

## Programme Department - Report for January 2007

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### Sri Lanka Update

#### *General situation and the work of the teams*

In a parade and an air and sea display of military power at a seaside park in the capital of Colombo on the 4<sup>th</sup> 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. Shortly after its inauguration, three members were sacked by the President allegedly due to plotting against the President.

Political analysts and diplomatic observers believe that this move by President Mahinda Rajapaksa to sack three senior Sri Lankan Cabinet Ministers can easily lead to a political crisis. With a possible revolt within his party, the President faces a difficult political setting, as an enraged opposition, UNP has already declared that it is "impossible" to cooperate with the Government. The JVP, the electoral partner of the President, is also cross with him on a number of issues. The political situation could pave way for a general election sooner than later.

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 rebels potentially holding back sums of aid if no progress is made.

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 HR 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. An opportunity may arise when the UN Working Group on Sri Lanka is discussing the Alan Rock report in February. In the meantime, the Government joined 60 other countries that approved the so-called Paris Commitments to end the use of child soldiers. However, according to another report, 'Complicit in Crime', published by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) this month, the government of Sri Lanka is accused of supporting the Karuna group in the abduction and recruitment of children to fight the LTTE.

Gradually, the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons (IIGEP) arrived in Sri Lanka. Its support secretariat also has been established. Already the Commission of Inquiry (CoI) has started the preparations on the 15 cases it intends to investigate.

Another serious concern is the number of disappearances in Sri Lanka. According the latest statistics every five hours one person Sri Lankan disappears. There are no serious investigations taking place and no-one has been charged so far.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to identify the facts in Sri Lanka. Most information is manipulated and few media are unbiased and give credible information. In the East, Karuna is preventing Tamil newspapers to be distributed among the people. Information is also used to discredit INGOs. Several aid organizations such as ZOA and Safe the Children have suffered from a campaign that attempted to show how international INGOs are supporting the LTTE. Such information heats up the temperature among nationalists groups in Colombo that immediately take the streets and rally aggressively at the offices of the INGOs. In the meantime, the information gathered by the SLMM is hindered because it is now operating from Negombo and goes on rapid response missions to the East and North. Some analysts believe their role should be restricted to the North now that the LTTE no longer controls strategic areas in the East.

After months of fighting with the LTTE, the military captured the Vakarai area in the East. The LTTE cadres fled through the jungles and tens of thousands of people who had been caught in the crossfire sought safety in areas such as Valaichchenai. Many Tamil people saw their young men and children being detained by the military or the Karuna faction while they were seeking safety in government controlled areas. Most ended up in camps in Welikande which is notorious for the child recruitment activities of Karuna also described in the HRW report. Families claim that the army brings back children who try to escape from the Karuna camps. They are also told that their loved ones are treated as surrenderees who will need to undergo rehabilitation.

### *The work of the teams*

The Jaffna district remains under marshal law. Human rights organizations and defenders are facing increased threats. NPSL role is to provide proactive presence to a number of partners which allows them to carry one with their work to receive complaints, file cases and raise awareness. 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. Those camps are direct consequence of the recent violence. Many of them have been set up in volatile areas where armed groups are active. As a result, most of the child abductions are now taking place in IDP camps by both Karuna and the LTTE just as NPSL predicted several months back but its

warnings to the UNHCR were disregarded. Local authorities and the military in the Trincomalee district wish to see the IDPs to return to their original villages but many fear to do so. Safety and security of IDPs including their safe return have been monitored by NPSL teams on a number of occasions.

Trincomalee is experiencing an increase in K group activity and heavy military presence including stricter security procedures at checkpoints for vehicles of international organizations and the UN. NPSL is reassessing the security of the location of one its offices, after a Claymore mine exploded not far from the office, and two small military outposts and an army camp have been set up near it. The road north is being enlarged which may indicate a military build up towards LTTE areas in the near future. The district is currently experiencing more political killings by the paramilitaries and the LTTE as well as round-ups by the military that resulted in a number of arrests and executions. One particular incident ended in the unfortunate death of the brother of Rani, the NPSL caretaker.

Peoples' livelihood continued to get interrupted. Fishermen are experiencing great difficulties due to the restrictions imposed by the Navy 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 such as ASM and Shakti 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.

NPSL management has decided to reorganize the work in Trincomalee to ensure it can cover all areas with one district team rather than two teams operating from Trincomalee. The idea for the establishment of a district team in the Trincomalee district serves to consolidate the efforts by the Mutur and Trinco teams but it can also create capacity for response to rising needs elsewhere. Overnight stay in Mutur is also part of the plan. Restructuring of the team and local staff is required.

In Valaichchenai, due to the many abductions in the area, NPSL members are heavily involved in facilitating family support groups. Its offices often serve as a safe meeting space for mothers and families who wish to share experiences and relevant information and decide on possible collective action. Gradually, NPSL Valaichchenai, together with its local civil society group partner, is covering around 100 families total. It intends to bring all the families together for a larger gathering in February.

Safe places for youth at risk continue to be requested. The team in Valaichchenai has been able to introduce 15 boys to a vocational training center where they would follow a year long program with room and board. NPSL accompanied the boys in rented vans through checkpoints to the center this month. NPSL will continue to serve as link for other youth and the center which has additional spots available. It is also seeking funding for youth to take part in the training, thus be protected from armed groups.

NPSL in Valaichchenai is operating with some caution due to the heavy presence of the K group. Underage armed cadres are noticeable in the streets and at TMVP offices while interacting with the army. Early January, one of the TMVP offices was attacked by the LTTE which has pledged

to wipe out all TMVP offices. The TMVP moved its offices to a residential area in close proximity to one of NPSL's residences. This causes some concern. An additional concern is the threat to the local staff that is more vulnerable these days.

The openness of activities by the armed K group is also clearly noticeable in Batticaloa where its offices increasingly serve as administrative units to solve community problems. There are reports that the TMVP runs a prison and that it set-up courts copied the way the LTTE practices public administration in their controlled areas. TMVP seems to anticipate regional elections and it is eager to show that it is a strong force that holds the interests of the Eastern Tamils.

The LTTE has not given up its influence in the region. Currently, there is a turf war going on between Karuna and the LTTE. This was clearly manifested in the Claymore mine attack at the Eastern University which has been an institution suffering from political manipulation by armed groups seeking control. At the request of a religious leader, NPSL Batti provided immediate presence after the attack to ensure that the roundups of the students and lecturers after the attack followed proper procedures and would not result in a blood bath which happened in a similar incident in Vavuniya several months back. NPSL quickly mobilized other international and local actors and contacted Police and human rights groups in Colombo.

NPSL continues to be heavily involved in addressing child abductions. It works closely together with the Valaichchenai team on the issue. 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.

In response to the threat to the communities and potential risk to the partners and NPSL local staff, NPSL has begun a campaign for a dialogue with all stakeholders including armed groups such as the TMPV/Karuna and LTTE.

In Colombo, there is a need for FTM presence that serves as a link with the field sites in support of accompaniments and to facilitate protection needs of families. Such presence can also focus on incidents currently taking place in the Colombo. In addition, a smaller number of FTMs in one team allows for a more flexible, mobile and rapid response that can address the vulnerability of specific groups such as IDP camps under particular threat and youth at risk in areas like Batticaloa.

It has proven difficult to support the teams from a distance. In order to provide more consistent and on-site support to the field teams, NPSL Management is therefore introducing District Support Coordinator positions. These positions are essentially an extension of the human resource department but are based in the field. They serve to bridge the gap between headquarters and the field. The new positions are open to current NPSL staff and the starting date is March 1st 2007.

NPSL in Colombo is increasingly getting involved in cases such as the disappearance of the Vice-Chancellor of the Eastern University but also serves as a link for accompaniment from the field to Colombo. This puts an additional burden on the management team. This month, NPSL has also been preparing for the IGC meeting in February and the upcoming renewal of the work permits. A visit by the Project Director to the teams in the East served to get a good understanding about the environment and to offer guidance and support. NPSL has started several new partnerships with CIDA, Christian Aid and PWRDF and is currently finalizing a new project proposal with UNICEF.

NPSL welcomes the IGC members and international staff. It is eager to share its views and experiences which may benefit the discussion among the IGC members between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> of February. NPSL is seeking the full support from members of the IGC so it can carry out the plans for 2007 which no doubt will be a challenging year.

Counting FTMs, Management and support staff, we have had end of January 55 staff in Sri Lanka. So three years after the beginning of the first project, NP has reached the figure that was first envisaged when the overall NP concept paper spoke of a first project with 50, and growing later to several hundreds.

### **The New Projects**

For all the three new projects NP is still seeking funds to begin deployment. So we are still not in a position to say when any of them will begin.

### **Philippines- Mindanao**

#### *General situation*

The overall political situation in Mindanao is quite fluid and uncertain because of the following reasons: Impasse in the peace process between the government (GRP) and MILF although communication channels are open through backdoor diplomacy; issues related to the implementation of 1996 peace agreement between GRP and MNLF; upcoming congressional elections on May 14, 2007; the ongoing “war on terrorism” against Abu Sayyaf, Jammah Islami and New People’s Army; and, small scale fight/skirmishes between paramilitaries/auxiliary groups and MILF on land issues in Midsayap/ North Cotabato.

#### *The work of NP*

Project Coordinator Atif Hameed came to the Philippines on 7<sup>th</sup> January to follow up with partner NGO’s, donors and principal parties in the conflict.

NP Mindanao project has not yet got any concrete answers from any of the donors in spite of continuing to get positive signals from agencies when submitting proposals to them. NP Mindanao and NP’s International Office altogether approached 19 donor agencies since August 2006.

Atif Hameed met the founding Chairman of MNLF, the Vice President of MILF, and high ranking officials of GRP (Office of the Presidential Adviser for Peace Process - OPAPP & Department of Foreign Affairs – DFA). NP Mindanao project has already received a written official affirmative response from the Secretary of DFA and hopes to get similar letters from the other parties soon.

In January he visited also some of NP intended project field sites, met partner NGOs/CBOs and members of the NP Mindanao Project Advisory Board. All are keenly awaiting to welcome NP’s International Civilian Peace Keeping (ICPs) teams (as FTMs will be called in this project) to Mindanao.

After receiving the assessment reports from the NP core training in Nairobi, Atif and Christine also made a decision on the composition of the future team, and informed the chosen candidates who all are experienced in peace-related grassroots' work of the decision. The team that will be led by Atif will consist of a Rumanian, a Nigerian, a Serbian, a Sri Lankan and a Ruandan. They will be three men and three women, most in the 30s, two Muslims, one Buddhist, one practicing Christian and two more from countries with Christian background.

## **Colombia**

### *General Situation*

In Colombia, the situation has remained mostly unchanged. The discussion about the role of the paramilitaries and their links to governing circles is ongoing. Political violence is in spite of government claims to the contrary unabated. Just recently two community leaders who represented victims of paramilitary violence was killed by gunmen.

### *Project Preparation*

The preparations for an assessment and core training for Spanish speaking field team members have started. This training is going to happen in May, and the advert seeking applications went out to NP's network all over the world.

## **Uganda**

### *General Situation*

The truce between the Ugandan government and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) concluded in August last year has been extended for two months in spite of the recent problems in the peace talks when the LRA questioned the role of the Sudanese mediators. The LRA is requesting another venue for the talks, either in Kenya or South Africa.

### *Project Preparation*

After the leaving of Interim African Coordinator Redemptor Ries Binta, a participant from the Nairobi core training who offered his services was hired as an interim fundraiser/ coordinator for the Uganda project for the months January and February. It is Shall Sinha, a Canadian whose wife Pramila is a field team member in Sri Lanka. His tasks are to connect to the groups that are listed in the project proposal as "NP partners" in the North of Uganda, and to work in Kampala on fundraising and finishing the registration of NP Uganda. Shall has in January had a chance to attend a large peace related event ("Peace Week") in the North with 6.000 participants where he met a large number of activists from many groups, and presented NP's work and intentions to them. After a short visit to Gulu to meet among others the NGOs ARLPI, GUSCO, JPC and Ker Kwaro, most of his time in January was spent in Kampala trying to meet with international donor agencies (Canadian CIDA, USAID and others).

The challenge of fundraising for the Uganda project is specially high because NP committed only to one half-year phase of a project which is mostly exploratory in nature, and therefore nothing funders are eager to support.

*Christine Schweitzer, Programme Director, 14 February 2007*

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