



FIELD REPORT: SRI LANKA PROJECT

April 2009

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The Political Context in Sri Lanka

April 2009 appeared to usher in the endgame in the fight between Government of Sri Lanka Security Forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE were progressively cornered in a diminishing strip of coconut groves in the northeast corner of the country, along with unknown numbers of civilians trapped on a narrow piece of sandy beach unable to escape. What was verifiable was the number of civilians that have poured out of the combat zone this month, tripling the number of displaced civilians in a matter of days to approximately a quarter million when government forces blasted through a massive earthen dam and thousands of desperate people literally ran for their lives.

The President of the Security Council issued a statement condemning the Tamil Tigers for using civilians as human shields and keeping them trapped in the battle zone. He also spoke on behalf of the 15 members of the Council, saying the Sri Lankan government also must abide by international humanitarian law on allowing aid access to refugees. The meeting was not a formal session of the Security Council and the president's statements were non-binding.

Speaking from previous experience, the government continued to maintain that a ceasefire would only give respite and succor to the rebels, who have refused repeated calls from the United Nations, many governments and neighboring India to release the civilians under their control and lay down their arms. Hope still persists that an acceptable political solution and a genuine reconciliation process will be undertaken with all due speed.

The Context and Work of the NP Teams

Nonviolent Peaceforce teams provided international protective presence in its three field sites in Jaffna in the North, and Valaichchenai and Batticaloa in the

East, as well as assisting human rights defenders and vulnerable civilians in the capital of Colombo to access needed resources for the protection of their fundamental and human rights. NP field workers attended more than 35 coordination meetings this month with a wide variety of stakeholders. Such meetings support and facilitate needed networks and build relationships of trust at the grassroots level, and also build awareness and advocacy among other actors at multiple levels to improve the overall human security situation for vulnerable civilians.

In Jaffna District the numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) escaping the conflict zone doubled to about 11,000, most of them arriving by sea. They are being housed in approximately 12 sites in three areas of the peninsula. The teams in Batticaloa received 20 new reports of alleged killings, abductions, arrests or threats this month, with 26 families returning for additional help and advocacy. Highlights of the activities of the teams this month are outlined below in four broad areas of NP's protection work.

Protecting Children

The direct and indirect impact of the war on children, youth and families is tremendous. NP teams coordinate child protection efforts with UN agencies and other humanitarian organizations, particularly UNICEF, as well as with government structures, such as Probation Officers, the Department of Child Protection, and the police, and with civil society actors at the community level. The teams also work with families and coordinate with Save the Children to identify options and needed reintegration activities for children and youth who have previously been part of an armed group.

In Batticaloa, NP was asked by a parents' group to provide presence at a demonstration at one of the schools where an 8-year-old girl was abducted. Her body was later found in a well not far from where she was taken. A harthal (or general strike) was called, which shut down the district for a day, as parents demanded more protection for their children. No update was available on the fate of the other two missing children. Sixteen accompaniments were performed by NP teams this month, several of them for vulnerable youth or families with children to gain greater safety and to access needed services and resources.

Promoting Human Rights

Promotion and protection of human rights for all under girls much of the work of NP. Coordinating with the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission (HRC) and assisting human rights defenders to carry on their activities under difficult circumstances is on-going. NP teams provided a number of human rights

defenders with protective accompaniment to vulnerable areas to carry out their work, including a request to accompany a government servant doing family casework. Fears regarding the fate of friends and relatives in the Vanni dominate the discussions with many families.

Monitoring IDP Camps and Resettlement Areas

NP teams are part of district and national level coordinating bodies related to the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs), including in areas where they are returned or resettled. As referenced above, there is a humanitarian crisis related to the many thousands of IDPs created by the recent months of fighting in the Vanni area in the north of the country. NP has been requested by local and national actors, and is poised to participate, in helping provide monitoring and protective presence in those areas, once resources are secured and permission is granted by the government for humanitarian organizations to fully access the areas where the IDPs are being sheltered.

NP teams gained valuable experience during a similar IDP crisis in 2006-2008 in the East. In Jaffna and Batticaloa, the teams still monitor weekly assigned IDP camps and other resettlement areas as part of their role in district protection working groups. In Batt, both teams were asked to monitor additional camps and resettlement areas this month. In Jaffna, with the influx of new refugees, already tensions have been raised as IDPs compete with local communities for limited aid and resources.

Supporting Community-Based Structures

In order for peace and stability to come permanently to Sri Lanka, local initiatives and structures must be supported and strengthened. NP teams build relationships of trust within the communities where they live and work in order to play a facilitating role to local peacemakers and to encourage nonviolent problem-solving when problems do arise. At the grassroots levels, relationships with the lowest level government servants (or GSs) are of particular importance, as well as with village societies, such as RDSs (Rural Development Societies) and farmers' and fishermen's associations. In Jaffna the team met with representatives in four GS areas this month, noting that children were now attending school in one previously displaced and vulnerable community, and that 6 schools in two other areas have been taken over for temporary housing of IDPs. In another area, fishermen continued to seek outside advocacy for the lifting of fishing restrictions that have had a long term impact on the livelihoods of at least 600 fishermen in the area.

In Batticaloa the Batti team visited with GSs in two areas and met with representatives from several community-based organizations and RDSs to hear their perspectives and ideas on security in their areas. In another historically volatile area, the divisional secretary (DS) invited the team to work with the conflict-affected families in his division, which the team will follow up in coming months. The team also participated in the important monthly meeting of the Community Protection Network held under the auspices of CHA (the local Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies).

In Valaichchenai, the team used the opportunity of the appointment of a new Head of Field Office to re-connect with a variety of government servants, security forces, and other community stakeholders. The community networks facilitated by the team are functioning well, including an Early Warning Network that includes approximately 100 people that can be called upon quickly to help dispel rumours and otherwise help mitigate potential violent situations as they arise. A second network of Tamil and Muslim grassroots organizations continues to use the safe office space in NP's annex and to work together across ethnic lines. This month they began jointly taking Sinhala language lessons and began a clothing drive to send needed clothing to the IDPs in the Vanni.