



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

October 2008

Brief on Context for NP Teams in the Field

While security remains tight in the capital of Colombo and the war continues to be executed within the northeast of the country, the security situation where NPSL teams live and work in the North and the East is also fragile and unstable for civilians. This month the Tamil Tigers carried out their second air attack on the capital, hitting a power station and causing some turbine damage, while also targeting a military installation in Mannar District. Heavy monsoonal rains and stiff resistance has slowed the earlier Security Forces progress

On the national political front, TMVP political head, who goes by his nom de guerre of Colonel Karuna, was sworn in as a Member of Parliament. Concerns on this appointment were raised in international human rights circles, and a legal petition has been filed seeking to prevent his taking up the appointment.

Outside of the official war zone, there were many reports in the media and from communities of a variety of destabilizing incidents in the North and East – grenade and claymore attacks, targeted killings, including of security forces and police, reports of missing civilians, and hartals or enforced general shutdowns. Batti Team also saw an increase this month in the number of reported cases of abductions and forced recruitments into armed groups.

Continued reports of LTTE re-infiltration into the East are heard, with increased clashes between armed factions with competing loyalties within the TMVP itself. Colonel Karuna and the Chief Minister of the Eastern Provincial Council, Pillaiyan, provided a public show of unity in Batticaloa at a protest demonstration against Tamil Nadu's involvement in Sri Lanka's internal affairs. For the demonstration it was reported TMVP arranged 300 government busses to transport people from different areas of Batti district, including from some areas of Ampara district. According to one media source 20,000 people attended the rally. In one form or another, "unidentified armed groups" continue to wreak violence on armed and unarmed actors alike. In one attack on a TMVP office in the district, 4 cadres were killed and 5 more have gone missing from the office since the attack.

One of those killed was an under-aged youth whose family had earlier sought help from NP and other agencies in getting their boy released. For all too many families, help is too little or too late.

Tamil-Muslim tension continues to fester in Batticaloa as well, with a second grenade attack within a month at a mosque in Kattankudy. Four people were injured with no group claiming responsibility for the attack. While there are not many Sinhalese choosing to live in Batticaloa, there were two reported incidents of attacks and killings of Sinhalese civilians. In one incident 3 Sinhalese workers were shot dead in the south of the District and in another 5 Sinhalese workers were injured in a grenade attack just outside of Batti town. There was some heightened fear that these communal tensions would spill over to Trincomalee District, but they did not this month.

All of Batti district was affected by a full day enforced harthal, allegedly in protest of the bodies of two Tamil youth being found dead in the sea. The families had reported to NP that their sons were missing following arrest in a government search operation. The authorities told the families the boys would be released the following day, but when they failed to turn up in the morning, the families were told they had been released the night before instead. It wasn't until the bodies were found some days later that the families learned the fate of their sons.

While Trinco District seems calm on the surface, some reports still are received related to abductions, round ups, shootings and killings of individuals in and around Trinco Town. One man shot dead bore more than 32 bullets and his dead body was unattended on the road for two hours. One particularly vulnerable cohort of people in the East seems to be those returning for visits from working abroad. One person who was preparing to leave the country for a job in the Middle East went missing. Security around Government officials has increased, with mobile phones now being taken from visitors before entering government offices.

A harthal was also experienced this month in Jaffna, reportedly called by the EPDP in protest of a suicide attack on ships in KKS harbour. During strict harthals, the NP teams work from their residences, and national staff are not able to safely travel to work. While Jaffna was relatively calm in October, there was frequent out-going shelling and there were more SLA mortar positions set up during the month, including at least one new one near the NP office.

From public reports at least 3 people were killed and at least 2 reported missing in the Jaffna peninsula this month. Two fishermen went missing after the navy reportedly opened fire off the Point Pedro coast. An explosive device targeting SLA soldiers guarding the electricity transformer in Kokkuvil Jaffna was set off. Due to threats and perceived insecurities, at least 10 people, including 2 women,

surrendered to the courts seeking protective custody, joining scores of others who see also a lack of protective options for them and their families.

Key Areas of Focus in October 2008

Children, Youth & Families

NPSL teams coordinate activities with government authorities such as child protection units, probation officers and district secretaries; with Unicef, Save the Children Sri Lanka, local community groups, vocational training centers and other youth-serving facilities, and families. NPSL's focus is to support individual cases such as mothers searching for children or youth recently released or escaped from armed groups, and to strengthen the capabilities of local mechanisms to protect the safety and rights of children and their families. While both of these foci are critical and interrelated, the teams face a continual challenge to balance the time intensive needs of individual cases, with the capacity building work which is usually less of an emergency but offers the potential for longer term change. Examples of NPSL's work this month include:

NPSL was contacted by a family to assist their son, who had been an underage conscript, to access a safer location by attending a vocational training program. Youth whose education is interrupted at an early age find they have few options if they are able to return home. This boy had run away from a previous training program. The team took the time to gather all the facts regarding problems experienced and presented the case to a second facility so the staff there could properly assess the risks of enrolling the boy and to more fully discuss the matter with the family. In the end, the second program did accept him, but could do so with clarity about the challenges the boy presents. In another instance, while working with a youth-serving facility, the staff identified an unmet need for psycho-social counseling for the former young combatants they work with. NPSL staff connected them to a potential funder.

In Jaffna, there are many women and children in a rehabilitation center for their own safety. Often these are families whose husbands had been under severe threat and who surrendered themselves for their own safety to the Courts. The men are held in Jaffna Prison and their families are in the rehabilitation center. NPSL has been able to work cooperatively with Save the Children Sri Lanka and with funds provided from Unicef for small immediate needs, to provide safe transport to the children so that they can attend school.

Families in the east continue to report cases of forced recruitment or child abduction. Other threats to the safety and well being of children and families reflect the challenges of living in IDP camps and/or being resettled after displacement, often in areas where they report continued human security concerns,

and where the infrastructure—schools, hospitals, transport, markets--and livelihood options are currently limited or unavailable.

Displacement and Resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

The government, in conjunction with various international organizations, is working hard to resettle the remaining internally displaced people (IDPs) in the east. Some of these families have been displaced for many years, others for only a year or less. NPSL teams have been told the plan is to try to resettle all IDPs in the east by the end of the year.

The work relating to IDPs involves a complex set of relationships and activities. The IDP camps are affected by the presence, in some cases, of armed groups in their area, the activities of the military and police, and the civil authorities. Additionally UNHCR plays a significant role attempting to determine if all camps and resettlement efforts meet international standards and to advocate when this is not the case. There are also local and national civil society organizations involved. NPSL's role is to regularly monitor and to provide protective presence at critical times in a number of camps within the areas where we work. In particular NPSL provides presence in some of the more rural and hard to reach camps, where other humanitarian staff may be unable to visit, or are concerned for their safety if they do. NPSL has helped people who wish to advocate for themselves regarding when they will be resettled and where.

In addition NPSL has helped to bring attention to some of the tensions involved in resettlement. There have been allegations that Tamil families have been given land to cultivate that belongs to Muslim families. This plants seeds of communal tension and a potential flashpoint for violence. There are concerns that some resettlement villages are too far from schools, so the children will be unable to continue their schooling, or can only pursue schooling to a certain level, after which there are no facilities. There are concerns about the adequacy of water and overall safety and stability of the area. There are often discrepancies between various agencies about how many families and people are actually in a camp and have or have not yet been resettled and even where they have gone to.

NPSL has been present at several IDP camps just before the buses come to resettle families. NPSL staff have discussed with families if they are moving voluntarily and with confidence, and have shared with the responsible authorities any concerns raised. We have continued to follow up on concerns that in some communities IDPs have been unable to bring sufficient fuel or other needed items, including food, to the camps, given military concerns about resources reaching the LTTE instead of serving civilians. In some areas proposed for or actually resettled, there continue to be concerns about buried landmines.

A new but likely growing area of work is with IDPs in Jaffna. People are moving out of the Vanni, a large area to the south of Jaffna District, due to continued fighting. The army and police have security concerns too about people moving out of areas that have been controlled by the LTTE for many years. Thus the level of screening, potential security risks, and long term isolation from others is expected to be high. The NPSL Jaffna team is becoming involved with this emerging reality on behalf of vulnerable civilians.

Protection and Promotion of Human Rights

In its human rights work, NPSL continues to support civilians seeking to protect their own rights, while simultaneously supporting Sri Lankan organizations to strengthen their efforts to ensure all mechanisms that support human rights are accessible and operate appropriately. All NPSL teams respond to individual cases of rights violations such as forced recruitment, disappearances, threats, involuntary resettlement, misappropriation of land, extra-judicial killings and arbitrary arrests.

Teams provide both short and long term accompaniment to individuals and families to assist them to use existing mechanisms, such as meeting with local civil authorities, to inquire about missing relatives, to access youth-serving facilities, and to move to longer term safer places. The teams continue to respond to inquiries from others working to support peace and human rights efforts at the grassroots levels to learn first-hand about specific conditions and challenges faced by vulnerable families and their children..

The Colombo Response Team (CRT) continues to both provide accompaniment for threatened individuals and families coming to the Colombo area to access human rights and justice mechanisms and resources, and to represent the field sites in national level meetings and processes. Recently they have strengthened their relationship with the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka in regards to civilian rights and safety. They have been requested to consider the needs of journalists for safety, and also provide protective presence to human rights promoters in the Colombo area.

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