



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

October 2006

Sri Lanka's security situation continued to deteriorate after talks failed between the government and the LTTE on October 28-29 in Geneva, while clashes continued and more people were reported killed. The failure of the Geneva talks to yield a positive outcome has come as a big blow to the expectations of the people, particularly those directly victimized by the conflict in the Northeast. The suffering being experienced by displaced persons, especially children, the severe shortages of foodstuffs in Jaffna and other essential commodities, and the continuous killings and abductions have made life a perpetual challenge for citizens in these areas.

Although no agreement was reached in Geneva, the two sides re-iterated their commitment to the ceasefire agreement, and promised not to launch any military offensives. However, heavy fighting between the two parties immediately recurred after the talks. On October 31, only one day after the failed talks, the Sri Lankan Navy destroyed a suspected LTTE arms ship in the north. The most serious clash between the two sides happened in the seas of Jaffna peninsula. The military claimed some 16 LTTE craft including suicide boats had targeted a ship carrying 308 Tamil civilians from the eastern port of Trincomalee to the northern port of Kankasanturai. In another clash between the Karuna breakaway faction, the army and the LTTE in eastern Sri Lanka, many LTTE and Karuna cadres and civilians were reportedly killed.

Norway's International Development Minister Erik Solheim, who has been facilitating Sri Lanka's peace process since 2002, stated that he was very troubled by the deteriorating situation in Sri Lanka. "I am extremely disappointed that the parties are not honoring the promise they made in Geneva to refrain from launching any military offensives and to abide by the ceasefire agreement," said Solheim. Earlier in October, Sri Lankan jets bombed LTTE areas in Thenmarachchi and the LTTE fired mortars and artillery on Sri Lankan Army positions in Muhamalai, even as the Norwegian peace envoy Jon Hanssen Bauer was talking to LTTE's Political Wing leader, Tamilselvan, in Kilinochchi about resuming the stalled peace talks. In the battle around the forward defense lines in

Jaffna, the Sri Lanka army suffered its heaviest setback with at least 118 soldiers killed and over 500 wounded, apparently to a large degree by friendly fire according to some reports. The SLMM truce monitors in Sri Lanka condemned the push by the army into territory held by the Tigers.

In apparent retaliation, LTTE launched a suicide attack on a Sri Lankan military bus convoy near the town of Habarana, killing 99 navy personnel and injuring 100 more. In another incident, LTTE cadres posing as fishermen blew up two of their boats in a suicide attack on a naval base in Galle, killing at least one sailor in the first such attack in Sri Lanka. The suicide bombing in Galle, a tourist town on the southern coast, could signal a major shift for the LTTE, whose campaign has largely focused on Sri Lanka's north and east.

An SLMM delegation visiting an LTTE controlled area in the north to undertake a feasibility study of opening an alternative road to the closed A9 highway narrowly escaped artillery fire of the army. The government has so far been determined not to give in to the LTTE demand to open the A9 highway, although the people of Jaffna want it opened. The Bishop of Jaffna is one among many leading civil society personalities who have appealed for the road to be opened by the government.

Despite the fact that political rivals, the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the main opposition party, the United National Party (UNP), signed a landmark pact to cooperate on 'key issues vital for the nation's well being' including the subject of resolution of north and east conflict, there is no sign the violence of Sri Lanka will come to an end in the near future. This was underscored with the latest assassination of a Tamil legislator, Nadaraja Raviraj.

The work of the teams

Days before the Geneva talks, NPSL teams in Valaichchenai noticed increased presence of the Karuna faction in Valaichchenai. Abductions were on the increase, with several families each day knocking on the doors of NPSL's office asking for help to get their children who have been abducted back. There are few places for the victims to turn to. The police appear limited in their ability to respond, which further discourages people from filing a complaint to them and to international agencies. Families generally know where their children are being kept, but are powerless to secure their release. Underage recruitment by force is on the rise again. Child abductions are carried out by both the LTTE and the Karuna group.

Because NPSL does not have access to LTTE areas, it can only monitor and report on the activities of the Karuna group which is operating in government controlled areas. The activity seems to be increasingly criminalized with 'finder fees' being

rewarded for children identified as suitable for recruitment. Children in IDP camps are in particular vulnerable. Recent fighting in the Vakarai area has created new waves of IDPs in the Valaichchenai area. Requests for overnight international presence in the camps have been repeated. A suitable solution has yet to be identified. Frequent protection visits to IDP camps continue as part of the protection programme with the UNHCR. More official channels, such as recently established National Commissions, are being approached by NPSL to see how they can support families dealing with disappearances and abducted children.

The security situation in Trincomalee initially was calm but changed half way during the month after the suicide attack in Habarana. The military presence in Trincomalee town is unprecedented which puts a great deal of pressure on its inhabitants. The numerous checkpoints including the new vehicle pass system to leave the district is causing serious delays and tensions among the people. Meanwhile, the Karuna faction's political wing (TMVP) has opened a political office in the district and its cadres have become increasingly active, reportedly involved in disappearances and killings in the town and its outskirts. There are also rumors of LTTE cadres moving into town, thus increasing the likelihood of serious clashes between the two armed groups.

Despite pressures to return to what they consider an insecure environment, many Tamil IDPs still feel unsafe to go back to the Mutur division although they commute back and forth daily now. They fear hostilities from the Muslim population. Now that the security forces control the area of Sampur and Rakuli, Muslim people feel safer. The Mutur and Trinco teams continued to monitor the IDP camps raising issues such as forced return with various local authorities. The Mutur team has increased its visits to Mutur and has re-connected with the Mutur Peace Committee whose members are still scattered and some have been killed, requiring the members to seek replacements and possible restructuring of the committee itself. NPSL Trinco and USAID agreed to work together in the capacity development and confidence building of the peace committees in the area.

Members of the Jaffna team prepared the return to Jaffna in November and conducted an assessment of the IDP situation in Mannar. Many IDPs from Jaffna and Trinco have settled in the Mannar district. Some of the IDPs take the risk and try to reach India by boat. Madras, India, currently holds 15,000 refugees from Sri Lanka.

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