

## **Programme Department - Report for March 2007**

### **Sri Lanka Update (written by Marcel Smits, and including some events in early April)**

#### *General situation*

In March 2007, the situation further deteriorated.

In the political theatre in Colombo accusations were made by the main opposition at the address of the President pointing the finger that he allegedly gave large sums of money to the LTTE in return for the boycott of the 2005 elections in LTTE controlled areas in the East and North.

On the military battle field, the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) continued the military offensive in the East through air bombings and shelling forcing thousands of civilians to flee their homes. The Secretary of Defense publicly stated that it would take three years to defeat the LTTE military, thus openly distancing himself from the ceasefire agreement.

The LTTE carried out its first major aerial attack on the Katunayake military airbase near the international airport only 45 minutes away from Colombo. This was followed by a suicide bomb attack on a military camp in Chenkaladi in the East killing several soldiers and a number of civilians.

Due to the shelling into civilian areas including threats against UN, most agencies are on restricted operations and have pulled out non-essential staff from Batticaloa. International staff of the ILO, UNDP, UNHABITAT, FAO and several Red Cross agencies left the district.

Armed groups and army personnel are patrolling the IDP camps in Batticaloa where dozens of IDPs including children are being kidnapped either for recruitment or intelligence purposes. Despite vast evidence and promises to investigate the numerous child abductions, no effective measures have been taken to stop the forced recruitment of children in government controlled areas.

UNICEF said that as of January 2007 they have recorded 6,241 child abductions in the North and East provinces and blamed the LTTE for having recruited 6,006 of them for war. According to them, the breakaway Karuna group abducted 235 out of the recorded 6,241. The UN agency said 1,879 children are still being held by both groups out of which 1,710 are still being kept by the LTTE while the Karuna group uses 169 of them.

The total number of IDPs since April 2006 has now reached approximately 315,000, thus rapidly reaching UNHCR's worst case scenario of 400,000 IDPs. This number adds to 200,000-250,000 tsunami IDPs and about 315,000 that were displaced before 2002 (totalling around 830,000 IDPs). In addition, over 16,200 people have fled to India. The number of new IDPs in the Batticaloa District alone has reportedly increased to over 160,000 persons. According to latest figures supplied by officials at Batticaloa district secretariat more than one third of Batticaloa's population of 422,674 is now displaced, and food shortage is emerging.

Many instances of involuntary return of IDPs have been documented. This triggered the UNHCR to officially disengage itself from the government led process of return that is in violation of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. UNHCR reported on a number of cases of intimidation, harassment, threats and physical violence by the security forces.

UNICEF described the situation in the camps as appalling. It warned that human faeces, garbage and over-crowding were creating serious health hazards in the camps. "The grounds are littered with faeces and great patches of urine. Children urinate against walls, on tents and near water sources. School furniture has been burned for firewood," UNICEF said in the statement.

According to the Scandinavian led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), there have been over 4000 civilian deaths and extra-judicial killings in the last fifteen months. This has escalated to a rate of around 360 killings per month in 2007. That is more than ten people killed each day.

In 2006, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka recorded 1,000 cases of forcible abduction. In 2007, it has already reported 87 disappearances in Jaffna alone - that is more than one person a day.

In a new and grisly turn, mutilated bodies are being found in public places decapitated, hands bound and faces disfigured adding to the atmosphere of intimidation and terror. Lawyers have reliable eye-witnesses to these and other incidents who are unwilling to provide public testimony to police or to court of law due to fears for their safety.

Journalists, academics, human-rights defenders and workers providing humanitarian assistance are deliberately being targeted through killings, abductions, violence and threats of violence in an attempt to silence criticism of the government and to prevent witness to the impact of the war on human rights and civilian life.

In the latest Worldwide Press Freedom Index (2006) Sri Lanka has fallen from 51st ranking in 2002 to position 141 in 2006. Position 140 is held by Zimbabwe and 142 by the Democratic Republic of Congo.

### *The work of the teams*

The security situation in the Batticaloa district is very unpredictable. Now that the LTTE camps including the headquarters of the political wing, Kokadicholai, have been captured by the security forces, the LTTE may be using more guerilla tactics in the future. The fighting has had a negative impact on the NPSL operations. Many roads were closed and the mobile phone network has been down for months which hinders effective coordination.

In March, NPSL Batti responded to two waves of forced return by monitoring IDP camps together with UN and other INGOs. In the camps that NPSL visited no forced return took place and it was able to distribute information to the IDPs on their rights. The majority of the IDP families did not wish to return (to Mutur area) due to lack of security but feared that food rations would be stopped if they stayed. A discussion with the Human Rights Commission took place regarding the possibility of joint visits to IDP camps. NPSL Batti also intervened successfully in one IDP abduction case.

In close cooperation with NPSL Valaichchenai two family support meetings were organized. NPSL Vala provided a safe meeting space to over 75 mothers and fathers who claim that their children have been abducted by LTTE and TMVP. Copies of LTTE Child Rights act and TMVP code of conduct were distributed among the parents for them to use in their own advocacy efforts. A banner was made with a statement regarding the value of life which parents made with their handprints.

NPSL Batti and Vala visited the TMVP office as part of the dialogue with all stakeholders and to facilitate meetings between mothers and the political representatives of the TMVP. Due to these efforts many families have been able to come together, thus bring them out of their isolation, to

discuss strategies that can lead to the release of their children. The meetings facilitated by NPSL and the local civil support group members have increased their confidence for collective action. NPSL Vala received over 32 family visits this month. It also received further requests for safe places for youth at risk and was able to arrange safety for six boys. Because of the recent funds by UNICEF it will be able to facilitate safe places for 50 youth at risk. It is hoped that more funds will become available and it has appealed to Sarvodaya in the USA and currently waiting for it response.

Despite a significant escalation of the conflict in the south of Trincomalee district the security situation in Trinco town has been relatively quiet. Shops in the town area remain open longer during the evenings and people are out at night. According to the military town commander the security situation in the town has improved significantly.

Nevertheless, during the day there has been heavy shelling in both northern and southern part of the district this month. From 12th of March onwards IDPs from Batticaloa returned to Trincomalee on buses organized by the authorities and security forces. These IDPs have been resettled in transit camps in Kiliveddy with the intention to gradually return to their villages. However, the transit camps are not prepared to take care of the thousands of IDPs and many of them have decided to return to their homes despite the fact that some areas are not secure (Eachchalampatai).

A rise in incidents in border villages has been observed in Mutur and Seruwila divisions especially in the villages where IDPs are staying. A number of killings, abductions, harassments, arrests and beatings by the security forces were reported. Tamil people fear the security forces and therefore stay overnight in schools and temples. They are restricted in their movement due to the many checkpoints which they wish to avoid. As a consequence, their livelihood is being threatened. The authorities organized a “go and see” visit to Rakuli for the IDPs who were staying in two schools in Kinniya. NPSL Trinco accompanied the IDPs on this visit upon their request.

As one of its first assignment as a district team, NPSL Trinco, in a joint collaborative effort with a Christian Aid local partner, successfully facilitated the establishment of a new Peace Committee of seven members in Kinniya resembling the neighboring Mutur Peace Committee. The Mutur Peace Committee made progress towards the establishment of sectoral subcommittees such as the formation of a 150 member three-wheeler driver committee. The Sangama Peace Committee in Trinco town has expressed interest in the kind of trainings and workshops that NPSL Trinco has been able to set up by creating space and confidence to its local HR capacity building partners.

NPSL Trinco attended the human rights trainings for peace committee members in Mutur. About 30 people participated. It also was present during the “Mothers Voice For Peace” demonstration organized by another Christian Aid partner as part of International Women’s day. Together with a local Human Rights group, NPSL Trinco is looking at ways to facilitate the creation of a women’s support group that can bring the women affected by violence from their isolation.

The support around the fishermen in Trinco continued with the involvement of CHA and a local HR group as well as the Urban Council that has agreed to call a meeting to discuss ideas for alternative livelihoods as long as the fishing restrictions remain. In the meantime, the SLN eased some restrictions and offered clarification of the restrictions to the fishermen as result of the engagement by NPSL Trinco that brought parties together and had individual meetings. Some further proposals will be prepared by a new committee in Colombo involving the ILO and the Ministry of Fisheries and be taken up with the Defense Ministry.

NPSL also continued to provide presence to families under threat. It assisted in the creation of an incident log by one of the families. This will be used to build their asylum case in Colombo. NPSL Trinco intervened during the round up by the security forces that arrested 5 people. All people have now been released.

Some sense of normalcy is returning to Jaffna although the district experienced an increase in abductions. More youth are seeking safety under the so-called Surrendee Act which is part of the new emergency regulations. Over 65 youth, who sought safety from being killed or abducted, have been placed in protective police custody awaiting rehabilitation and vocational training prior to their release.

Following the aerial attack by the LTTE on the Katunayaka military airbase security forces have been put on alert anticipating an attack by the sea tigers in the north of Jaffna. As a result fishermen have been restricted in the fishing causing further distress to the area where food supplies still run short.

NPSL Jaffna continues to provide protective presence to several Human Rights Defenders including members of the Human Rights Commission. These Human Rights defenders can carry out their work more freely and take on sensitive issues during fact finding missions to IDP camps, community, family and surrendee visits.

NPSL Jaffna and local partners are working together on a HR awareness campaign. One of the HR defenders runs a HR course for eighty participants. NPSL Jaffna serves as a resource for the group and intends to facilitate the initiatives that the participants may carry out in the future.

In an attempt to reduce fear and build the confidence of people to return home, NPSL Jaffna carried out visits to IDP camps suffering from harassment by the security forces. NPSL Jaffna will have to use its relationship with army to be able to reduce the tensions that exist.

The merger between Trinco and Mutur teams seem to work out. In addition, initial steps have been taken to set up the so-called Colombo Response Team which will serve to be a link between the field teams and Colombo. It is also meant to take on Colombo cases which it has started to do. The introduction of the two District Support Coordinators seems to have its positive effect on the support to the teams in the East. NPSL is still looking for a new Fundraiser and will be looking for a new Communications Officer as well.

NPSL has been a start to capture its best practices. Over the course of the next several months NPSL will review its work in determine what practices work well under what circumstances. This type of evaluation is meant to help the teams that do not have time to assess their work and to assist new members who will be joining NPSL in the future as well as to serve as guidelines for NP deployments elsewhere.

NPSL continues its dialogue with stakeholders and received positive responses from police headquarters and the president's secretariat and Ministry of HR.

NPSL signed a partnerships agreement with UNICEF. In March, it has also been approached by one of its long standing partners, PAFFREL, to support a HR awareness campaign.

Omar has recovered from his surgery and is waiting to return home. NPSL Project Director visited the NP Brussels office and attended a seminar on EU and INGO coordination in conflict areas.

## **Philippines- Mindanao**

### *General situation*

The situation in Mindanao has become more tense over the last month. At the beginning of March one soldier and three members of MILF were killed in a clash between army and MILF in the Maguindanaon area (close to Cotabato).

The Philippine government offered the Muslims in Mindanao the right of self-determination which was considered by political observers a possible break-through to revive the peace negotiations that have been stalled since September 2006.

### *The work of NP*

In March, the preparatory work for the arrival of the first team in Mindanao continued. Project Director Atif Hameed left the Philippines in early March to return home to Pakistan, and continued his work from there.

For the preparation, we hired a consultant in Cotabato who hopefully will stay with us in the future as Communications' Assistant for the project.

## **Guatemala**

A request has come from Claudia Samayoa and the Unit for Protection of Human Rights Defenders of the National Movement of Human Rights of Guatemala 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 April 2007 and February 15 2008. National elections will be held on Sept 7 and Nov. 9 2007 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 15<sup>th</sup> – at the latest, they expect the situation to return to “normal” and NP could end its accompaniment.

NP is providing a team of four accompaniers, including a Team Coordinator. The other three accompaniers are volunteers (meaning that they do not receive an offshore salary like Field Team Members in other NP projects) and serve in average for three months in Guatemala.

The total budget for the ten-month project is around 95.000 USD:

### *Need*

The Unit of Protection of Human Rights Defenders have been providing protection with a low level of direct threats against the Unit until May 2006 two telephone intimidation calls were received. After that the Unit perceived acts of surveillance in front of the office. On the night of February 3<sup>rd</sup>. 2007, its offices were raided and one computer was stolen. Other offices in the same building were raided and the computers and video equipment were stolen too. In the doorknob of our office a death threat was left behind.

Several days later, a message was sent through a family member of a member of one of the organizations of the building that indicated that the raid was done by the army. There are reasons to believe the information given is credible.

One of the members of the Unit of Protection is Claudia Samayoa who is also a member of the Convergence of Human Rights that is an organization that denounces the existence of clandestine groups, organize crime and social cleansing. Her role in this organization is to investigate those groups.

In the past during the electoral year, she was the only one doing the activities of the Unit and the activities of the Convergence that resulted in high numbers of threats that ended up in the need of international accompaniment and eventually temporary exile.

Since 2007 is an electoral year it is expected that the Unit can be subject to more violence as a group as well as Mrs. Samayoa as a human right defender. So Nonviolent Peaceforce has been asked for its intervention to provide protection for the following 10 months to the Unit.

### *Objectives*

The objective of the project is to ensure the security of the activists of the „Unit of Protection“ against politically-motivated violence they have been threatened with through the volatile period before, during and after the September and November elections.

NP is pursuing this objective by providing individual protective accompaniment.

### *The work of the team*

The work of the first team consisting of Project Coordinator Betsy Crites and so far two other accompaniers (both like Betsy women from the US) has only started in April and will therefore be reported on only in the next Programme Department report.

## **Colombia**

### *General Situation*

The situation in Colombia is reported by international agencies that work in the country to have deteriorated over the last month. In spite of the ongoing disarmament process of the paramilitaries, it seems that their influence in parts of the country increased, and new groups have formed. Also FARC increased its threats against NGOs.

In Southwest Colombia up to 7.000 people were forced from their homes due to fighting between government troops and FARC end of March / beginning of April. The military offensive started on 23 March and is intended to retake land that is used to produce cocaine in the area.

### *Project Preparation*

NP advertised for a consultant to work for three months in Colombia mainly with the task to approach possible funders, and a number of applications were received. (Actually by the time this report is written, a decision has been made and will be soon announced. We expect the consultant to start his work in May.)

## **Uganda**

### *General Situation*

The cease-fire between Uganda and the LRA seemed to have broken down, fuelling fears that the war may restart. However, international mediation efforts in March by the UN (led by the Uganda envoy of the UN, former Mozambique President Joaquim Chissano) and the international NGO Pax Christi have been giving reasons to hope that this was rather a temporary set-up than a permanent collapse. New (informal) talks between the government and the LRA took place at the very end of March in Mombasa, reaching according to a report by Pax Christi “significant agreements” on extending the truce.

### *Project Preparation*

The plan is to start work with a small 2-person team in June.

*Christine Schweitzer, Programme Director, 17 April 2007*

- This department report will always be submitted after the 10th of the following month, due to deadlines for internal reporting in Sri Lanka. -