

# Youth abductions haunt Lanka as violence rises

REUTERS, Kiran, Sri Lanka

Dozens of young men have been rounded up and abducted in eastern Sri Lanka, the United Nations and residents say, probably to train as fighters for rival ethnic Tamil groups.

With violence between the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at its highest level since a 2002 truce, the mainstream Tigers are also facing off against a breakaway faction known as the TMVP who analysts say may be army-backed.

"They came at three o'clock at night to the next road," 55-year-old Krunaharan Ratha told Reuters inside her shop in the town of Kiran in the eastern Batticaloa district. "They took two or three boys. No-one knows where they are. I have sent my two sons away from here because of fear."

Many residents on the main road through Kiran have fled, fearing a Tiger attack on an army convoy might prompt military retaliation. Most houses are shuttered and empty.

The LTTE have long been accused of using child soldiers in their two-decade war for a separate Tamil homeland. They deny it, but UN children's fund Unicef say boys and girls continue to be grabbed. And they say TMVP abductions are soaring.

The majority of those taken appear to be over 18. But Unicef says it knows of at least 50 children, some as young as 13, taken by TMVP fighters loyal to former east-em Tiger leader Karuna Amman since March, most in the last 10 days.

"We always assume that only a third of cases are reported to us," said Unicef official Yasmin Ali Haque. "LTTE abductions are still

continuing. But what is different here with Karuna is people are being rounded up. Not just children, but older men."

The government has denied backing Karuna, who split from the mainstream rebels in 2004. But many diplomats are skeptical and international monitors say troops have turned a blind eye to him.

Aid and development officials estimate there are around 1,000 underage youths among the mainstream Tigers' 10,000-20,000 fighters, most of whom are over the age of 16.

"Even one child being taken is not acceptable," Ali Haque said. "We are calling on the government to provide security for these children. Children are not protected here at the moment."

The Tigers and the TMVP deny being behind any abductions.

## Rounded Up

Men and boys, sometimes more than a dozen at a time, are rounded up and loaded onto vehicles by known Karuna supporters, aid staff say. Few have been seen since.

Development and human rights workers say it is not clear how large-scale abductions can take place so close to army checkpoints, or how the victims can be transported freely though one of the most militarised areas in Sri Lanka.

Some speculate the sudden recruitment drive signifies that Karuna expects either soon to launch an offensive against the LTTE or to have to fight off his former comrades.

In almost every Tamil area that Reuters visited near Batticaloa, from villages to dusty camps for the displaced from the 2004 tsunami, people talked of recent abductions. But with unsolved killings almost as common, few dare apportion blame.



A dentist examines the teeth of a patient in the city yesterday. Unilever Bangladesh and Bangladesh Dental Society organised free dental camps across the country to mark the Oral Health Day.

# Elderly population ratio in Japan now world's highest

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan, struggling to deal with a falling birth rate and an aging population, said on Friday its ratio of elderly people to total population was now the world's highest, surpassing that of Italy.

The ratio of people aged 65 or older reached 21.0 percent of the total population in 2005, beating Italy's 20.0 percent, the government said in a report released on Friday.

The ratio of people aged 15 or younger in the total population was the world's lowest at 13.6 percent, surpassing Bulgaria's 13.8 percent, the report said.

"This shows a strong trend toward fewer children," Kuniko Inoguchi, the minister in charge of dealing with the falling birth rate, told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

"We are determined to do our best to deal with the problem." Japan's low birth rate and gray-ing population have aroused con-

cerns about future growth in the world's second-largest economy and the sustainability of its pension system.

Japan's population -- now about 127 million -- declined last year for the first time since 1945. Experts had long forecast the shift, but it came two years earlier than expected.

Japan's fertility rate, or the average number of children a woman bears in her lifetime, fell to a record low 1.25 in 2005.

Japan's slumping birth rate has been attributed to long working hours for both men and women, the high cost of putting children through a highly competitive school system, and barriers to women advancing in the workplace while raising children.

The government said in December that Japan's population would shrink by half in less than a century unless something was done to reverse the falling birthrate.

# Pepsodent-BDS Oral Health Day observed

Unilever Bangladesh and Bangladesh Dental Society (BDS) jointly observed the 'Pepsodent-Bangladesh Dental Society Oral Health Day 2006' yesterday, says a press release.

On the occasion, 250 members of BDS volunteered their services and provided free dental check-up to 12,000 registered patients. These patients had previously registered through a call centre. The event was held in all the 64 districts of the country.

Unilever and FDI (World Dental Federation) have also launched a global initiative called 'Live, Learn, Laugh' with an aim to promote oral health awareness and education in the developing nations.

Pepsodent carries out frequent researches and innovations as part of its continuous quality improvement for its product. As a result of this, both FDI and BDS have given their endorsement to Pepsodent. FDI is an organisation consisting of nine lakh dentists worldwide.

Pepsodent has been carrying out various programmes for the last decade to raise awareness about oral hygiene among general people.

Bangladesh Dental Society has also been carrying out Free Dental Camps in areas where dental services are not available.

# Pakistan rejects 'outside advice' on elections

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has said it does not need outside advice on its democratic process following comments by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on elections due next year.

The foreign ministry issued a statement late Wednesday following Rice's visit to Islamabad where she met President Pervez Musharraf, a key ally in the US "war on terror".

Referring to Rice's "reported comments", the statement said the top US diplomat and Musharraf did not discuss the subject of elections, which are due in 2007.

"On the democratic processes in Pakistan, we do not require advice from outside... these matters essentially concern the people of Pakistan," the statement said on Thursday.

"There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the elections will be free and fair. This is the commitment of the leadership and government of Pakistan."

However Rice told reporters on board her flight to Islamabad that she would raise the issue of elections when she met Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999.

"The important thing is the world expects there to be democratic, free and fair elections in Pakistan in 2007," she said. She did not mention the issue at a press conference after the meeting.

Democracy is a sensitive issue in Pakistan, especially as since becoming president, Musharraf has refused to abandon his role as chief of the powerful army.

Opposition parties want Musharraf, whose five-year term also expires in 2007, to be elected by the new parliament following elections, but his supporters say he can be elected by the current assembly.

# Expat Pakistanis head home for makeover

REUTERS, Islamabad

Fancy a tummy tuck or face lift? How about a hair transplant?

Such surgical procedures are de rigueur in the West, but the trend is now also catching on in an unlikely country -- conservative Pakistan.

Lured by the cheap cost, expatriate Pakistanis are among the biggest customers returning to their homeland for cosmetic surgery in what is a rapidly expanding business in the predominantly Muslim country.

Hamayun Mohmand's Hair Transplant Institute in Islamabad is typical of clinics in Pakistan that offer breast enlargement, tummy tucks, face lifts, nose jobs and hair transplants.

He says most of his customers are people of Pakistani origin from overseas. "My biggest concentration of people is from the United States. Second is the UK," Mohmand told Reuters at his clinic in the capital.

Other customers getting treatment at a tenth of the price they would have to pay in the West include people of Pakistani descent from continental Europe, especially Norway and Denmark, and a few from Australia, he said.

Ijaz Ahmed, a businessman of Pakistani origin from the British city of Manchester, said he had hair transplant work done in Britain and Greece but he wasn't satisfied with the results.

Then a friend recommended Pakistan.

"I was worried about rip-offs but I got some references and people said good things about their experiences in Pakistan," Ahmed said.

"I came to Pakistan, taking a risk, but I've had absolutely no problem. One of my friends used to go all

the way to Thailand because it's very cheap there but Pakistan is also very similar. I'm from Pakistan and decided to get it here," he said.

But it's not just people from overseas who are flocking to improve their appearances at clinics in Pakistan.

Steadily rising economic growth is bringing with it the ways of a Western consumer culture, especially in its biggest cities -- Lahore and Karachi.

And looking good is as important in Pakistan as it is anywhere else.

With television programmes like Oprah Winfrey and the complete makeover programmes, people have become more conscious of their image. They've started to believe in looking good," Mohmand said.

Affluent urban women are fuelling the boom.

"I got a nose job done before my marriage as I didn't like the parrot shape of it," said one middle class woman who asked not to be named.

"It's worth spending the money to look beautiful and be confident if you can afford it."

Another Islamabad-based cosmetic surgeon, Nadeem Pasha, said the daughters of elite families, in their 20s and 30s, as well as women from the world of show business were setting the trend.

"Film actresses are among the biggest clients of plastic surgeons in Lahore," said Pasha, who declined to identify any celebrities among his customers.

Doctors say the latest craze among women is to enlarge their breasts.

The process takes a day and costs nearly \$1,600 but post-operative care and consultations may push up the bill, Pasha said.