

Disappearances haunt Lankan civilians

REUTERS, Colombo

Like the relatives of hundreds of Sri Lankans who have 'disappeared' or been abducted amid renewed civil war, 27-year-old Dushyanthi Malaravan dreams of the day her missing father will come home.

Professor S Raveendranath was serving as Vice Chancellor of the island's Eastern University in the restive eastern district of Batticaloa when he disappeared from a science fair in a heavily guarded district of the capital Colombo in mid-December.

"Every day he came home for lunch. That day he didn't arrive. By late afternoon, I knew something had happened because he had been getting threats (demanding he resign)," Malaravan said, her mother weeping beside her.

"We don't want to point at anyone, because we are afraid for his safety as well as for ours," the housewife said in the apartment where her father lived before his disappearance.

Colleagues and rights officials say 56-year-old Raveendranath, a Tamil from the northern Jaffna peninsula, had been receiving threats from a break-away rebel faction called the Karuna group, which split from the Tigers in 2004.

A United Nations envoy says elements of the military have been helping Karuna members to abduct children as fighters. Nordic truce monitors see troop involvement in Karuna attacks, and analysts say the government is fostering the former rebels.

Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission says nearly 100 abductions and disappearances have been reported to them so far this year in Colombo, Batticaloa and the besieged Jaffna peninsula, which is guarded by more than 40,000 troops.

That in turn comes on top of 1,000 cases reported during 2006 as the island's two-decade civil war resumed, 56 abductions of which were blamed

on the Tigers, 71 on their former comrades the Karuna group and 184 of which were listed as unknown.

Other groups say the numbers are really far higher and do not include those taken inside rebel territory.

The Tamil Tigers have long been accused of abductions, particularly of hundreds of children to fight in their push for an independent state in Sri Lanka's north and east.

Unicef still lists 1,710 outstanding cases of Tiger under-age recruitment and 169 cases of underage recruitment by the Karuna group.

The Tigers argue children lie about their age to join up. Released abductees Reuters has spoken to in the east say they were taken against their will.

Some see an eerie parallel between abductions in well guarded government-controlled areas and a rash of disappearances when the then government crushed an uprising by hardline Marxists in the late 1980s – and see state involvement.

"The present set of disappearances is creating a sense of terror, fear in all the island," said Basil Fernando, executive director of the Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission.

"There's a link between the faction from the east with the government. So there is some sort of an agreement not to interfere in this at a political level," he added.

Rights groups say relatives and witnesses in the east have sighted infamous white vans with no numberplates whisking abductees unhindered through army checkpoints – a terrifying echo of white vans used in abductions in the late 1980s.

They doubt the Tigers could be behind abductions in Colombo, because security has been tightened after a spree of rebel attacks, spot checks are routine, road-blocks widespread and hundreds of troops and police are on the streets.



Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industries (CCCI) President Saifuzzaman Chowdhury inaugurates Education UK Exhibition '07 at Bulbul Centre of Hotel Peninsula in Chittagong yesterday.

Karzai slams Afghan deaths

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai yesterday condemned US troops for shooting dead 10 civilians at the weekend as officials said nine more – five women, four children and an old man – had been killed in an air strike.

The nine were killed on Sunday in Kapisa province, barely 90 minutes' drive northeast of Kabul, the deputy provincial governor, Sayed Dawood Hashimi, said yesterday. That strike followed a rocket attack on a US base.

Both Nato and the US-led coalition which also operates in the area said they were investigating.

US marines also shot dead 10 civilians in the east on Sunday, which Karzai condemned, in what the US military said was a "complex" Taliban ambush involving a suicide bombing and gunfire in a populated area outside Jalalabad city near Pakistan.

The military said the soldiers fired in self-defence and 16 civilians were killed in the suicide raid and subsequent firing.

No provincial or central government official has confirmed the U.S. military's account that the convoy came under rebel gunfire. Analysts say killing of civilians by NATO and U.S. troops is sapping public support for the foreign mission here.

NO JUSTIFICATION - WITNESS

Two provincial government officials said on Sunday 10 civilians were killed and more than 25 wounded as US soldiers fled the scene of the attack.

Wounded in hospital said US soldiers just opened fire.

"The Americans fired at us without any justification," said Sayeda Jan, a passenger in a passing vehicle who was shot.

"Karzai should raise his voice and intervene about it, but he won't because he is thinking about his power. We were in the car and saw the convoy coming from the opposite direction and they fired at us."

Hospital doctors say 30 people were wounded in the shooting.

Education UK Exhibition begins in Chittagong

CU CORRESPONDENT

A two-day Education UK Exhibition began here in the port city yesterday.

British Council organised the fair at Bulbul Centre of Hotel Peninsula Chittagong with a view to providing an opportunity for prospective students and their parents, teachers and training managers to find out more by talking directly to UK institutions and their representatives.

Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industries (CCCI) President Saifuzzaman Chowdhury inaugurated the exhibition in the morning.

Delegates from 16 UK universities and college took part in the exhibition.

Entry fee in the exhibition was fixed at Tk 50 per person while school students in uniform and other students with identity cards would be allowed to enter without any fee.

Olmert on the offensive over Lebanon war report

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, facing expected harsh criticism of his government's response to Hezbollah rocket attacks on northern Israel last year, on Sunday strongly criticised the state comptroller who drew up the report.

Israeli media said Olmert, in a letter two days before the report is due to go to a parliamentary committee, condemned the comptroller's office for a series of leaks.

Writing to Dalia Yitzik, the speaker of parliament, Olmert said: "The comptroller has revealed the report to the media before even transmitting it to those involved, as procedure demands."

He termed the action "a criminal offence."

The report by state comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss follows a long inquiry into the government's handling of the north's rocket-battered residents both before and during the 34-day offensive in Lebanon and war with Hezbollah.

WW2 SEX SLAVES Japan won't apologise again

REUTERS, Tokyo

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said yesterday that Japan would not apologise again for forcing women, mostly Asian, to act as wartime sex slaves for its soldiers even if US lawmakers adopt a resolution calling for an apology.

Abe, seeking to bolster support among his conservative base, has already sparked diplomatic ire by appearing to question the state's role in forcing the women to act as sex slaves for soldiers during World War Two.

US Congressman Michael Honda, a California Democrat, has introduced a non-binding resolution calling on Japan to unambiguously apologise for the tragedy that thousands of Asian women, many Korean, endured at the hands of its Imperial Army.

"I have to say that even if the resolution passes, that doesn't mean we will apologise," Abe told a parliamentary panel yesterday, adding the US resolution contained factual errors.

But Abe repeated that he stood by a 1993 government apology that acknowledged the Japanese military's role in setting up and managing wartime brothels and that coercion was used.

"It is not true that Japan has never reflected or apologised," he told reporters later, criticising a question by an opposition lawmaker at the parliamentary panel.

"The facts are as contained in the (1993) statement."

Abe, who wants to rewrite Japan's pacifist constitution and restore a sense of pride in the nation's past, upset his core conservative supporters and startled critics when he softened his stance on wartime history after taking office last September.

Among those shifts was his decision to stand by the 1993 apology, known at the "Kono Statement," after then-Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono, in whose name it was issued.

The softer stance on history was widely seen as an attempt to smooth the way for summits with China and South Korea and improve ties that had chilled under his predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi.

Then last week, Abe sparked a fierce reaction from South Korea when he appeared to question the degree to which physical coercion was involved in recruiting the women for the brothels.



Winners of Shilu Abed Karushilpa Purashkar '07 pose for photograph with the guests at a ceremony at Brac Centre Inn in the city yesterday. Sitting from left are Rafikul Islam, Monira Emdad, Fazle Hasan Abed and Taurem Robin.

Three get Shilu Abed Karushilpa Purashkar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The prize giving ceremony of 'Shilu Abed Karushilpa Purashkar '07' was held in the city yesterday.

In order to promote and recognise the contributions of handicraft artisans, Bangladesh Jatiya Karushilpa Parishad has been giving away the award since 1998.

The ceremony supported by Shilu Abed Trust took place at Brac Centre Inn at Mohakhali in the city. The criteria of artisan selected for this year was based on traditional 'Jamdani Saree'.

Md Jalal Mia of Noapara Rupganj, Narayanganj won the award of best artisan for his outstanding contributions in 'Jamdani Shilpa'. He received a cheque for Tk 50,000, a crest and a certificate.

Md Ismail of Rupganj and Jahangir Alam of Sonargaon, Narayanganj were accorded with special honorary awards.

Brac Chairperson Fazle Hasan Abed distributed the prizes among the winners.

Addressing as the chief guest, Abed expressed his resolution to develop country's economy through promoting 'Karushilpa'. He also declared that the amount of prize money will be doubled next year.

Designer Chandra Shekhar Shaha, Taurem Robin, vice president and Monira Emdad, president of Bangladesh Jatiya Karushilpa Parishad also spoke on the occasion.

'Declare the corrupt, loan defaulters incompetent in polls'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The caretaker government should declare corruptionists, smugglers and loan defaulters incompetent to be a candidate in the election so that black money and muscle cannot influence the election process, said former secretary Saiful Islam Bahauddin Ahmed Chowdhury.

He made this observation while delivering a lecture on 'Life and contribution of late justice Muhammad Ibrahim' at the auditorium of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in the city.

He urged the government to impose five-year restriction on retired officers from participating in the parliamentary election and cancel all contractual appointments and retired justices.

He said justice Ibrahim remain immortal in the hearts of compatriots because he engaged himself for the welfare of the nation and humankind.

Prof KM Mohsin, chairperson of Justice Muhammad Ibrahim Trust Fund, presided over the programme while Prof Dulal Bhowmik, convener of the Trust, delivered the introductory speech on justice Ibrahim.

Top civil society members attended the lecture session.

Pak envoy meets Anwarul Iqbal

UNB, Dhaka

Pakistani High Commissioner in Dhaka Alamgir Babar paid a courtesy call on Adviser of the Caretaker Government Md Anwarul Iqbal at his office yesterday.

During the meeting, they exchanged views on local government system of the two friendly countries and discussed various bilateral issues of mutual interest, said an official handout.

Unity govt in Palestine this week: Abbas

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas has said that a Palestinian national unity government would be set up "in less than a week," a spokesman said Sunday.

"There are no obstacles for the application of the Mecca Declaration," said Nabil Abou Rodeina, referring to an agreement to set a national unity government, which Abbas signed with the exiled leader of the ruling Hamas party, Khaled Meshaal, on February 8.

"We have needed some days to discuss all the problems. We will continue our discussions tomorrow and a national unity government will be formed in less than a week," the spokesman said.

The comments came after Abbas held a meeting with the Palestinian prime minister-designate Ismail Haniya, of the Islamist Hamas movement, who was handed the task of setting up a unity government after the Mecca talks.



Former secretary Saiful Islam Bahauddin Ahmed Chowdhury speaks at a lecture on 'Life and contribution of late justice Muhammad Ibrahim' at the auditorium of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in the city yesterday.

Where Indian women lead, a better life follows

REUTERS, Kanaipur

Every morning 10-year-old Indian villager Nipa Halder crosses a canal in a small boat and trudges along a mud road for 20 minutes to reach school, pursuing her dream of becoming a nurse.

Nipa has not missed classes once in three years, just one of hundreds of young children in Kanaipur village in the eastern state of West Bengal to have benefited from a law that promotes the involvement of women in local politics.

"I want to become a nurse and help all the poor and ailing people when I grow up," she says as she heads for classes about 70 km (40 miles) from the state capital, Kolkata.

In 2004, a newly elected village council, or panchayat, in Kanaipur included for the first time a representative number of women – and resulted in a mini social revolution.

In addition to their new clout in village affairs, the move also sprouted a number of self-help groups.

Together they have improved

the provision of healthcare and education for women and children, according to a study by UNICEF of 165 villages in West Bengal.

"The number of visits by health workers in these villages was significantly higher and the desire to do good work by women leaders had a ripple effect on everyone else," Priyanka Khanna, a UNICEF spokeswoman, told Reuters in Kolkata.

That may not be radical – micro-credit pioneers have been saying for years that one of the best ways to chip away at rural poverty is too give women control of project purse strings – but in India it marks a milestone.

With 70 percent of a billion-plus population living in a patchwork of poor villages and small towns in India, these grass-roots changes have a significant impact.

FEMALE TOUCH

In 1993, India amended its constitution to accommodate the concept of panchayat raj – effectively village self-governance – and make laws out of its previously non-binding rules.

Among the changes was the

reservation of one-third of seats on every village council for women.

In West Bengal, ruled by the world's longest-serving elected communist government, moves to boost the role of women began in the 1970s. The constitution change added impetus and by the time the UNICEF study was completed the results were there to be seen.

"Women come out of the shell once they see that someone from the same gender is fighting for them and that impacts the entire household and the village," says Kolkata-based sociologist Prasanta Roy.

The survey revealed that in areas where women had taken up their allocated places on councils, investment in clean drinking water had doubled compared to those still run solely by men.

Roads were twice as likely to be in a good condition.

A similar UNICEF study in the western state of Rajasthan found that a child living in a village where the council was headed by a woman had a better chance of being vaccinated against common diseases.

And there was only 13 percent fewer girls than boys sitting behind school desks, a significant improvement in the conservative desert region.

UNSHACKLED?

Less likely to study fully or follow a career, many women in India's rural and small-town heartlands still have to ask permission from a father or husband to step out of the home.

Here an intensely patriarchal society largely untouched by the mood of emancipation makes for a hard life.

Boys get an education and grow up to take most of the decisions; women do as they are told – largely work and raise the kids.

But in Kanaipur, Soma Dey, the village's first female council chief, was busy examining dozens of new solar-energy panels that will provide electricity to 400 people.

"At least 90 percent of the village is covered with conventional electricity, but in remote places we have installed solar energy," said a beaming Soma, wearing an orange shawl to beat the cold wind blowing across the Hooghly river.

Eight years ago, the village did not have a single school and access to medicines was a luxury beyond the reach of most people.

Today it has 15 schools and several healthcare centres stacked with medicines – all funded by the state government.

Since the 2004 election, Soma and her 12 women colleagues on the 30-member council have successfully wooed the state government for money and roped in experts to improve lives.

"I found women shy to talk about their health problems and domestic violence, but now they come every day," Soma says.

Affordable loans are now available in a country where debt lurks in most rural homes.

"We used to live on coconut water, and farm marshy lands eight years ago, but now I have a new boat to go fishing in," said 70-year-old Nirmal Gharani.

Nipa clings to her 95-year-old grandmother Phulphuli, who settled here after leaving Bangladesh 10 years ago.

"It's an oasis here, I'm not going back," the old woman says.