

Programme Department - Report for December 2006

Nonviolent Peaceforce Sri Lanka

The team of Nonviolent Peaceforce in Sri Lanka wishes all colleagues, friends and supporters a healthy and hopeful new year. The hope is what drives us to continue our efforts in 2007.

General situation

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 fighting terror threats but that led to serious human rights abuses in the past. At the time of its introduction in 1979, the PTA was described as being worse than the South African law.

A series of attempts by the Norwegian envoys to bring the parties back together failed, and it can be concluded that the present international set-up to facilitate a negotiated settlement is seriously flawed. Observers think that failed process not only complicates matters but stands in the way of securing a sustainable solution. Instead, the country is facing a civil war fuelled and fought by nationalists on both sides.

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 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 will 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" that is overseeing the ceasefire agreement (SLMM) to reconsider its presence and strategy in the country.

On the war front, the Sri Lankan military 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 have died and 15,000 people have fled while another 15,000 remain trapped and face starvation 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 hundreds of IDP camps or are arrested by the military or Karuna group who are treating 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 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. One seems to have involved a female suicide bomber. Dozens of civilians got 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. It would further increase the already tense situation between Tamil and Sinhalese people and could trigger ethnic riots.

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 including Project Director Marcel. This viral fever, spread by mosquito bites, and the holiday season affected the capacity by NPSL to respond to the latest developments. At the time that many of the staff were either ill in bed or outside the country, IDP's from the Vakarai area continued to arrive in both Valaichchenai and Trincomalee area.

The local authorities and army in the Trincomalee district have started a policy to force Tamil IDPs to return to their villages despite the fear and insecurity. Some members of international refugee agency point out that this violates international humanitarian law, and even speak of a "racist policy". NPSL Trinco and Mutur provided presence in and around the camps on several occasions to ensure that the rights of IDPs were being upheld, and to prevent physical violence that occurred in other places where NPSL had not been present. NPSL has also used its presence to inform UNHCR of some of the incidents regarding the manipulation of IDPs on several other occasions. Such information will be used at the policy and advocacy level both nationally and internationally.

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 prevented 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 brought up 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 Batticaloa district alone there are currently 61 IDP camp sites holding over 72,000 IDPs. Aid agencies have been stressed to the limit and are 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 try to escape south to Valaichchenai. Some who attempted to come by boat drowned when the boat sank.

The EPDP, another anti-LTTE group, has become more visible in the Valaichchenai town area and rumors are spreading that it is working together with the Karuna group. The increase of armed group activity in and around Valaichchenai and the lack of any police involvement while thousands of IDPs from various different communities have settled in the area is gradually creating a 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 still happen outside the camps.

NPSL Valaichchenai visited various camp sites and communicated the protection needs to local authorities and international agencies. It also facilitated a mission by INFORM, a local human rights organization, to document the plight of IDPs. This has been part of increased collaboration and the start of a new report and support mechanism between NPSL and several local human rights actors. In addition, a protection meeting is being organized by the Valaichchenai office to come up with some new approaches to become more proactive and rather than reactive. One idea that will be explored is the possibility to organize a kind of peace circle about nonviolent principles and methods, involving community based organizations and IDP camp management.

Fewer families have come to report to NPSL on missing children although the actual number of abductions has increased despite the pledges by both Karuna and the LTTE to release them following the statements made by UNICEF, Human Rights Watch and UN Special Rapporteur Allan Rock. 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 is also encouraged by the interest and support from local actors including religious leaders in the development of a so-called abduction secretariat introduced by NPSL Batticaloa. Such a body would coordinate the response in case of abductions and the prevention of them. 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 address lack of accountability by some of the armed groups.

In January, NPSL will also restart its engagement with the armed groups including the Karuna group which is represented politically by the TMVP party. Other initiatives such as the advocacy by the Human Security Working Group, a consortium of local and international agencies in Batticaloa originally set up by NPSL several years back, becomes increasingly more important to tackle the prevailing situation in the district and ensure that communities do not completely get paralyzed.

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 partners, the Center for Peace and Reconciliation 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.

In Colombo, NPSL finalized the Sri Lankan review, 2007 strategy and budget and it started interviews with candidates for the position of Grants Manager. So far, the search for this fundraising position has not been successful. 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 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 boys. The office has also been approached by the family of the abducted Vice Chancellor of the Eastern University in Batticaloa who went missing from a high security area in Colombo. NPSL has been able to raise the attention on the case and pressure on the GoSL through its contacts at diplomatic missions, international and local HR agencies and contacts within the GoSI itself. Unfortunately, the efforts have not led to the release of the Vice Chancellor and there is a real concern for his life.

Philippines- Mindanao

The current status of the project is the following:

- We are waiting for a decision on our funding applications with five funding agencies. The German Foreign Ministry has rejected the application for security reasons. To follow up with the applications, Project Coordinator Atif Hameed has sought renewed contact with these (and some other agencies) during the last months of 2006 by phone and e-mail to Manila, and will continue to do so in Manila in January 2007. The fundraising department is researching whom to contact in the different headquarters of the agencies to pursue the applications from that side.
- Project Coordinator Atif Hameed has been continuously employed by NP since mid of June 2006, the beginning of the three-month advance work. After returning home mid of September, he worked on fundraising, maintaining contacts with partners and recruitment of five additional FTMs to begin work in Mindanao once the money is found, and joined the assessment and core training in Nairobi in November-December as assessor and resource person. In January, Atif is returning to the Philippines for another two months to work on fundraising, reconnection with our partners, and working on registration and political contacts.
- Recruitment: Based on the recommendations received by the trainers and assessors of the core training in Nairobi, Atif and Programme Director Christine Schweitzer made a decision whom to invite to join the first team to Mindanao, and informed the lucky (and unlucky) applicants in early January. Unfortunately we cannot tell them yet when the project will really begin because we are still waiting for any success with the funding applications.

Colombia

After the IGC had in October generally approved the project proposal, work has been done on four areas:

- Funding prospects: The fundraising department prepared a list with possible funding sources, and Regional Coordinator Alvaro Ramirez-Durini spent ten days in December 06 in Bogota to make contact with some of the agencies. However, to begin fundraising in serious has as precondition that there is a staff person in Colombia.
- That staff person who ideally would be later the first Project Director of NP Colombia would have several tasks: Contact with funders in Bogotá, providing detailed and up-to-date information for grant applications, take care of NP's registration (which is needed for receiving funds), ongoing work with local partners, and meetings and understanding with the different actors on the ground (political contacts). Once there is prospect for funds coming in, s/he would support the Programme Director in recruitment of more management staff and the first team, and see that all preparations for the arrival of the first team are being taken care of. The search for that person will begin as soon as the IGC has approved the budget 2007, so that if all goes well (and the IGC gives its agreement) that person would begin her/ his work in April.
- NP representatives have held meetings with PBI and FOR USA, two other peace team organisations already working in Colombia for a considerable amount of time, and discussed possible areas of cooperation between the organisations.

Uganda

Uganda is the project most recently approved by the IGC (see the Department report from November about their decision).

Like with the other projects, the first task is to find the funds to begin it – the IGC made the start of the exploratory “phase 1” dependent on restricted funds being found for it. By end of December, a list of potential donors has been updated.

To get the fundraising started, it was decided at the very end of December to accept the offer by a participant in the core training to help out as a fundraiser for one or two months in Uganda. He is Shall Sinha, a Canadian who has the last years done a lot of public relation work for NP by giving presentations mostly in North America. (His wife Pramila is a FTM in Sri Lanka, by the way.) He has been given a one-month contract for January 2007 with an option for prolongation for another month to take care of the following tasks:

- Undertake fundraising visits with international agencies(both governmental and INGOs) as directed by his line supervisor and the NP Fundraising Director.
- Contact and maintain relationship with our inviting partners.
- Follow-up on the steps Interim African Coordinator Ries Binta took on registering NP as an INGO in Uganda, and seek to bring the registration to completion.

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