

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

### **Sri Lanka Update**

Generally the situation in Sri Lanka and the work has continued like in the months before. An update of the events and work in May will come out together with the June report next month.

### **Philippines- Mindanao (written by Atif Hameed)**

#### *General situation*

1. Elections dominated the political space throughout the month. They were marked by several malpractices and were closely monitored by national and international observers. Many provinces of Mindanao in which NP has plans of working have been declared to have had “failed elections”. Re-elections in Lanao del Sur and Shariff Kabunsuan generated more polarisation of society and added fuel to existing *ridos* (clan conflicts). The results of Maguindanao are under dispute and people fear more violence. Civil society leaders consider the elections to have had a divisive impact on the overall peace process, instead of uniting the stakeholders. Overall, the elections fortified the power of provincial feudal elites.

2. A ceasefire was announced between the AFP and armed elements of MNLF in the Panamao area of Sulu province. The army captured the military camp of MNLF in this area and the mini-war went on for nearly a month. It was halted through political agreement between higher-ups of both sides, given the need to conduct elections as well as other considerations. Small skirmishes continue in this area because the army is still chasing some enemy combatants. Civil society maintained continuous presence and advocated for early cessation of hostilities. Thousands of civilians were displaced in this mini-war and many are yet to return to their homes.

3. Although the ceasefire in Midsayap (North Cotabato) is holding and most of the IDPs have returned to their respective homes, fear of renewed violence is widespread. The core issue (land dispute) has not yet been settled. There is heavy presence of armed actors in their respective allocated areas. Civilian grievances regarding protection have not been addressed and they continue to be a cause of concern.

4. Bomb explosions occurred near the centre of Cotabato city, killing three persons and injuring several more. The NP Philippines main office is located in this city. Rumours of upcoming serial bomb explosions in the city are circulating in the post-election scenario. Heavy surveillance and checking are occurring in and outside the city.

#### *The work of NP*

1. All five NP International Civilian Peacekeepers (ICPs) and the Project Director arrived in Cotabato city and settled into the new office straightaway. The Communication Officer (CO), Norgianna Suleik, who was appointed on May 1<sup>st</sup> in a full-time capacity, prepared the office in advance for it to accommodate the ICPs and to be a venue for the In Country Training (ICT). Various office supplies and equipment were purchased in accordance with NP policy of supporting the local economy.

2. A month-long ICT was conducted for the ICPs under the supervision of the Project Director and with the assistance of the CO. The modules of the ICT were devised by the Project Director in consultation with the NP Programme Director and the CO. The whole theme of ICT was based on the orientation of ICPs to the culture, politics and the peace processes in Mindanao in specific and the Philippines in general. All the local partners presented their programme activities to the NP ICPs and also gave their expert advice. The ICPs also met the leadership of the AFP, MILF and the CCCH (Coordination Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities) of the two main parties to the conflict. The ICT also introduced ICPs to NP working practices, philosophy and code of conduct.
3. As part of the ICT, the participants got briefings on the latest mini-war in Central Mindanao and were taken on guided field visits by the International Monitoring Team and by local partner organisations. In the process, they were exposed to two different kinds of field visits- high and low profile. During the field visits, ICPs met communities, peace advocates and local level commanders of different parties.
4. NP Programme Director, Christine Schweitzer, and ICP, Sreeram Chaulia, joined the team in the third week of May in Cotabato city. They contributed to the concluding phase of the ICT. Sreeram is staying with the team for about two months as a volunteer.
5. The first NP Advisory Board meeting was held in Cotabato city in the premises of one of NP's local partners. Several key decisions about the nature, functions and roles of the Board were finalised. The Board members appreciated NP's unique style of promoting accountability to local civil society and extended full fledged support through their point people at the grassroots and higher levels for NP's work in Mindanao.
6. Various efforts were undertaken to process the work visas of all the ICPs. These included one visit of the whole team to Davao city. NP Philippines announced an opening for the position of Administration and Finance Officer. The main office in Cotabato also hired a full-time caretaker.
7. The Project Director had a detailed meeting with the Delegate of the European Commission in Manila and discussed NP's project in Mindanao and possibilities of collaboration.

## **Guatemala (written by Betsy Crites)**

### *General situation*

**1. Impunity and the National Civil Police:** Human rights defenders, international bodies, government officials and the press continue to voice alarm about the impunity with which violent crimes are committed in Guatemala. Disagreements have arisen between the government and human rights groups about the actual numbers, but none dispute the fact that this is still the major problem facing the country. A major newspaper, La Prensa Libre, reported that in the first four months of the year, 2,000 Guatemalans were assassinated, whether by "common crime" or "extrajudicial executions". If this is true it exceeds the death rate of the war years. A poll by Unimer Research International found 82% of the respondents listed "crime and insecurity" as their major concern.

Most of the public criticism has focused on the PNC (National Civil Police). The Collective of Social Organizations in a publication marking ten years since the signing of the peace accords, confirmed what NP has heard from other sources, namely that the previous administration opened the doors to organized crime allowing infiltration into the management and operation of the PNC. As an example, continued press investigation of the case of the murders of the three Salvadoran

diplomats and their driver, introduced in our April report, has led to revelations of apparent involvement of an organized crime syndicate within, or cooperating with, the police and prison guards.

Government officials have responded to criticism by pointing to the problem of understaffing of the PNC. There are less than two policemen for every 1,000 inhabitants when according to international standards there should be at least eight. There are 23,000 police in the country, but in a country with such high levels of violence, there should be 100,000. Some three thousand of the existing force have been assigned to protect high level personalities, embassies and other buildings, and judges, something the Minister of Government has said must change. With the elections pending the police force will be stretched even farther to protect polling places and respond to conflicts.

The relevance for human rights defenders, and those who seek to protect their right to defend human rights, is that the very authorities they might call on to protect them are often the ones implicated in attacks against them. Consequently human rights defenders are forced to create strategies to protect their homes and offices from break-ins, take measures such as changing their schedules and routes for transportation, issue official complaints to the prosecutor's office, the police, and the ombudsman's office on human rights so the government is informed, seek protection through public awareness within Guatemala and internationally, and request international accompaniment. The latter is far too scarce for all those who might benefit from it, but for those who have that possibility, it is an important element in their strategy.

**2. La Unidad:** La Unidad de Protección de Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos released their quarterly report with data on attacks against human rights defenders which they have investigated and confirmed. In this period, environmentalists and justice rights defenders have been the most frequent subjects of attacks. (The term "attacks" includes threats in person, by phone or in writing, break-ins, legal complaints, assassinations, attempted assassinations, intimidation, persecution, kidnapping and being followed.) By far the greatest concentration of these abuses, 58 from January-April of this year, have taken place in Guatemala City.

Several strange anomalies occurred with the cell phone of a La Unidad staff member. In one of the incidents a call came from the office in the middle of a Sunday night when of course no one should have been there. Later that night a call came in from another staff person who later confirmed she had not made such a call. The staff person registered an official complaint to the ombudsman's office and acquired a new phone.

La Unidad has covered many cases in this month including attacks against five staff of the Institute for Comparative Studies in the Penal Sciences. They have been subject to harassment, a break-in, abduction, intimidation and death threats. The attacks have come with warnings to stop their investigations, presumably into the case of a woman who was raped by police officers. One staff person abducted at gun point was told "Tell those sons of bitches that we know how they are organized and how many people they have. If they continue getting involved in things where they have no business, we are going to start cutting heads off. We are tired of giving warnings." The Institute had reason to believe the attacks were committed by policemen and they appealed to the director of the PNC for assistance. Nevertheless, attacks and threats continued to escalate to where an international alert was released in May to Amnesty International on behalf of this group.

**3. International Development Organizations attacked:** The offices of four international development groups, including CARE, in April, and ACTION AID in May, have been subject to break-ins in the last 40 days. They have been robbed of computers and CDs, which contained

information about the programs and projects of the organizations. Money and other things of value have not been taken, leading to the conclusion that the perpetrators are not common thieves.

**4. Elections:** Election season officially opened May 2 with political parties rushing to meet the registration deadline, announce their programs and step up their public appearances. In the past five presidential elections not once has the party in power been re-elected. Nevertheless 38% responding to a poll by Prensa Libre in early May said they are motivated to vote by the hope that some things might improve.

Election related violence, however, is a serious concern. According to the Guatemalan group, “Election Watch”, politically related assassinations this year have already surpassed the entire election period of 2003, the last year elections were held. In 2003, the group counted 29 politically motivated assassinations through October. By May 2 of this year the number was at 43. The group’s report added that this statistic may be low due to underreporting by the parties.

The internationally renowned Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu has mounted a serious presidential campaign. Opinion polls vary, sometimes widely, but she is credited with support ranging between 2-4% of those questioned. This places her in third or fourth place, which is reasonably high in a field of 21 parties. Her program seeks to address a broad constituency, including issues ranging from fiscal responsibility in the government to establishing child care centers.

Another internationally known figure, Rios Montt, has been pursuing various legal and political avenues to protect his immunity from prosecution for genocide against the Mayan population in the early 1980s. In the last days of May the Supreme Electoral Court cleared the way for Montt to run for Congress. Several human rights groups are appealing the ruling. Should he win his bid for Congress, which is likely, this would extend his immunity for the next 4 years. Montt remains under an extradition order from the National Court of Spain. Lawyers defending the families of victims and survivors said the case against Montt could go forward before the Spanish courts in spite of the immunity he holds in Guatemala.

### *The work of the team*

**1. Team Members:** In May the team bid adios to Penn Garvin who returned the 10<sup>th</sup> to her home in Nicaragua. We welcomed Begoña (Bego) Bouza who arrived May 5 from Spain and Vittorio (Vito) Ghibauda who arrived May 8 from Italy. Betsy Crites and Ann Frisch are providing the continuity and on-the-job training. Both of the new members are well versed in nonviolence theory and practice and international work and offer special talents to the team. Begoña is a professional translator and Vito is a professional IT consultant. Training segments for the two have included NP history, organizational structure, code of conduct, and political independence, security precautions, the history and nature of the Guatemalan project, protocols for one-on-one accompaniment, nonviolence theory and practice (from the core training), and with the Guatemalan organization SEDEM, the political history and current reality of Guatemala and the nature and sources of the security risks in the country.

**2. Accompaniment Work:** A day in the life of a volunteer is never routine, however a few things can be shared about how we do our work. This month volunteers travelled with La Unidad staff to far reaches of the country including Sta. Catarina Ixtuacan, El Quiche and Quetzaltenango, trips that involve 5-7 hour bus or car rides. One accompaniment took Vito to Honduras and back in one day.

While this form of accompaniment does not always allow access to the meetings and information being discussed, NP still attempts to understand the work of our partners so we can assess our own presence in the Guatemalan context. La Unidad responds on a daily, even hourly basis to calls from human rights defenders from around the country. This may include everything from environmental workers who are threatened by organized crime to a group of campesinos who are in conflict with local “patrollers” who are trying to force them to participate in armed patrols.

Their staff go to the site of the incident(s) to question the parties involved, make a determination about whether the attack is politically motivated or a matter of common crime, provide advice to the offended party about what they might do to improve their security, encourage or facilitate the presentation of an official complaint, or report to the ombudsman for human rights and, if warranted, advise and facilitate some sort of protection (hiding or in extreme cases, exile) for the party under attack. All of this places La Unidad staff under risk themselves.

NP accompaniment gives La Unidad staff some measure of security to continue supporting human rights defenders around the country. We travel with them to their interviews, workshops, and visits to government offices. An NP volunteer sits in their office every day on the chance that a call will come in about a case needing attention. This often happens. If one La Unidad staff has to leave to attend such a case, we are there to go with them. Another volunteer immediately replaces the first at the office in case something else comes up. The comings and goings of our volunteers has the added benefit of providing a visible presence to whoever might be watching from the outside. It shows that our physical presence, and the international awareness it implies, are now a part of whatever happens to the people in this building.

**3. Public Relations:** This month Betsy went with Claudia to a reception at the British Embassy and among other people met the U.S. Ambassador, James Derham. She later arranged to meet with Lucy Chang, the attaché for Labor and Human Rights at the embassy. Both were opportunities to let the U.S. Embassy know about NP and our work. Betsy also met with Conrado Martínez at the office of the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman.

The team hosted two house warming receptions which included Guatemalans from La Unidad, the National Movement of Human Rights Defenders, and other organizations, as well as volunteers from ACOGUATE (a coalition of accompaniment organizations) and Peace Brigades International.

## **Colombia**

### *Project Preparation*

In May consultant René Perea from Colombia has started his three-month work on fundraising for the planned project.

## **Uganda**

In May the negotiations between the Ugandan government and the LRA continued.

### *Project Preparation*

The preparations for the arrival of the two-person team that began its work on 20<sup>th</sup> June continued during May.

*Christine Schweitzer, Programme Director, 20 June 2007*