

Programme Department - Report for November 2006

Sri Lanka Update

General situation

The talks between the Sri Lankan government (GOSL) and LTTE in Geneva on the last weekend of October ended without result. The parties were not able to even agree to an agenda – while GOSL wanted to discuss fundamental issues of the conflict (probably with the idea of suggesting a federal solution), the LTTE insisted on dealing with what they called humanitarian issues first, namely the re-opening of the A9, the road leading through LTTE territory to Jaffna.

After this failure, military action has been resumed although in November not in larger extent than before the negotiations. Particular incidents were the shelling of an IDP camp by the Sri Lankan Army, leaving according to figures by the ICRC 40 Tamil refugees dead and 75 wounded, and some time later shells allegedly fired by the LTTE falling on a school in the East and killing several children.

To give an impression: In Batticaloa district, according to figures collected by our teams, there were in November between 149 and 177 civilian deaths, 85 combatant deaths, between 217 and 847 civilian injuries, and 68 combatant injuries due to violence. The discrepancies in the reported figures are an indicator of the increasing difficulty to obtain objective information. Violence continued to escalate with 21 days on which shelling took place, 21 incidences of aerial bombing and artillery fire, 23 incidences of targeted shooting, 5 grenade attacks and one bomb explosion.

Also at sea there have been confrontations (with the Sea Tigers sinking three gunboats close to Jaffna and Trincomalee, it seems), and shelling of LTTE positions close to Trincomalee.

In the 47th week there was a meeting by the co-chairs (US, Norway, EU, Japan) in Washington. They expressed concern about the conflict and the growing malnutrition problem in the North (and parts of the East), and called on all sides to return to the negotiating table and allow access for humanitarian aid;

While there has been still no aid going to Sri Lanka's North where more than 500.000 people are trapped with little food left in spite of the announcement by the government to open the A9 at least as a one-time measure, one large UN / ICRC-led aid convoy of more about 35 trucks reached the LTTE-controlled Vaharai area in Eastern Sri Lanka. One other convoy did not reach its target, and a third one got looted by IDPs.

Much attention in Sri Lanka found the summarizing statement by the UN Special Advisor on Children and Armed Conflict Allan Rock after his ten-day visit in which he not only talks about the continued child recruitment by both LTTE and the Karuna faction, but speaks of “strong and credible evidence that certain elements of the government security forces are supporting and sometimes participating in the abductions and forced recruitment of children by the Karuna faction.”

At the end of the month (27th November) LTTE Leader Prabakaran gave his annual speech for which many people waited to see if he would cancel the Ceasefire Agreement. In the end the speech left open a lot to speculation. Made obviously with the idea in mind to keep options open, it was not a formal declaration of war, or an unilateral declaration of independence, but it left little to hope in terms of a soon return to the negotiating table.

End of the month a visit by the Norwegian mediator Jon Hanssen-Bauer remained unsuccessful, with an assassination attempt on Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, the brother of President Mahinda Rajapaksa that happened while he was in Colombo hardening the lines.

The work of the teams

General / in all places

In November all field teams including the Jaffna team have been operational again, with the Muthur team visiting the Muthur area but living in Trincomalee town. Three members of the Jaffna team returned in November to Jaffna, a fourth member stayed in Colombo to support the work from there.

The main issues all teams are dealing with are the IDP situation, child abductions / recruitment, community conflict, and human rights violations (extra-judicial killings and disappearances).

Activities that all teams have been engaging in include visiting IDP camps, protective presence, individual accompaniment cases, and accompanying and supporting local partners on different humanitarian issues mostly related to the points above. One outcome of this work at least in Batticaloa district has been that more families are taking the risk to report abductions or other human rights violations to the authorities or at least to other international agencies.

NP is not able to provide permanent accompaniment although the number of requests increase but accompanies people to specific meetings or places. One outcome in Batticaloa has been that some of the families of the victims of extra-judicial killings decided to make a petition to the magistrate's court to get copies of the post-mortems of their relatives. This will give the lawyers the information needed to challenge the labelling of the victims as LTTE cadre and to appeal for compensation.

In spite of these efforts, the general picture in the East is one of increasing fear and impunity. Witnesses fear to report incidents, families are afraid that if they report an abduction they will be prevented from seeing their children or face increased threats and physical punishment of their children or other members of their families,

Aside from these activities, one ongoing and quite time-consuming activity in all field sites is the work with different national and international agencies on the same issues. There are many coordinating meetings with international protection agencies like ICRC, UNHCR and UNICEF (the latter two of them being main donors for NPSL) and other humanitarian organisations, as well as with local institutions like the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, Human Rights Commission, and the local Peace Committees.

Another activity happening in all sites is the linking IDPs and other citizens (e.g. people under threat) with national and international agencies. Especially the Valaichchenai team has become a focal point in this regard.

One particular problem is that NP can only operate in Government Controlled Areas which distorts our ability to respond to the needs of civilians for support and our ability to maintain impartiality in the outcomes of our reports.

In the last weeks bureaucratic challenges have developed from several sides. Travel is getting very restricted with every vehicle having to register whenever it wishes to leave a district. The national bank requires NPSL to document the way we spend our money in detail. (This is a consequence of the intention to stop funding going to the LTTE.)

A member of the Batticaloa team represented NPSL at the Forum Asia – Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) conference in Thailand. Approximately 200 human right defenders from across Asia attended this meeting to share strategies and work towards regional cooperation. Participants included National Human Rights Organisations, Human Rights NGO workers, activists, UN special rapporteur on HRDs, Ms Hina Jilani, and one government representative from South Korea. Many of the participants expressed an interest in NPs work and requested information on how to contact the organisation.

Jaffna

The closure of the A9, prolonged displacement, food scarcity, restricted mobility (road closures and curfew), harassment at checkpoints, fuel shortages, and economic decline are the main contributing factors which have raised tensions throughout the peninsula. Armed hostilities have continued during the days and nights. Additionally, white van abductions, extra-judicial killings and confirmed reports of torture have also increased fears substantially among various communities.

Upon reentry to Jaffna, NP Jaffna met almost all of its international and national partners in order to assess the possibility of resuming programmatic activities within the area, identify and prioritize activities responsive to the needs of the current context; and implement a limited programme mindful of human resources constraints. The team slowly resumed traveling throughout Jaffna Town and the surrounding district in order to reestablish a visible presence among the communities, armed actors, GoSL and international agencies. The Team also visited two IDP camps as community outreach and confidence building measures. In both camps, the IDPs originated from Allaipidy and Mandaitivu have resided in the camps since the events of 11 August.

Other issues the team dealt with are disappearances, meetings with international delegations, and accompaniment requests.

Trincomalee town

Forced return of IDPs was a significant focal issue for the month and protection issues for the IDPs at a certain church in Trinco engaged the team's attention and efforts. Regular protective presence at IDP camps was maintained in the course of the month and significant collaborative efforts with the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission were initiated with a meeting with the Protection officers of the Trincomalee office of the HRC.

Monitoring and joint advocacy of detained persons was conducted, when the team in collaboration with the ICRC and HRC addressed the issue of two IDPs detained by the security forces after a round up. The team constantly reminded the ICRC (who had significant access) and the HRC about the case and kept abreast of the facts till the IDPs were eventually released.

Under the heading of community violence reduction fell activities like attending peace committee meetings, accompaniment and protective presence at IDP camps.

Mutur

The Mutur team has been visiting Mutur town and the area as often as possible, meeting with local peace activists and members of the Mutur Peace Committee, monitoring the situation, maintaining a protective presence in the market of Seruwila for the IDPS from the close-by camp, visiting IDP camps, and working with national and international agencies and organisations on protection issues.

Valaichchenai

The Valaichchenai team has been dealing aside from what is described in the general section with issues like the

- Need of safe places for boys who have escaped from armed groups abduction, trainings or threats;
- Need for international presence in the Valaichchenai IDP Camps. The team is regularly visiting camps, and discusses options for a more permanent presence.
- Safe return back to Vakaraï mainly separated families or injured persons from the shelling incident on the 8th.
- Resumption of regular meetings of religious leaders from the area.

Batticaloa town

Activities of the team in Batticaloa town are mostly described in the general section. Main issues here are the support and accompaniment of families victims of abductions or other human rights violations, work with community-based support structures, accompaniment of local activists when they take affected families to seek legal advice, support and consultation with IDPs and host communities, and supporting families affected by violence.

Colombo

Aside the administrative work, Colombo has become almost for some time become a part-time field office of its own, in particular in the time when the Jaffna team was still relocated to Colombo, and started to connect to human rights groups and activists in the capital. In Colombo the number of political disappearances is on the increase. There also have been accompaniment cases in Colombo itself.

Philippines- Mindanao*General Situation*

The talks between government and MILF are still stalled, and the situation is somewhat tense in Mindanao, but people remain confident that there will be no return to war.

Project Preparation

Project Coordinator Atif Hameed went as one of the assessors to the general core training held by NP in Nairobi / Kenya.

Colombia*General Situation*

Politically, the news in November have been that Colombia's right-wing paramilitary leaders have declared the peace process with the government void in reaction to their transfer to a high-security prison after President Uribe had accused them of ordering assassinations from their cells. The paramilitaries had agreed to disarmament and reintegration in a deal made in 2004, and leaders had given themselves up to the police. Since then, more than 30.000 members of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC, an umbrella organisation) had been disarmed.

Project Preparation

Regional Coordinator Alvaro Ramirez-Durini left for Colombia at the end of the month in order to make fundraising contacts, and to gather information on some practical issues like registration of NP etc.

Uganda*General Situation*

The peace talks between the Lord's Resistance Army and the government have been stalled after the LRA suspended its participation at the end of the month, accusing the government on killing three of its fighters while being on the way to an assembly point in Southern Sudan.

Project Preparation

The International Governing Council (IGC) of Nonviolent Peaceforce met by teleconference on the 1st of December 2006 to discuss the proposal to begin a project in Uganda. The decision was prepared by a in-depth deliberation of the proposal by NP's Programme Committee. The IGC approved the Programme Committee's proposal to begin a project in Uganda as soon as sufficient funds are identified to cover the full costs of Phase 1 (the initial field team). Phase 1 means the sending of three field team members for up to six months, combining practical work with the main mandate to assess the possibilities of a field project in North Uganda and to find answers to a number of questions and issues that we feel have not yet been adequately answered. The IGC expects a report back before a progression to Phase 2. (Phase 2 would involve the deployment of nine internationals including the project management as described in the original project proposal that you have seen, only probably with a somewhat more limited mandate.)

The reason for having such a phase 1 ahead of what was proposed in the original proposal by Redemptor Ries Binta and David Grant were questions and issues that the IGC felt need answering before formulating a concrete mandate for a field deployment. Just to highlight the two probably most important: NP 's expertise is violence prevention through nonviolent

peacekeeping, while the proposal highlights the need for broader peacebuilding work. And secondly, there were issues about the security of the field team members, the question if internationals would be protected in any way themselves from the LRA, let alone provide protection to others. For these reasons, the proposal was not accepted as presented, but changed by adding the phrase of an “Initial Field Team” to accommodate the concerns without having to return to another “exploration” – explorations there have been enough, what is needed now is really dipping our feet in the water.

The mandate of the team in phase 1 will be:

- Updated analysis of the political and security situation in North Uganda (since things may have changed a lot between Ries’ work in early 2006 and the eventual coming of NP probably sometime in 2007)
- Develop NP’s mandate with a list of activities to be undertaken in stage 2 that match NP’s central mandate
- Do an analysis of the potential effectiveness of nonviolent deterrence.
- Demonstrate that there is a niche for NP
- Do a risk analysis that includes both the risk of violence by conflicting sides and considers health-related questions due to infection caused by unhygienic living circumstances
- Prepare concrete suggestions regarding activities, logistics and security that match NP’s niche and mandate.
- Undertake fundraising activities that need to be done on the ground.

So now the next step in this project like for the other new projects will be to find sufficient funds (around 100.000 USD) for phase 1 of the project. The international fundraising team will start working on this, but it is too early to say by when we may have succeeded in fundraising, and when a team really will begin.

Interim African Regional Coordinator Redemptor Ries Binta will not work for NP beyond December. We wish her all the best for her future, and thank her for her work she has been doing in the exploration of the Uganda project.

Report written by Christine Schweitzer (Programme Director)