varying amounts of time. Some people were displaced by fighting many years ago, and have been in camps for over a decade. Others are displaced because their homes are now in high security zones established by the armed forces in the last several years. Some people were recently displaced in the last year or two, as the fighting intensified in the East and in the Vanni.

People who have been in IDP camps for awhile may have established deeper roots in their current locations, with children in local schools and livelihood in the local community. They may be located in less rural areas than before. Thus one of the tasks for NPSL when visiting people in camps that are scheduled to be closed, with the inhabitants resettled elsewhere, is to inquire if people are moving freely and voluntarily. If anyone reports otherwise, NPSL brings this to the attention of the proper authorities, and may support the families advocating for themselves. NP teams monitored several returns in November and participated in all forums regarding the protection and rights of IDP's, coordinating with others to help ensure international standards are met.

People in the camps often feel vulnerable to threats and there have been a number of abductions reported from the camps in the east and north. As NPSL visits some of the camps and resettlement villages with regularity, people have come to know and rely on us. In one resettlement area that NPSL staff visit, the community reported experiencing a number of difficulties related to armed groups in the area. One person reported to NPSL that some of the threats were related to having INGO visits. This alarmed our staff and we asked if it would

be better if we didn't come. The person said, no, it would be much worse. He asked the team to please continue to come visit the area. This reflects both the perceived value of our work and also the bravery of people and their desire to resist threats and find nonviolent ways to increase their own security. In some cases people have taken the initiative to call NPSL when they have a concern,

rather than waiting for NPSL to return on our own schedule. NPSL networks with the police and Sri Lankan Army, as well as UNHCR and ICRC and district protection networks, on cases of abductions and missing persons, as well as on other community concerns.

In Jaffna there is a higher percentage of area that is designated as high security zones. Loss of homes and access to livelihoods is a constant pressure on families and communities in these zones. Currently there are also new challenges related to IDPs coming from LTTE controlled areas where the fighting has been at its most intense. New IDP camps have been set up and it is not clear when or how people there will be able to reconnect with family they have been separated from. If they are allowed to move freely into other areas, there are concerns for their safety. NPSL tries to regularly visit some of these camps, but given security issues and transportation difficulties, and now monsoon, there can be several weeks between visits.

Protection and Promotion of Human Rights

Protection and promotion of human rights is a large part of the work of NP, whether it is on behalf of children and youth, families, displaced populations, or the organizations and individuals who serve them. Representative activities in this focal area this month in Jaffna included two joint visits with the Court Magistrate to the prison and the Women's & Children's Rehabilitation Center, where families under severe threat have had to turn themselves over for protective custody. The conditions of these facilities are quite minimal and the Magistrate expressed concern about the safety and welfare of people in protective custody, which NP is helping to monitor.

The president of the Jaffna University Student Union called and asked NP to meet him and other student union officers. They told how two men on a motorbike had come that morning and forced a student to put a leaflet on the walls. The leaflet identified 14 names including students and lecturers. They didn't have a specific request but wanted to inform ICRC and NP of the threat. NP provides periodic protective presence at the University, particularly at times of specific incidents. The team also met the vice chancellor regarding student vulnerabilities. In Trinco the team worked with a dozen human rights cases this month and visited vulnerable areas where there is a heavy armed presence. In one area the team's presence was recognized and appreciated by a local religious leader.

The NP teams provided protective accompaniment to approximately two dozen individuals and participated in all the district interagency and protection working group meetings. The Colombo Response Team (CRT) undertook 12 accompaniments for individuals and family members under threat in November. Two partners accommodated five individuals referred by CRT.

In Batti, the team worked with local human rights defenders and the Batti Peace Committee to help prepare 19 families to complete and file complaints regarding the Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance of family members. While specific positive outcomes seldom result for a family undertaking such a process, many families feel that it is only through using all available mechanisms that justice will ever be served. In addition, the team visited nine families with missing family members. The impact of on-going efforts of Sri Lankan civil society and international actors based on UN recommendations regarding disappearances is starting to be seen now. The government this month has appointed a special Deputy Inspector General (DIG) on Disappearances for Trincomalee; and he is of Tamil ethnicity.

Strengthening Community-Based Structures and Collaborative Networks

NPSL staff presence is sometimes called upon to contribute to the safety of other humanitarian workers as they do their work in vulnerable areas. NPSL also helps build the capacity of small, local groups by opening up space for them to gather in a more secure environment and helping them access resources available through larger organizations or other networks. These slow, relationship-building activities help build the confidence of local peace-minded actors to take more pro-active roles in solving community problems and reducing the likelihood of violence across ethnic and religious divides.

In Batti District, given the violence that has spiked a number of times in 2008, groundwork has been laid for the January launch of a UNDP-funded Dialogue project to help the teams further build the capacity of their established networks in both the northern and the southern parts of the district to be able to address community problems nonviolently. The project is a six-month pilot to engage in a 'democratic dialoguing' process with grassroots Tamil and Muslim stakeholders in vulnerable communities, and is a combined initiative including NPSL, Sarvodaya, and the Foundation for Co-existence. A Training of Trainers will begin the process and then trained community workers will return to their communities, with the ongoing support of the NP teams, to engage in dialoguing exercises at the grassroots level on community problems they identify. The fragility of community level connections between Muslim and Tamil communities has hampered peaceful resolution of community tensions before. It is expected that this effort will build these connections outside of a crisis period, so that they can be called upon if and when needed.

In Trinco District the team has also been laying the groundwork for a series of December and January activities that will further support and build the capacity of the Peace Committees that the team has long been associated with. Consultation meetings were held with more than 17 Peace Committees in six divisions, and 12

Peace Committee projects were identified for bringing the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities together around shared community activities. This initiative is funded by our supporters in Japan through the Niwano Foundation and with the support of NP-Japan. As in Batticaloa district, the lack of dependable connections between ethnic communities allows rumors and fears to spread in times of crisis. These projects will continue the strengthening of shared networks.

The Jaffna and Colombo Response Teams continue to collaborate on improving the safety network for human rights defenders (HRDs) and other vulnerable civilians.

The situation in Sri Lanka is fast changing – and NPSL is working to find new ways to support and build local structures that help Sri Lankans to feel safer and more confident and to offer presence and support in vulnerable communities, help provide protection to individuals whose lives have been threatened, and to support children and families when their lives have become caught up in the cycles of violence and war.

Rita Webb, Programme Officer
Ellen Furnari, Acting Grants Officer