Hope and uncertainty: the vital search for missing children in Northern Sri Lanka

July 12, 2011 - One of the key child protection issues following the displacement of thousands of people in northern Sri Lanka in 2009 was that of separated children. During the last phase of the Sri Lankan conflict, a large number of children among the internally displaced people were lost or separated from their families. As a result, many displaced families were also filing tracing requests and reporting missing children to a number of the authorities at the district as well as at the national level.

In December 2009, in response to the many tracing requests received, the Vavuniya Government Agent, and the Probation and Child Care Commissioner (Northern Province) jointly established a Family Tracing and Reunification (FTR) Unit for unaccompanied and separated children, with UNICEF support. The FTR unit established a telephone help line and employed data collection staff, who underwent training on how to handle calls and deal with visiting parents/relatives and on data information/collection and management. Information posters/banners promoting this new service were distributed in the camps and to partners and agencies across other districts. Furthermore, photographs of children reported missing were published in local newspapers, leading to a few successful family reunifications and additional information on the possible whereabouts of children.

Hundreds of requests

To date 2,564 tracing applications have been recorded by the unit, based in Vavuniya, of which 676 are related to children and 1,888 to adults. The Family Tracing Unit currently has 676 missing children on its files. Of those, 29 have been reunited with family and a further 13 children have been identified and are in the process of being reunited with their parents or relatives. Another 34 children’s names have found matches in the database and verification in terms of locating the children is in progress. The age analysis for children shows that the majority are aged between 16 and 18 years. In addition, 64% of tracing requests are reported by parents to be LTTE recruitment. The total number of missing children is unknown as many families are not aware of the ongoing government efforts.

From September 2010, a small team from the FTR Unit visited nine districts and briefed relevant officers on their work. Officers included the Government Agent, DS and GS secretaries, Probation Commissioners and probation officers, hospital authorities and police officers. In the following month, October 2010, Provincial Probation Commissioners met and agreed on a plan to start some tracing activities in hospitals, children homes and police posts in all the nine provinces across the island. Verification of the information is in progress.

The long way ahead

Active search for data has been made in children homes and hospitals on children who are alive, while very limited information has been sought from surrender and detention centres, and on children who died in hospitals.
Nearly 75% of the tracing requests received by the unit are related to adults. The Department of Probation is not in a position to follow up on this matter. The requests have been forwarded to the GA, Vavuniya and a follow up from the District Administration is expected.

Obtaining death certificates remains a challenge for the population displaced by the conflict, given the fact that adequate legislation for the cases of persons killed in the conflict has not yet been developed. This issue needs to be properly addressed as it has a daily impact on a number of issues including inheritance law, property, and the compensation for death or injury caused by conflict.

**Strong commitment and coordination needed**

The identification of missing children has not yet been completed as many families may not have had access to information about this important government initiative. Government authorities and UNICEF have agreed in expanding the family tracing unit to all districts of Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka.

Now is the time to scale-up the family tracing work to ensure a genuine and more meaningful service, above the daily cut-and-thrust of politics. A national, government-led, multidisciplinary Task Force should be established to develop a comprehensive child tracing programme. This Task Force should have a strong mandate to access/verify available data and sources of information. Some of the key government actors to be involved include: the Secretary of the Ministry of Justice, Commissioner General of Rehabilitation, Attorney General Department, Judicial Medical Officers, Department of Police, Health authorities, the National and Northern Province Commissioners of Probation and Child Care Services.

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**Sri Lanka’s missing children**

Jhoney sits in the shaded courtyard of a children’s home, alone in quiet thought. Understandably, she has a lot on her mind.

As we arrive in view, Jhoney gets up from her chair and wanders over to greet us. We shake hands and she looks us in the eye. Her first question is: “Can you help me find my brother?”

More than two years have passed since she last heard of him. Jhonson, who should be 17-years-old, has disappeared.

Jhoney’s quest to know what has happened to him has become a deep, lingering pain.

UNICEF Child Protection Specialist Saji Thomas said: “In collaboration with the government, it is important that we address the needs of the most vulnerable. This includes trying to locate children who are unaccounted for, and supporting their families who are often beside themselves wondering what has happened to their sons and daughters.”

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process of being reunified with their parents or relatives. Another 34 children’s names have found matches in the database and verification in terms of locating the children is in progress. Much work tracing and reuniting children and families remains to be done.

Reports suggest 64 per cent of those who have disappeared were recruited by the Tamil Tigers. Another 30 per cent were, reportedly, last seen in government-controlled areas.

The steady stream of families desperate to find their missing children has dwindled to a trickle, but the fastidious note-taking and building up of a missing children database continues unabated.

Family Tracing Unit officers are constantly amazed that despite many families in parts of Sri Lanka’s north having lost all worldly possessions, many miraculously have managed to retain personal documents and family photos. This has helped enormously as tracing unit officers compile profiles of the missing.

“When we hear people’s stories about missing children they cry and we cry. Many people are emotionally drained. We listen. It’s important we listen. It’s allowing people to release their stress,” said Volunteer Probation Officer, Kirislite Emalda.

Joyce’s quest

The tenacity of Jhoncy (20) in tracing her family is remarkable. She and her two younger sisters and two younger brothers were left parentless 10 years ago when their mother died and their father married again.

The three girls and two boys remained in contact although they were placed in separate children’s homes. Then, during intense fighting in early 2009 between Sri Lankan government forces and the Tamil Tigers, the children were forced to flee their homes. The girls’ escape led them to a camp for the internally displaced, Menik Farm.

Nearly 300,000 were displaced from their homes during the final two years of the conflict.

It was while in the camp that Jhoncy spotted a poster advertising the Family Tracing Unit hotline. She made contact. The team investigated her case and after cross-checking records, reunited the three sisters with younger brother Robin, now 12, who was living in a children’s home in north-west Sri Lanka.

Briefly, four of the five children lived together again with their father. Sadly, he was unable to maintain the family and the girls were again placed in a children’s home. Robin remains living with his father.

However, Jhonso, like thousands of other adults and children, remains unaccounted for. Jhoncy refuses to give up hope.