

Programme Department - Report for February 2007

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Sri Lanka Update (written by Marcel Smits)

General situation and the work of the teams

The fifth anniversary of the Ceasefire Agreement passed without any dramatic events but also with no hope and no signs that the signatories to the agreement are willing to engage in a peaceful manner, not even on the appalling humanitarian situation the country has fallen subject to.

According to the latest figures by the UNHCR the Batticaloa district has now more than 150,000 IDPs. The recent wave is caused by the continuous bombing of LTTE positions in the area west of Batticaloa town. There are not sufficient IDP sites for civilians who are fleeing from the rural area that is being targeted. As a consequence, current IDPs are being sent back home on buses to Vakarai and Mutur areas. The process of return is problematic for UNHCR which has now disengaged itself from the process because the returns do not follow the guidelines of a dignified and safe return.

The problem of armed groups operating in IDP camps increased and has become a top priority for international organizations and diplomats. The camps are unsafe for IDPs as well as for the staff who are under threat. Diplomats learned about the insecurity during a trip East when their helicopters came under fire by the LTTE in Batticaloa. Luckily no-one got seriously injured and the LTTE officially apologized blaming the government for not informing them this trip was scheduled even though the visit had been well announced. The LTTE has also criticized the international community publicly about unfair treatment of the LTTE which supposedly has undermined the peace process.

Despite appeals by international actors, the government continues its military strategy, thus inviting increasing pressure regarding the many human rights violations that occur in the process. For the first time in 25 years Sri Lanka has been discussed at the UN Security Council. Internally pressure is also mounting due to accusations by several ousted Ministers that the President made a secret deal with the LTTE which ensured a victory of the 2005 Presidential elections.

Perhaps due the pressures the number of abductions of children has declined and some reports indicate that more parents resist the recruitment tactics by the armed groups. The LTTE has also started to release children under the age of 17. The TMVP (considered the political arm of the K-group) has taken further control in the Batticaloa area and asks people to report problems to them instead of to the police. Trincomalee is also faced with an increased presence of K group cadres. Except for the north of the Trincomalee, it has been relatively quiet in the district although more military presence is noticeable and targeted killings continue daily.

The work of the teams

There are still many people coming to NPSL seeking safe places. There have been some possibilities for shelter identified through Sarvodaya but the lack of funding stands in the way. Meetings with families affected are becoming larger. In the last one in Valaichchenai almost 80 people came and spoke about their concerns and other sensitive issues thus breaking barriers of silence.

NPSL is carrying out more accompaniments of local partners often outside the district because more people request the help of NPSL. Accompaniments in support of families visiting the TMVP offices are gradually starting. NPSL in Batticaloa has also carried out accompaniments for faculty members of the Eastern University who felt unsafe after the claymore mine attack that killed security forces at the university. It also responded rapidly to a request for presence at the university after the incident and at the police station the following day where many people had been taken in for inquiries. There is good reason to believe that rapid onsite presence and quick mobilization of influential actors in Batticaloa and Colombo prevented further violence and ensured procedures under the emergency regulations were followed.

NPSL is taking more initiative in bringing Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and NGOs together. That way, stronger relationships are built and sensitive issues can be discussed. It also allows for a better understanding of the situation and builds confidence.

One of NPSL local partners in Kinniya took part in a two day workshop offered by a human rights group which NPSL had been accompanying. NPSL facilitated the implementation, among other, by accompanying the human rights trainers to Kinniya and back to Trincomalee. Representatives of various CBOs participated in the workshop on human rights and received certificates afterwards.

The Muttur Peace Committee has now been reactivated. Members of the eight zonal peace committees and 42 sub committees are requesting training. NPSL is currently looking for financial support for such training. A meeting with one zonal committee took place during which capacity building options were discussed. Initial contact between the PC members and one of NPSL other local partners has resulted in opportunities for participation of the PC members in training workshops in peace and human rights. NPSL Trinco is also facilitating the establishment of a new peace committee in Kinniya with the help of Muttur Peace Committee members and other local partners.

NPSL facilitated the fact-finding visit of national human rights organizations to Mutur. At the request of the DS (district governor) in Mutur, NPSL accompanied IDPs from Batticaloa to the villages in Mutur and Seruwila as part of the so-called 'go and see' visits that give people a chance to check the situation back home for themselves before they decide to return permanently.

Following a process to bring attention to the problems that fishermen face in Trincomalee, a large gathering between fishing societies, community and religious leaders, local authorities and (I)NGOs and UN agencies and the Navy took place on the 22nd of February, more options for resolve and coordinated action have now become available.

Fear between the communities is present and it comes out in various ways. Tamil families feel insecure in Mutur and are reluctant to go back to their homes. Fear to report incidents also remains and many people feel disillusioned. Further engagement with military and armed groups by NPSL is required which part of the communication plan with stakeholders that has begun in all field sites. There is a challenge on dialogue with LTTE due to lack of access. More interaction with local authorities is needed and to include them in the work by NPSL.

Large troop movements in and around Jaffna has increased the rumours that bigger battles and attacks are forthcoming. International presence by INGOs in Jaffna has been reduced. The living conditions are still harsh and food distribution problematic. Many disappearances still take place while youth at risk are being placed in protective custody at police station. NPSL has continued to provide presence to local human rights actors who are under threat from all sides. The team is also doing more child protection work in Point Pedro which is suffering from abductions.

The situation in Jaffna is increasingly more demanding to keep a team present. The team in Jaffna is faced with logistical challenges in terms of cargo (mostly food) and staff rotation that hinders effective communication and team work.

The Trinco and Mutur NPSL team have merged together and will operate as one district team. The new District Support Coordinators will help to facilitate the transition and give future team support, where required.

Members of the International Governing Council and international staff visited Sri Lanka for its annual gathering. They were introduced to the field through a visit to Batticaloa and presentations by the teams in Colombo. The strategy and budget for Sri Lanka received approval. Regrettably, one IGC member, Omar Diop, ended up in the hospital after suffering from a minor heart attack. He is, however, recovering and preparing for a trip to France to receive surgery.

Philippines- Mindanao

General situation

The situation in Mindanao has become more tense over the month of February with the negotiations between government and MILF still being on halt. (In March however there have been positive signals by the Philippine government that may move the peace process forward again.)

The work of NP

The great news in February have been that thanks to three donors from the USA we have found enough money to actually begin the Mindanao project. These news arrived while the International Governing Council of NP was assembled for its yearly Council meeting in Sri Lanka. So the work of Project Coordinator Atif shifted from fundraising (which is still an urgent need however because we need to sustain the project beyond the months covered by the donations) to concrete preparation of the arrival of five field team members, called “International Civilian Peacekeepers” in that project.

We hope that the five field team members will arrive around the first of May. Some weeks of in-country preparation will follow after which they will be deployed to two sites in Mindanao.

Colombia

General Situation

The big political news in February have been that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe expressed willingness to directly talk to the FARC, the biggest left guerrilla group, about the release of prisoners. The move came on the fifth anniversary of the abduction of former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt. FARC suggests to exchange about 60 high-profile and foreign hostages for about 500 jailed guerrillas as a step towards peace talks.

Project Preparation

NP has started advertising for a three month consultancy position in Colombia. The task of that person would be

- Undertake fundraising visits in Colombia with international funding agencies.
- Prepare and present proposals working together with the Fundraising Director, the Programme Director and the Regional Coordinator in LAC.
- Contact and maintain relationship with our inviting partners.
- Contact and maintain relationship with other INGOs working in Colombia, in particular those with related mandates.
- Register NP as INGO in Colombia
- Start working on logistical preparations for the project if it seems likely that funding will soon begin.

The current deadline for receiving applications is 23 March.

Uganda

General Situation

End of February bad news came from Uganda: The Lord Resistance Army announced that it would not renew the 8-months truce with the government that expired on 1st of March. The talks between the two sides had collapsed in December over disagreement of the role of Sudan in hosting the talks. The LRA demands a new venue and different mediators. The announcement is

causing much worry about the 20 year war starting again though by the time this report is written (middle of March) there has been no fighting, and even signals from international mediators that the crisis may be overcome without further bloodshed.

Project Preparation

Consultant Shall Sinha spent the month of February mostly in Kampala contacting possible funders, and trying to finish the registration of NP. Unfortunately we have not been able to find grants for the project so far. Shall has left Uganda end of February with his two months' consultancy being ended. We thank him very much for his work under difficult circumstances.

The plan now is that while the new African Coordinator Ombok Otieno will keep an eye on things for the time being, we will try to send a two-person team to Uganda later this year (around June probably) to conduct what is called "phase 1" in the Uganda project proposal. Their task would be to reassess the situation with all the changes that have happened recently, and formulate a concrete mandate for a NP team if possible. This team will be headed by Oloo Otieno who is currently District Coordinator in Sri Lanka.

Guatemala

A new project proposal has reached Nonviolent Peaceforce in February: IGC member and former co-chair Claudia Samayoa and the Unit for Protection of Human Rights Defenders of the National Movement of Human Rights of Guatemala have asked for protective accompaniment. They have received many death threats for their courageous work of working with human rights defenders in Guatemala and believe that NP and international protective accompaniment could help protect their lives and enable them to continue their important work between now and February 15 of next year. National elections will be held on Sept 7 and Nov. 7 and the time leading up to the elections and for a period after the elections until the new government gets set up is a time when more violence is expected. By Feb 15th 2008 at the latest, they expect the situation to return to "normal" and NP could end its accompaniment.

The proposal is to have four volunteers (or rather: three volunteers and a team coordinator) working in Guatemala providing protective accompaniment for that group. The suggestion to rather work with short-term volunteers who may come for a period of three months is motivated partly by the rapid and short-term character of the project, and partly by the need to find funds quickly to begin the accompaniment in the face of the very concrete and recent threats that group is facing.

This project which would be considered the first Rapid Response project is currently under decision-making in NP.

Christine Schweitzer, Programme Director, 16 March 2007

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