



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

January 2007

In a parade and an air and sea display of military power at a seaside park in the capital of Colombo on the 4th of February, Sri Lanka celebrated 59 years of independence from Portuguese, Dutch and then British rule between 1505 and 1948.

In a politically turbulent month, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the government and the UNP was torn apart by the main opposition party after it was compromised by the 'cross over' of 18 UNP MP members who have joined the government. To accommodate the defectors, new ministerial posts were created, resulting in a jumbo cabinet of 54 Ministers, the largest in the world today. During the international donor conference that was held in Galle at the end of January, Western powers, including the United States, were urging Sri Lanka's government to commit to a political settlement with the LTTE, potentially holding back sums of aid if no progress is made.

Also at the international level, 38 US congress members called upon President Bush to appoint a special envoy to Sri Lanka who would also monitor the human rights situation. In a further development, the UN Secretary-General called for 'targeted measures' against the LTTE and Karuna for their continued involvement in child recruitment. The Government joined 60 other countries that approved the so-called Paris Commitments to end the use of child soldiers.

Gradually, the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP) has arrived in Sri Lanka. Its support secretariat also has been established. Already the Commission of Inquiry (CoI) has started the preparations on the 15 human rights cases it was charged by the President to investigate. Another serious concern is the number of disappearances in Sri Lanka. According the latest statistics every five hours one person in Sri Lanka disappears.

The Work of the NP Teams

The Jaffna district remains under marshal law. Human rights organizations and defenders report they are facing increased threats. NPSL's role is to provide proactive international presence to a number of national partners which allows them to carry on with their work to receive complaints, file cases, raise awareness and do advocacy. NPSL in Jaffna is also getting more visits by families whose relatives and children have disappeared. NPSL has been requested to provide presence and interact with families affected to determine how to reduce vulnerability and build capacity for community response.

Over 75,000 Tamil people are currently staying in IDP camps in Batticaloa district due to the recent fighting. Forced recruitment into armed groups, including of children is also reported to have increased. Local authorities and the military in the Trincomalee district wish to see the IDPs to return to their original villages but many families fear to do so. Safety and security of IDPs including their safe return have been monitored by NPSL teams on a number of occasions.

Peoples' livelihood continued to get interrupted. Fishermen are experiencing great difficulties due to the restrictions imposed on fishing times and boats. After a series of meetings with the fishing societies, the peace committee members, religious leaders and the Navy, NPSL has begun to serve as an impartial catalyst to connect the actors so they can identify a local solution to the imposed fishing ban that is having such a negative impact on people's livelihoods from all three communities in the area.

NPSL has established closer relationships with several human rights organizations in Trincomalee. These have agreed to conduct training programmes for NPSL partners that have expressed interest, but also for Peace Committee members in Mutur. The presence of NPSL personnel in meetings and through accompaniments so far allowed sensitive issues to be raised, partners to get connected to training programs and families to receive (legal) support.

In Valaichchenai, NP often serves as a safe meeting space for mothers and families who wish to share experiences and relevant information and decide on possible action and self-advocacy. The team intends to facilitate all the interested families together for a larger gathering in February. Safe places for youth at risk continue to be requested. The team has been able to facilitate the enrollment of a number of youth to a vocational training center where they would follow a year long residential program. NPSL will continue to serve as link for other youth and the centers which are serving them.

The LTTE has reportedly not given up its influence in the region, and appears to be competing with the Karuna group for control and influence. A claymore mine attack at the Eastern University was followed by the request of a religious leader for NPSL Batti to provide international presence after the attack to increase the safety and confidence of staff and students.

NPSL continues to be heavily involved in addressing the problem of continuing reports of child abductions. Several meetings with families affected were held during which information about the pledges and guidelines on child rights by TMVP and LTTE was shared. This prompted several families to write letters addressed to the groups, and others sought the support of UNICEF. NPSL has started to receive requests by the families to be present when they visit the offices of the TMVP.

NPSL has started several new partnerships with CIDA, Christian Aid and PWRDF and is currently finalizing a new project proposal with UNICEF.

Report written by Christine Schweitzer (Programme Director)



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

December 2007

December 2007 has seen the continuation of hostilities in the North and East and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) reiterating its push for a military solution prior to negotiating a settlement. The All Party Representative Committee (APRC) which is tasked with formulating a political solution has been in limbo much of the month and not able to reach an agreement by the end of the year, as had been promised.

During December the Pillayan element of the TMVP continued its consolidation on the East Coast with reports of attempts at political agreements with other Tamil political parties, in preparation for the forthcoming local government elections in the East. At the time of writing it appears from media reports that the TMVP will run in the elections without any coalition arrangements.

Sadly another member of the Sri Lankan Red Cross was assassinated by unknown persons. This killing took place in Jaffna on 18th December. The European Union has condemned the abduction and killing of the Sri Lankan Red Cross volunteer and urged the Government to do everything possible to protect humanitarian workers in the country. Worryingly there was an incident in the compound of a humanitarian organization in Batticaloa District on the evening of 21st December whereby a grenade was thrown and three vehicles destroyed.

The media has come under particular attack during this time period, including killings, disappearances, abductions and arrests, as well as the burning of the Sunday Leader newspaper presses, the banning of a consortium of radio stations, and an aerial bombing of the Voice of the Tigers radio facility. The Emergency Procedures enacted more than a year ago continue to be renewed by Parliament on a month-to-month basis.

The Work of the NPSL Teams

NPSL's mission continues to provide protective presence and to help limit or reduce the effects of violence on individuals and vulnerable communities.

Our work is currently organized under three major objectives:

1. To increase the level of safety and options for recourse for vulnerable groups affected by violence in the communities.
2. To develop the involvement of community actors in peace and human rights initiatives that address threats and violence in the district.
3. To stimulate the level of involvement and (coordinated) action on the human security situation in Sri Lanka at the community, district, national and international level. Some of the highlights of December team activities are given below.

Teams in the East continued to provide protective accompaniment, and continued to actively support families and children under risk of recruitment/abduction. This also involves support to local partners to set up safe places for these children. Our Trinco team helped a local CBO to ease tensions between two villages, and also worked to help set up a peace committee between Muslim and Hindu groups in a particular area.

The Trinco team also commenced work with UNHCR on creating a joint understanding on creation of Peace Committees, with both doing separate needs assessments for discussion on roles and responsibilities. The team facilitated a joint group of Tamil and Sinhalese women with their request to UN FAO on a fair and community balanced allocation of boat engines that was causing tension in the area, and the team also attended regular coordinating meetings of the Child Protection and Inter- Agency Protection agencies

In the Batticaloa district, our teams in Valaichchenai and Batticaloa town continued their work with vulnerable communities, and their support to strategic partners. The Valaichchenai team supported both the Tamil and Muslim communities as they grapple with inter- and intra -community violence, especially as the impact of the conflict violence has escalated on the Muslim community in the past two months. Space was also provided to the Consortium for Humanitarian Agencies for their community legal services. The rural location of the Valaichchenai office makes it a gathering spot for organizations and agencies serving the northern part of the District.

Information sharing between NPSL and other protection agencies, including ICRC and SLMM in the District was coordinated, resulting in increased accurate human security reporting and rumour control. This work was facilitated through the Human Security Working Group of which NPSL is a member along with other international agencies. At the request of the local Civil Affairs Major of the Sri Lanka Army, both district teams facilitated the contacts needed for another

organization to provide training for senior military staff in Peace and Human Rights

The Batticaloa town team provided numerous accompaniments to at-risk individuals, and coordinated with UNHCR to provide protective presence at two IDP camps on a weekly basis. The team met with religious leaders from both Tamil and Muslim communities to address tensions following the recent abductions of young Muslim men. Consultation also took place with Rural Development Societies to plan cross-community village nonviolent protection strategies.

In Jaffna, the team focus was on providing international presence for various vulnerable groups. No violent incident was reported at the university indicating that NPs routine presence might have had some positive effect on reducing violence. The Team hosted a Colombo-based human rights worker during his visit to Jaffna for the Religious Summit on Peace.

Despite the low level of civil society activity possible for civilians in Jaffna, NP was able to provide protective accompaniment on several occasions during the month. The announcement in late December that NPSL would very likely have to close its Jaffna office in March due to lack of funds is causing considerable concern in NGO and community-based organisation circles in Jaffna and Colombo, especially as the focus of the conflict is now concentrating on the North. Fundraising efforts are underway to address this shortfall.

The Colombo Response Team (CRT) continued supporting the other field teams on advocacy and organizational linkages at Colombo level. Throughout the month the Team also provided international presence and accompaniment in response to requests.

NPSL began discussions with its key elections partner PAFFREL regarding pre-election monitoring during early 2008. At the time of writing preliminary arrangements are being planned with PAFFREL whereby up to ten NPSL international staff will assist with pre-election monitoring for six weeks, in nine local authority areas, in the Batticaloa District. The elections are planned for March.

As a number of current international field workers are ending their one or two-year contracts at this time, 7 new international field team members arrived in December. They received In-Country Training and were deployed by Christmas-time to the various NPSL Field teams.

By ppathak