

Programme Department - Report for April 2007

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Sri Lanka Update

General situation

The start of the Tamil and Sinhalese New Year in April was not promising. On the night of the 28th of April when the entire population of Sri Lanka was glued to a television screen to watch the World Cup Cricket final between Sri Lanka and Australia, the LTTE launched an air attack on fuel stations including a storage of gasoline outside Colombo. It sent a shockwave through the city that is unprepared to face such attacks from the sky. The attack by two small aircrafts sent a warning message to leadership in Colombo which has set its mind to defeat the LTTE militarily.

Already the people in the North and East are bearing the brunt of the war. Human Rights violations continue on a large scale. The media are also being threatened. The developments triggered the Pope to urge the President of Sri Lanka, who visited the Vatican, to respect human rights and restore the dialogue with the LTTE. Both the UK and the US are cutting aid to the Sri Lanka due to the prevailing human rights situation. However, the parties of the conflict seem not to be influenced by these developments. In the North the LTTE is aggressively recruiting civilians including children while the GoSL stepped up bombings in the North. At the same time, it has indicated that it will hand over police powers to the military, possibly resulting in further violations of HR.

The work of the teams

Meanwhile, NPSL was forced to respond to an incident involving the discovery of a hand grenade in one of its vehicles in Trincomalee. As a consequence, two of its staff members were arrested. They were forced to spend two weeks in prison despite clear indications that the grenade had been placed in the vehicle by a third party without their knowledge. The Ministry of Defense followed by the Sinhala media took the opportunity to discredit NPSL publicly even though it promised not to interfere in due process. The incident fits in the hostile environment that INGOs and UN agencies face in Sri Lanka. Again, this was illustrated by several email threats that individuals and agencies collectively received. Despite its general good public standing in Sri Lanka, NPSL is still required to respond to such threats and attacks on its image and it must continue to show its nonpartisanship and ensure that its actions are seen as impartial.

Fewer cases of forced child recruitment were being reported in the East partly because of the ongoing fighting but also because the lack of progress on releases. It becomes harder to meet the expectations of families who measure success only by releases of their child. Nevertheless, two children were released after intervention by NPSL and its local partners. NPSL Vala and Batti continued hosting family meetings to increase the confidence of families and prepare them for meetings with the armed parties. Eight families attended a meeting at the TMVP office in Batti and were treated with more respect due to the accompaniment of NPSL and the fact that they acted as a group.

The search for safe places also remains priority in Batticaloa. The new Colombo Response Team is assisting in trying to set up an informal network that can assist. NPSL Batti continued visiting IDP camps and participated in the distribution of leaflets in the camps explaining the rights that they have in the return to their homes. Again, this is part of the empowerment and strengthening of the vulnerable groups. The local networks that NPSL are trying to mobilize are gradually getting bigger but the willingness to take on or even discuss sensitive issues is still very low. The increase of the fighting is also affecting the mobility and communication of the teams.

NPSL Trinco's efforts were focused on the release of the two staff members. It received support from the new Colombo Response Team. The incident required the team to keep a low profile during April. It managed to facilitate several fact-finding missions from Colombo and assisted in several cases involving severe human right violations now being taken up in Colombo. It was also available for the Muttur Peace Committee that has opened up an office and now makes lawyers available to civilians several times a week. The new Peace Committee in Kinniya is also making progress towards a more stable formation.

In Jaffna the situation remains tense especially after LTTE planes targeted Palaly airport on April 24th. Massive cordon searches by the army and navy 'to find LTTE suspects who have infiltrated Jaffna take place on a daily basis. NPSL Jaffna' role is clear. It facilitates the monitoring and documentation of human rights violations by working side by side with several human rights defenders. NPSL Jaffna is also gradually trying to expand the security and protection network.

NPSL Colombo communicated with other international colleagues, local agencies and respected individuals, the GoSL and the media regarding the grenade incident. It received a lot of support including from the Ministry of Human Rights and other local authorities and was able to overcome the small crisis. It is pleased to announce that the two staff members were released, albeit on bail. They have started their work for NPSL again.

Although NPSL is being approached by many individuals and local and international organizations, including the victims and witness protection unit of the International Independent Group of Eminent Persons, that realize the potential of NPSL in the insecure environment and its contributions in protection so far, it is also recognized that it must act with caution as those who oppose violence face many threats in Sri Lanka.

Philippines- Mindanao

General situation

1. The situation became tense in the island of Sulu in the month of April. A 'mini war' broke out between the Philippine army and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) that resulted in a number of casualties among the armed groups and civilians living close to the fighting areas. Hundreds of Tausug fled from their houses and sheltered in nearby IDP camps. Civil society organizations from Mindanao rushed to the IDP Camps to provide relief assistance and asked the armed groups to announce a ceasefire.
2. Two bombs that exploded in Pikit and Cotabato city created fear and insecurity as the parties were campaigning for the election. Besides, some areas in Mindanao witnessed election related violence.
3. Another 'mini scale war' in Midsayap, North Cotabato that lasted for more than one month, partially ended as both parties announced ceasefire. The Ceasefire Mechanisms Committee facilitated the dialogue between the warring factions. Civil society in Mindanao maintained continued presence throughout the violent confrontations in Midsayap.

The work of NP

NP consultant Ms. Norgianna Suleik in Mindanao participated in focus groups discussions regarding the mid term congressional elections in the Philippines and went along with the civil society groups to meet the officials of the 6th ID brigade, the Philippine army and agencies dealing with peace and development in Mindanao. She maintained contacts with NP partner organizations in Mindanao and in coordination with Project Director Atif Hameed arranged visa invitation letters for the first team of NP Mindanao project. Norgianna coordinated also with the landlord of the house that NP rented as its basis in Cotabato and made the house ready for the arrival of NP Mindanao team.

Atif Hameed worked in April from Pakistan and maintained contacts with Norgianna and partners and principal actors in the Mindanao conflict. He coordinated with the part time consultant in Manila and secured the NP registration certificate through the Securities and Exchange Commission. He also continued the preparatory work in regards to the arrival of first team of NP Mindanao project. Atif along with Christine Schweitzer and Norgianna designed the in-country training (ICT) and communicated with potential resource persons for different sessions of the training.

In late April, Atif visited the NP Brussels' office and had meetings with the staff and Programme Director Christine Schweitzer. Along with the NP Europe Coordinator Alessandro Rossi and Fundraising Director Agnieszka Komoch, Atif met key officials in the European Commission, the European Parliament and the German Foreign Office. He then went on to Germany to present the Nonviolent Peaceforce Sri Lanka and Philippine projects in an event in the German

Parliament organized by the Forum Civil Peace Services, Germany. Later he participated in the annual meeting of NP – ENCPS(European Network of Civilian Peace Services) in Berlin and met NP member organizations from Europe.

Guatemala

The general situation

1) Media coverage of the election process has been distracted by the February 19 abduction, torture and murder of three Salvadoran officials and their driver who were in Guatemala for a meeting of the Central American Parliament. Four policemen were arrested for the crime and within days they were murdered in prison. This has blown up into scandal proportions leading to the resignations of the Minister of Government and the head of the Penal System, both of whom appeared implicated in the crime. The crimes have created heightened alarm in the international community as well. There is some hope that this might open a national discussion about the model of national security that has gained importance. However, some believe that the response by the government and press has been weak and the push for a thorough investigation and arrests of the intellectual authors of the crime is stalled.

2) Voices representing international bodies are expressing concern about impunity for acts of violence and violations of human rights in Guatemala. The Guatemalan press reported that Anders Kompass, representative of the U.N. High Commission on Human Rights, spoke up in the European Parliament saying “It is deceptive and scandalous that the impunity continues happening so calmly in this country.” This body has previously noted that impunity in Guatemala continues to undermine the credibility of the justice system, and that the justice system is still too weak to confront organized crime and its powerful structures.

The same press report quoted a government representative saying that the lack of scientific equipment and advanced technology for processing evidence is part of the problem. Another spokesperson for the ombudsman’s office of human rights said there is a lack of training and efficiency among the employees who work at crime scenes and also among forensic doctors.

High-level officials of the Government of Guatemala have acknowledged the infiltration of organized criminal networks into the state apparatus and the difficulty of combating these networks when they are deeply entrenched in public institutions.

3) On April 25, a report entitled “Extrajudicial Executions of Stigmatized Youth, The Legal, Social and Human Dimensions of the Phenomenon and the Responsibility of the Guatemalan Government in the Misnamed ‘Social Cleansing’” was released by The Center for Action on Human Rights, the Institute of Comparatives Studies on Criminal Science of Guatemala, and the Association for the Study and Promotion of Security in Democracy. The report was a review of the human rights situation in recent years and included the results of a one-month study of two outlying communities of Guatemala City, which points to a somewhat favorable public climate of tolerance and indifference to extrajudicial murders.

Some respondents presumed the victims were gang members or drug addicts or people who are, in their opinion, deserving of their fate. The report observed that official proclamations stigmatizing poor youth as gang members and juvenile delinquents have encouraged this public perception. The crimes, ranging from illegal detentions to torture and murder, are interpreted as a get-tough-on-crime response. None of the cases noted in the study have been adjudicated.

4) The Peace Accords of 1994-1996 continue to be a reference point for many groups working in Human Rights, however, there is considerable discussion about whether the government has lived up to its pledges.

The U.S. State Department has noted that police corruption is a serious problem in Guatemala and there are credible allegations of involvement of police officers in criminal activity, including rapes, killings, and kidnappings. The events of February 19 appear to bear out this allegation, with police involvement in the murders of the Salvadoran diplomats.

On December 12, 2006, the Government of Guatemala and the United Nations signed an agreement to establish the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala--CICIG) to assist local authorities in investigating and dismantling illegal security groups and clandestine organizations that continue to operate in Guatemala. This seems to indicate the Government of Guatemala hears the concerns of the international bodies. The Congress has yet to ratify this agreement.

Nevertheless, human rights groups, ranging from environmentalists to women's groups to human rights investigators, continue to receive threats through phone calls, surveillance, abductions, break-ins and personal threats and assassinations. Amnesty International has taken up many of these cases.

The work of the team

Shortly after the IGC approved the project to accompany The Unit of Protection of Human Rights Defenders (La Unidad) in March, NPs Rapid Response department began enlisting personnel. Team Coordinator, Betsy Crites, arrived on April 10 and started work both in accompaniment and in setting up the necessary infrastructure for the additional 3 team members to follow. Within the first 2 days, and with the help of Claudia Samayoa and La Unidad staff, NP was able to get four cell phones, and a bank account. Finding a house for the team took another two weeks.

Team members Ann Frisch arrived on April 14 and Penn Garvin on April 16 and they immediately began to take most of the accompaniment assignments while Betsy searched for and contracted for the house, responded to NP correspondence and administrative duties, and provided general back-up support for the team.

The team moved out of the hotel and into a furnished 3 bedroom house on April 26 with great relief to have the space and privacy. The house is centrally located within walking distance of the Unit office and is on a relatively quiet street. We have also rented a room across the street for the fourth team member.

The team has received a thorough orientation on Guatemalan society, electoral politics and government organization provided by Guatemalan organizations. Betsy and Claudia met with representatives of the other accompaniment groups PBI and ACOGUATE, both separately and together. NP's team has established an accompaniment protocol, security procedures and rapid response approaches to potentially threatening situations. A further training with in-coming members, including role plays, is being prepared.

Penn Gavin led the process of editing the Volunteers Handbook for Guatemala. Ann Frisch is maintaining a blog with additional details about Guatemala and the work for the team. This can be accessed at www.annfrisch.blogspot.com. Uniforms arrived thanks to Regional Coordinator Alvaro Ramirez-Durini and Claudia's assistance on the Guatemala side.

The team has been actively accompanying Claudia and her staff from the April 10 initiation, but there have been gaps because of lack of personnel, our training sessions and moving into our house. ACOGUATE personnel have filled in some of those gaps. This week, May 2, we have been able to fill all the requests of the staff, though they were on holiday for 2 days. With the increase to four on the team, we should be in good shape to cover the needs.

The fundraising efforts for the Guatemala project have so far raised more than half the budget. The team wants to express its gratitude to all the NP administrative staff and to Claudia and the staff of the Unit for the countless ways it has supported the initiation of this project.

Colombia

General Situation

In April, the Colombian government agreed to a temporary ceasefire proposed by the National Liberation Army ELN, the second-largest guerrilla group in the country.

A well-renowned international think tank/ pressure group, the International Crisis Group, has published a report on “Colombia’s New Armed Groups” in which they describe the emergence of new paramilitaries that are replacing those that have been demobilized since 2003 (www.crisisgroup.org).

Project Preparation

In April a consultant has been recruited who will work for NP in Colombia for three months to initiate fundraising for the planned project. Rene Perea Pérez is a Colombian with ample experience in fundraising. He is being supervised by the Fundraising Director who also plans to visit him in June.

Uganda

General Situation

The interrupted peace talks between the Ugandan government and the LRA have been resumed on the 26th of April, thanks to successful mediation by former Mozambique president Joaquim Chissano and others. They signed an agreement binding them to finding ‘lasting solutions to the causes of the conflict’.

Project Preparation

While there was no activity in April, it has by now been decided that a 2-person team will go to Uganda in June as Advance Team to reassess the situation and begin preparations for an eventual fuller deployment of a NP team to Uganda.

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