



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

September 2006

Armed hostilities between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the LTTE (commonly known as the Tamil Tigers) continued in September, although the parties did not officially declare an end to the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) - at least not yet. After the LTTE's defeat in Sampur, the military appears to feel it has the upper hand. This certainly makes the efforts of the Norwegian Special envoy to resurrect the talks more difficult. A recent possible breakthrough for unconditional talks in Geneva at the end of the October turned sour by newly imposed preconditions by the government, and by heavy fighting in the Vakaraï area in the East of Sri Lanka. The present indications are that the government and LTTE are preparing themselves for further military campaigns. At the time of the release of this report heavy deployment of Sri Lankan armed forces has been reported in parts of Jaffna.

The overall security and human rights situation in Sri Lanka has continued to deteriorate. Jaffna remains generally cut off from the rest of Sri Lanka. Food items are being provided by GoSL cargo ships under the protection of the navy but the supply is not enough. The ICRC is unable to do anything because the parties cannot agree on the method of transportation. Sporadic UN chartered flights to Jaffna have started but regular civilian flights remain on hold. On the peninsula mobility and movement is still restricted.

With the monsoon season starting soon hundreds of thousands people who are still displaced in the East and North with unmet basic needs will certainly bear the brunt of the continued lack of access and the fighting. In the past, most major attacks were conducted by the LTTE during the rainy season. The North East monsoon limits operational capabilities of the heavy vehicles, tanks and artillery as well as air and naval traffic. Such vehicles could get stuck in Jaffna's rain drenched soil, which delays the operational capabilities of the superior armed power of the security forces. This has been a known tactic employed by the Tigers in the past and there are no reasons to suggest that they will not follow the pattern this year unless something dramatic happens on the peace front.

The fear of people in the East is such that threatening leaflets distributed in Muttur, purporting to be from the LTTE, have caused many amongst the largely Muslim population to flee once again. Those same people have been compelled to return to Muttur under threat of being denied relief rations. These are actions that are in violation of all norms of international humanitarian conduct.

The civilian military training campaign and child recruitments that are taking place in the North East, both by the LTTE and its breakaway Karuna group, are most likely in anticipation of battles that lie ahead. Reports from the East indicate that the child recruitment taking place is extremely cruel. Families who have lost one of their children to one group are being doubly victimized to give another child to the other group. The spate of assassinations and abductions of Tamil people suspected to be either pro or anti LTTE is also continuing. In Colombo dozens of Tamil businessmen have been abducted which prompted the GoSL to set up a Parliamentary Group to investigate these abductions.

The brutal killings of ten Muslim farm workers in Pottuvil in the East are another example of the breakdown of law and order related to security of life in the country and the growing practice of impunity. The Home for Human Rights, a local NGO, reported this month that more than 1000 extrajudicial killings of civilians have taken place since November last year.

The lack of any investigations being conducted in many of these crimes and other incidents in the East and North has frustrated the international community. Recent international pressure in Geneva and New York resulted in the promise by the GoSL to set-up a Commission of Inquiry to look into approximately ten high profile crimes committed during the violent conflict over the course of this year. The recommendations by many human rights observers to set-up an international monitoring mission and an international commission of inquiry have so far been rejected by the GoSL. However, it has been agreed that the new national Commission of Inquiry would be observed by a number of eminent international persons. So far, the inability of the national and international human rights machinery and UN bodies, including the UN Human Rights Council, to deal with potential war crimes in Sri Lanka has been disappointing. The Supreme Court in September declared that neither United Nations conventions signed by Sri Lanka nor the directives of monitoring bodies are binding on the country.

In addition, Parliament is about to pass a law that allows the GoSL to expulse international agencies out of the country. Already six international organizations including Doctors Without Borders/ France and Spain have been requested to leave the country immediately. In a further attempt to curb the activities of INGOs and NGOs, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka has issued (I)NGOs new bank account numbers which it has started to monitor. Local NGOs that work in LTTE areas are

facing more difficulties. Funds in the bank accounts of the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) have already been frozen.

The most hopeful prospect in this bleak situation is the signing of a landmark agreement between the SLFP and UNP, which are the country's two largest political parties, to work together on a common national agenda.

The work of the teams

In the course of issuing work permits that all INGOs now need to have, NPSL this month was interviewed by the Ministry of Defence about its activities. It received the promise that it will receive the work permits for all its international staff by the end of September. However, all agencies including NPSL have now been asked to provide details of its national staff before the permits are being issued. Meanwhile, international staff is still without access to LTTE areas. There is much concern within NPSL about the families it has been supporting in those areas as well as the disconnection with one of the main stakeholders in general. NPSL continues to lobby for the right to access a large part of the population of Sri Lanka in need of protection.

NPSL plays a significant role in the roundtable discussions and coordinating meetings and workshops. In Batticaloa, NPSL teams attended a strategy meeting by UNICEF on the rise in child abductions in the district. The Valaichchenai office raised its concern about the increase in visits by families whose children were abducted and the lack of any accountability or recourse for the families. A particular concern is also the lack of safe places for those children under threat. Several action points were identified which will be further elaborated at the district and Colombo level before they are implemented.

Another challenge the teams faces in the Batticaloa district has been the influx of Internally Displaced People (IDPs), from 37,000 to 62,000. Both NPSL teams in the district have stepped up their efforts to address this issue. They received additional help from members of the Mutur team. A large number of Tamil IDPs who fled the violence in Mutur came down to the Batticaloa district and remain there in IDP camps. Several of those camps are in volatile areas. In a collaborative effort, members of the Mutur and Valaichchenai teams prepared an assessment of the protection needs of these IDPs and shared these with other agencies and groups including UNHCR.

A six months review of the work of the new office in Batticaloa revealed the need for consolidation of the activities and the inclusion of IDPs as part of its future activities. The focus of the office in the coming period will therefore be on certain areas, most notably, Human Rights, (child) abductions and IDPs through the

support of the citizens groups and Peace Committees. It is also recognized that religious leaders should be supported because of the active but risky role they play in the current environment. Such activities will need to be complemented with a proper monitoring and documenting mechanism. All of these efforts are part of the strategy to work toward ratcheting up the human security standards in the district and country.

The proposed collaborative and flexible approach has been part of NPSL's strategy all along. However, the environment today requires even a greater level of interdependency between NPSL and local groups and international agencies. In fact, the reality demands a response mechanism that has multiple players involved at different levels engaged in support, protection, activism and campaign efforts. In addition, the divisions between the communities are increasing so the need to work in a conflict sensitive manner is more appropriate than ever. A similar approach is being taken in Trincomalee where the two teams have been working with the large number of IDPs. Again, the situation required the teams to work in different locations with specific dynamics at the same time. The teams were able to link aid agencies to those groups of IDPs that were not receiving assistance. Most of the IDPs fled and resettled in places according to ethnic lines.

The Mutur and Trinco teams made an extra effort to ensure that they continued to work with all communities, hence with the Tamil IDPs in Valaichchenai, the Sinhalese IDPs in Seruvila and Muslim IDPs in Kantalai and Kinniya.

The Jaffna team continues to advocate the protection issues that concern Jaffna in forums in Colombo and is preparing for a return to Jaffna and to work with Jaffna IDPs who settled in the Mannar district. A ten day protection assessment in Mannar will be carried out by several members of the Jaffna team in October. NPSL's past experience with IDPs in Trincomalee and Jaffna and today's high protection needs of IDPs, who fled because of the violence, has resulted in a partnership agreement between NPSL and the UNHCR.

While members of the Trinco team took part in a learning workshop by Christian Aid, NPSL submitted a new partnership proposal for 2007 to the organization that focuses on the support of Peace Committees and other local coping mechanisms that can address the human security situation today.

Several new partnerships and renewed discussions with UNICEF on a framework for cooperation in 2007 require NPSL to gradually take a programmatic approach. Consequently, programme management systems including additional reporting mechanism will need to be put into place. A comprehensive reporting system will be introduced in October in order to meet the various reporting requirements to wider NP and the donors.

Report written by Marcel Smits (Sri Lanka Project Director) and Christine Schweitzer (Programme Director)



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.

Report written by Marcel Smits (Sri Lanka Project Director) and Christine Schweitzer (Programme Director)



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.

Report written by Christine Schweitzer (Programme Director)



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

December 2006

The end of 2006 seems to have marked the end of the peace process. Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, the brother of the President, barely escaped in December a suicide bomb attack on his motorcade in the heart of Colombo. Following this murder attempt, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) re-imposed the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), a tough anti-terrorism law meant to help fight terror threats but that were also seen to lead to serious human rights abuses in the past as well.

A series of attempts by the Norwegian envoys to bring the parties back together failed, and the present international set-up to facilitate a negotiated settlement may be seriously flawed. Some observers think that failed process not only complicates matters but stands in the way of securing a sustainable solution.

Another blow for the peace facilitators is the death of Anton Balasingham, the man who led the LTTE into negotiations with the Sri Lankan government in September 2002. The 68-year-old, who passed away in London suffering from cancer, was considered a moderate within the LTTE. Being the chief political strategist and chief negotiator of the LTTE, Balasingham was with the Tigers for more than 30 years. Some analysts believe his death could contribute to a full scale war. Already more than 3,500 people have died in 2006 alone. The current situation has forced the Scandinavian Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) that is overseeing the ceasefire agreement to reconsider its presence and strategy in the country.

On the military front, the Sri Lankan Security Forces has vowed to "flush out the LTTE" from the East. It has stated that it will capture Vakarai by March. This small coastal area in the East has been under LTTE control but has suffered military operations for months now. As a result, hundreds of people are reported to have died and 15,000 people have fled, while another 15,000 remain trapped and face severe food shortages according to a recent report by the Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO), the only relief organization active in that area. Those people who take the risk to get out by walking for days through the jungle areas end up in

one of the scores of IDP camps or are arrested by the military or taken by other armed groups who suspect them as LTTE sympathizers.

Jaffna is still facing serious food shortages, and other basic needs are not addressed. Abductions by paramilitary groups continue which has led dozens of youth to opt to go to prison and seek safety behind steel bars. The curfew in Jaffna has been relaxed and mobile phone system is partly working after a visit by the US ambassador to the North who expressed his frustration about the situation.

As expected, the heavy military pressure on the Tamil people both in the East and North has provoked the LTTE to strike back. The LTTE recently warned of a full scale war if the GoSL continued to target Tamil civilians in Vakarai. In a further development in the first week of January, it told the Sri Lankan government that it could face "serious repercussions" after an air force raid on a small IDP settlement in Mannar killed 16 Tamil people including 8 children. These repercussions manifested themselves on the first weekend of January in the form of two bus bomb attacks on two main roads leading to Colombo. Dozens of civilians were killed and many injured in these attacks. While the LTTE has denied any involvement, this development could mark the beginning of a campaign to hit civilian targets in the South followed by significant economic targets. Meanwhile, an experts' panel set up by Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse called in December for wide-ranging "genuine power sharing" to end the ethnic conflict, suggesting among other things a bi-cameral legislature and two vice-presidents chosen among the minorities. The report by the experts was however not received well by the Sinhalese nationalist parties.

The work of the teams

The end of 2006 was also marked by a Chikungunya outbreak in Sri Lanka which, besides tens of thousands of other people, hit the NPSL staff hard. This viral fever, spread by mosquito bites, and the holiday season affected the capacity of NPSL to respond to the latest developments. At the time that many of the staff were either ill in bed or on home leave outside the country, IDP's from the Vakarai area continued to arrive in both Valaichchenai and Trincomalee area.

NPSL Trinco and Mutur teams provided presence in and around the IDP camps on several occasions to help ensure that the rights of IDPs were being upheld according to international standards, and to prevent physical violence that occurred in other places where NPSL had not been present. NPSL's flexible and rapid response is having a comparative advantage in dealing with protection needs of IDPs. There have been many instances in which NPSL's quick monitoring and assessment ensured a response by humanitarian agencies to address the needs of IDPs in remote areas. Protective presence by NPSL Mutur on Mondays at the Serunwara market place has helped reduce reports of abductions and violence

against the IDPs who come there to buy food. This initiative is considered to be a confidence builder and means to reduce the vulnerability of IDPs.

NPSL Mutur has also addressed the security situation regarding IDPs with the local SLA commander. At times, NPSL is serving as bridge-builders between the host community and the IDPs. In one instance, NPSL Mutur mediated a dispute between one of its local Christian Aid partners operating in several IDP camps and the local government authority. Due to the spread of IDPs over many places in the district and to ensure its nonpartisanship, NPSL Mutur has widened its reach far beyond Mutur town and Mutur division and includes Muslim, Tamil and Sinhalese areas in various divisions. For the time being, it will continue to operate from Trinco town which enables it to cover these areas.

In the Batti district alone there are currently 61 IDP camp sites holding over 72,000 IDPs. Aid agencies have been stretched to the limit and are often unable to respond properly to the flow of IDPs, while the Tsunami reconstruction has virtually stopped. Due to increased shelling in the Vakarai area, IDPs have been trying to get to safety to the south in Valaichchenai. Some who attempted to come by boat drowned when the boat sank.

An increase of armed group activity in and around Valaichchenai while thousands of IDPs from various different communities have settled in the area is gradually creating an unmanageable situation. Requests for overnight international presence in IDP camp sites have been repeated (now also in Trinco) as abductions of IDPs by armed groups increased, although most abductions are reported to happen outside the camps.

NPSL Valaichchenai visited various camp sites and communicated the protection needs to local authorities and international agencies. In addition, a protection meeting is being organized by the Valaichchenai office to come up with some new cooperative approaches to become more proactive rather than reactive.

Fewer families recently have come to report to NPSL on missing children although the actual number of abductions is generally believed to be increasing, despite the pledges by both Karuna and the LTTE to release them. Few children have been released and in almost all cases it has been the family that was able to put pressure on the abductors. In response to several requests for safe places, NPSL Valaichchenai contacted different international and local actors that are working on child/youth issues to assess the possibility to create a "safe place network". The initial response from religious leaders who play an important role in the safety of civilians was positive. NPSL Batticaloa continued the accompaniment of local HR activists in Batticaloa to meet families and document

cases of abductions and it facilitated visits by IDPs to the police and the ICRC including one person who was under serious threat.

Overall the attitude of civil society actors is changing. They have become very cautious. This is related to the increase of activity by armed groups. The Karuna group, for example, has taken over private houses and forced several community organizations to move. NPSL Batticaloa and Valaichchenai as well as the Mutur team are hopeful that their increased efforts to engage with the police and security forces and continued dialogue with some local actors to work together on new strategies will help to respond to a lack of accountability by some of the armed actors.

Due to the security situation, the NPSL Jaffna team was forced to move its office to another location. Its efforts in December concentrated on visiting people under threat and the accompaniment of one its local partner organizations, which is one of the few organizations still functioning in terms of HR monitoring in Jaffna. NPSL Jaffna continues to be involved in the security of IDPs from Allaipidy who remain vulnerable.

At the request of wider NP an assessment on international presence in IDP camps was carried out among the field teams. In another event, members of the staff in Colombo took part in a workshop on Confidence Building and Stabilizing Measures organized by the UNHCR which involved representatives from both government and nongovernmental institutions and agencies. The Colombo office is increasingly receiving requests to get involved in the many civilian disappearances in Colombo. Together with two members of the Jaffna team who are currently staying in Colombo, it has been working on cases of missing and attempted abductions of several youth.

Report written by Marcel Smits (Sri Lanka Project Director) and Christine Schweitzer (Programme Director)