

**P**rotective accompaniment is a non-violent tactic with a long but largely unstudied history. Thousands of years ago, when members of a clan accompanied each other to the watering hole for safety, they were inventing protective accompaniment. Not so many years ago, when pairs of blacks and whites teamed up on the Fellowship of Reconciliation's Journey of Reconciliation in 1947 to test a 1946 Supreme Court decision outlawing segregated seating in interstate busing, they were refining nonviolent protective accompaniment techniques.

Although it has a long history, the use of the method has greatly increased in the last ten years, especially in conflicts between nations. Here the employment of foreign nationals as escorts in situations of high political violence is thought to have particular deterrent value, since any incidents are immediately internationalized and the political costs for attackers are raised.

Peace Brigades International (PBI), a global non-governmental organization, has worked in Sri Lanka since 1989, escorting human rights workers and political activists perceived to be under threat. In August 1994, PBI was asked to provide accompaniment for a coalition of Sri Lankan organizations conducting grassroots monitoring of the nation's pivotal parliamentary elections. Not for the first time, I served on the PBI team as a participant observer.

Sri Lanka's democratic traditions have been well-established since its independence in 1948. The turnout rate for national elections is historically above the eighty percent mark, and with the most literate population in Asia, the country is used to an uncommon level of democratic discourse and participation.

But for more than a decade Sri Lanka has been wracked by political violence, disappearances, draconian emergency regulations, and an ethnic civil war that has left tens of thousands dead and made many more refugees. The United National Party has held power for

## "Going Where We Otherwise Would Not Have Gone":



*Pat Coy, right, with Sri Lankans in monitoring team project*

## Nonviolent Protective Accompaniment and Election Monitoring in Sri Lanka

by Patrick G. Coy

the past seventeen years. The previous national elections in 1988 and 1989 were widely denounced in the country as neither free nor fair. The period prior to the parliamentary elections of August 16, 1994 was marked by especially high violence, with more than twenty election-related assassinations and thousands of incidents. It was within this context that the grassroots monitoring effort was launched.

**T**he monitoring campaign has demonstrated that any one accompaniment effort has many functions, not easily separated one from the other. There were at least five functions in the effort under review here.

*Overcoming Fear:* One of the legacies of long-running political violence is the disempowerment

of the people, their alienation from democratic processes. In formal and informal interviews with Sri Lankans, many commented on a "fear psychosis" that afflicts people and makes grassroots political and human rights organizing difficult. Many ordinary citizens have experienced, and perceive, the machinery and representatives of the state (police, army, and government officials) as a threat. They hesitate to appear in a police station for any reason at all, even as part of a larger nonpartisan group to report on election law abuses.

"I think that dealing with the police is difficult because the people don't have much positive experience with the police," explained Freddie Gamage, secretary of the Coalition of Human Rights Organizations. "We think of the police station as a place where people should not go; that is something in the minds of the people here. For example, this campaign was the first time in fifteen years of organizing that I approached the police on purpose. I was taken to the police station several times before, for demonstrating or something like that, but this was the first time I approached the police personally to file a complaint.... After this event, some people got some positive experiences with the police. Most people still have the fear mentality about the police station, because that is the place where people are condemned."

The organizers of the monitoring campaign, the Movement for Free and Fair Elections and the People's Alliance for Free and Fair Elections, addressed these fears in a number of ways. They instructed people in their rights under the Sri Lankan constitution, and the requirements of Sri Lanka's election laws. They publicized the successes of citizen polls watches in the Philippines. They used meetings, labor organizations, temple and church networks, street theater, and poster and leaflet campaigns.

They also used the presence of escorts and international observers from Peace Brigades International (PBI) and the International Human Rights Law Group (IHLRG) as another ingredient in their fear-abatement recipe. PBI team members accompanied the voter education and monitor-recruitment drives in the pre-election period, and the mobile monitoring teams during election week.

Rev. Oswald Firth, the director of SEDIC, the Catholic Church's social justice organization, did pre-election education in the Batticaloa district in the east. He said, "When we encouraged the people in the east, for example, and told them that we would be with them from the south, and that international observers would also be with them, I think it provided a tremendous boost to their psyche and to their impression that they were not alone." Gunaratna Konara, the secretary of the Monaragala Human Rights Organization, put it more bluntly: "The monitoring would not have been possible without the international escorts. Their presence made us unafraid to go where we otherwise would not have gone."

It was not only the Sri Lankan monitors who were fearful, but the people who were approached by the monitoring teams for reports. The Sri Lankan monitors, therefore, also used the presence of the international observers to allay the fears of the local populace and encourage them to report local election abuses.

*Increasing Visibility and Gaining Access:* The Sri Lankan organizers requested that the international observers and escorts arrive at their field sites at least a few days in advance of election day. This time was spent meeting with local police, government, and army officials to try and increase access for the local monitoring teams on election day and in the post-election period. "The presence of the internationals made a big difference in how we were treated," explained K. P. L. Perera, a local monitor from Pellawatte. "We made sure that the police knew ahead of time so they would adjust how they behave and how they treat us. We wrote to all the police stations in the district to let them know internationals would be accompanying us."

The escorts wore PBI's bright yellow bibs with the words "International Observer" and "Peace Brigades International" written in black in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. When the mobile monitoring teams stopped at polls stations and village squares, the escorts were the

first to disembark. The teams enjoyed a high visibility, with crowds materializing on the spot. Some local monitors felt the interest was partly attributable to the presence of the escorts and their bibs. If nothing else, this curiosity factor seemed to save the monitoring teams precious time on election day, allowing them to accomplish more visits than might otherwise have been possible.

*Reducing Reprisals:* Post-election reprisal violence has been a common feature in Sri Lanka's politics, and not just in the immediate past. Consequently, there was considerable concern that those Sri Lankans who had taken part in the polls watch would suffer retaliation from local officials after the elections. This fear was especially strong in the event that the present government retained power.

The fact that most of the international observers were in the country for only a few weeks around the election period may actually have served to increase the level of anxiety over reprisals. If the presence of outside observers helped raise the hope and courage of local peo-



*Monaragala Human Rights Committee gathering information, and interviewing villagers regarding election-related incidents, on the day after the election.*

ple, their early, impending departure signaled a loss of support in the post-election period, when reprisals were most likely to occur.

Campaign organizers dealt with this expectation by explaining the international networking they were putting in place, and which they intended to continue using on behalf of the local movement. They also emphasized that the Peace Brigades International team would merely shrink back to its normal size of six after the election period: PBI had been in the country since 1989 and the core team was still going to be present.

But the most significant way that the fear of reprisal violence was dealt with was to emphasize the domestic networking that the campaign was constructing, which would serve as a protective buffer for citizens involved in the monitoring. Organizers also spoke about

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the increased visibility and prestige the election monitoring campaign was bringing to the Sri Lankan human rights and democratic renewal movement. That visibility and prestige, it was suggested, should make reprisal violence that much more difficult to carry out against citizen polls watchers.

*Rebuilding Democracy:* The campaign organizers saw the polls watch as a step in a broader task of rebuilding civil democracy in Sri Lanka. The country has lived under emergency law for so long that a culture of non-involvement has taken hold. Wimal Fernando, the secretary of the Movement for Free and Fair Elections, said, "The first step is to make people aware of their rights, and the second is for them to have the strength to stand up for those rights. To do that, they need a lot of encouragement. They need to see that they are not isolated, that there are more people beyond them who care. That is why the international observers are important, at least in the early stages."

Kumi Samuels, who coordinated the documentation efforts of the monitoring campaign, explained the long-range nature of the effort. "The reason all this was done was actually to get the people involved in the electoral process—not only in seeing that a fair election happens, but also in seeing that whatever promises were made, by whatever party finally wins, would be kept; especially in terms of human rights and in the furtherance of democratic rights. So it is a whole process of democratic revival—or renewal if you will—to see that democratic institutions could be set in place and people could monitor and control that process of free democratization."

*Avoiding Dependency and Disempowerment:* Any campaign's reliance on foreign nationals for such integral aspects as security, access to officialdom, and empowerment of the people, is a two-edged sword. This is true even when the international observers and escorts play a minor role in the overall campaign, as was the case in Sri Lanka. Unless the indigenous campaign is also building a movement infrastructure independent of outsiders, the use of international nonviolent protective accompaniment may do as much long-term harm as short-term good.

Requests for protective accompaniment and other kinds of nonviolent interventions are growing tremendously. Proposals for establishing nongovernmental organizations to provide such services are also on the rise. The experience of Peace Brigades International in Sri Lanka during the parliamentary election period of 1994 indicates that protective accompaniment can serve many useful functions. It also indicates that, as with any nonviolent technique, a careful outlining of campaign goals and objectives is likely to increase the chances that it will be put to best use. □

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