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News Director/News Editor,

Press Communiqué

**PRELIMINARY REPORT BY PAFFREL ON THE FORTHCOMING LOCAL
GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS IN BATTICALOA**

A PAFFREL team headed by its chairman Kingsley Rodrigo undertook a two day fact finding visit to Batticaloa on February 2-3, 2008. They met with election officials, head of police, religious dignitaries and civil society groups to ascertain the prevailing situation and its conformity with the requirements of a free and fair election. They also met with TMVP officials.

The government officials reported that they were making preparations for the elections in which the registered number of voters is 270,471 and that these preparations were preceding smoothly. About 4000 government officials will be involved in election duties and will be overlooking 285 polling stations. The police reported that the police presence in the district had been strengthened and this was visible in the extra checkpoints visible in the area. In addition contesting candidate had been assured of two police guards each. So far about 200 out of the 813 candidates who are vying for 101 positions in local authorities had requested police protection.

There was general agreement that the security situation had improved, particularly with reference to the levels of violence. The opening of shops in the town till past 8 pm suggested that the people felt secure enough to move about at night. The presence of armed groups on the streets had been reduced. However, some of the civil society members did not agree with the assessment that the role of the armed groups had diminished and cast doubts on the possibility of free and fair elections unless they were disarmed.

It is possible that violence and election malpractices will surface as the election campaign gathers momentum, as the armed groups have not been disarmed, and this possibility needs to be guarded against. The inability or unwillingness of two prominent opposition parties, the TNA and UNP, to contest these elections have been due to their fear of their members getting killed or otherwise harmed by the armed

groups. The absence of these two parties from the election would deprive the voters of the full range of choice as called for by a free and fair election.

The government's decision to conduct local government elections in nine out of twelve divisions in the Batticaloa district has been contested by key opposition parties which resorted to legal action, and by civil society groups. They have argued that the conditions of violence that prevailed in Batticaloa over the past several months preclude the possibility of free and fair elections. Even a few weeks ago, there were reports of virtual anarchy in the district, with armed groups openly on the prowl, most of them allegedly in league with the government, but with the LTTE also capable of infiltrating back into the district from which they were so recently evicted.

A further complicating factor is that the government has apparently decided that its partner in the east would be the TMVP, which is the breakaway LTTE group in the east and which retains its arms. The partnership between the ruling national alliance, the UPFA, and the eastern regional TMVP in jointly contesting the Batticaloa Municipal Council election is a clear manifestation of this governmental intention.

Various groups including political parties have made calls to postpone the elections. The presence of armed TMVP cadres in particular has been as a serious threat to the prospects of free and fair elections. The TMVP officials, on the other hand, pledged to give their fullest support to the conduct of free and fair elections. They argued that the elections were important to them as they hoped to gain democratic legitimacy through them. But they expressed apprehension that other parties might seek to disrupt the elections.

There have been questions raised as to whether PAFFREL's presence at these elections will provide them with a legitimacy they do not merit. As an election monitoring organization, PAFFREL has monitored elections in worse situations than the present one, most notably the general election of 1988 and the presidential election of 1989. PAFFREL's presence was to record what was happening and report it to the people. This will be PAFFREL's endeavour at the present election as well.

As these elections, PAFFREL will be assisted by international members of the Non Violent Peace Force who have begun their monitoring activities from February 5. The elections will take place on March 10, and PAFFRLE will issue another report prior to that date.

In the meantime, PAFFREL calls on

1. The government to make a credible demonstration of its capacity to control violence and dispel the fears of the people regarding the possible use of arms by some of the contesting parties
2. The civil society to especially active in the period leading to the elections, and organize fact finding visits and encourage voters to affirm their democratic rights
3. The international community to also monitor the elections and help to create an environment for a free and fair election
4. The contesting political parties and independent groups to conduct their election campaigns in a peaceful manner, and
5. The voting public to participate in the elections and assert their right to vote.

Thanking you,

Kingsley Rodrigo
Chairman