

In Sri Lanka, Fear of Being 'Disappeared'

Government Offensive Against Tamil Rebels Also Claims Civilian Victims



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MAHA OYA, Sri Lanka -- Under thick tropical rains on a rutted country road, a bus packed with ethnic Tamil families screeched to a stop here in eastern Sri Lanka. At a heavily fortified government checkpoint, the families were ordered off the bus.

They were asked many questions. Where had they come from? Why? Whom did they visit? The experience, for many of them, was more than inconvenient. It was frightening. In places like this, they said, amid bungalows battered and burned by war, people go missing.

"It's not waiting in the lines or the search of our bags that troubles us as much as the chances of being picked out, arrested and never being able to see our families again," said a 19-year-old Tamil waiter, who was too fearful of government reprisal to offer his name. "I know neighbors it's happened to. If you are Tamil in Sri Lanka, your trust has been spoiled. You fear rebels and you fear the government, too."

This country's war against ethnic Tamil rebels has grinded on for a quarter-century. But under a recent military offensive to wipe out those rebels, government forces have abducted hundreds of members of the Tamil minority group, including civilians, according to human rights groups. Many of the "disappeared" never turn up again.

The government denies that abductions have become widespread and says heightened vigilance at checkpoints is necessary -- even if Tamils complain of ethnic profiling. Authorities cite the danger of suicide bombings, like one that killed more than a dozen people, including members of a high school baseball team, in February.

But rights activists say President Mahinda Rajapaksa and his lieutenants are intent on eliminating the separatist insurgency known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or LTTE, no matter the cost. They also say Sri Lanka's growing ties with Iran, China and Russia have emboldened the government to ignore criticism from the United States and other Western powers.

Rajapaksa "has a simple message -- that the LTTE are terrorists and he's going to be very, very confrontational," said Jehan Perera of the independent National Peace Council of Sri Lanka in Colombo, the capital. "He doesn't need the West. He doesn't need to worry about human rights."

Abductions are carried out in various ways, according to activists and relatives of those who have disappeared. Sometimes Tamil men of fighting age are rounded up at checkpoints, hurried into white vans and never heard from again. Sometimes they are arrested with little explanation in house-to-house raids at night.

Regardless of the method, the disappearances often leave deep economic and psychological wounds on Tamil families.

With her five grandchildren at her side, G.H. Mithralatha, a 75-year-old Tamil, said her 42-year-old son was working at a local harbor as a driver last year when police arrived on the scene. Without explanation, she said, they bundled him away. The family has not heard from him again, despite frequent visits to the police. The children's mother left to be a housemaid in Kuwait.

"I'm suffering so much with these children to care for," Mithralatha, whose body is frail and back is hunched, said as she wept. The grandchildren range in age from 2 to 14. "I wish we could find their father."

In its annual human rights report, released in March, the U.S. State Department said the Sri Lankan government's "respect for human rights continued to decline due in part to the escalation of the armed conflict." The report cited near-daily extrajudicial killings in the government-controlled Jaffna peninsula and accounts of the army, police and pro-government paramilitary groups participating in attacks against civilians.

In an interview, Foreign Secretary Palitha Kohona said the rebels have exaggerated reports of abductions for propaganda purposes. He also said that after U.S. diplomats provided a list of 355 missing people, the government launched an investigation and found that most of the missing had left the country of their own volition.

"We reviewed the lists meticulously; 23 people were found alive and kicking. But there were repetitions on the list," Kohona said. Other names "were suspiciously similar to those recorded by immigration officials as people who had left the country."

He emphasized that the Tigers are recognized as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government and others across the world. He also said the Tigers were using violence and

intimidation abroad to fund the rebel group, shaking down Tamil shopkeepers from London to Virginia for contributions.

"We are fighting a brutal terrorist group," Kohona said. "Our friends abroad must look at the pressures they are putting on us very carefully. They may be throwing a lifeline to a brutal terrorist group."

On Web sites and in statements, the rebels holed up in the north say they are part of a populist movement that wants a separate homeland on this island off the coast of southern India. They claim to be defending the rights of Hindu and Christian Tamils, who they contend are discriminated against by the Buddhist Sinhalese majority. The government does not permit journalists near the front lines.

Sri Lanka's ethnic tensions are rooted in history. The British colonized Sri Lanka with the help of Tamil administrators, giving Tamils, then about 15 percent of the population, political power way beyond their numbers. After independence in 1948, the Sinhalese gained back power, often with a nationalist program that Tamils say excluded them from government posts.

Mano Ganesan, a Tamil member of Parliament who heads a civil monitoring commission on disappearances, said that the unexplained arrests only further marginalize the Tamil community and breed anger among frustrated youth.

"The government arrests Tamils for being Tamil," Ganesan said. "And they ask questions later. I hate terrorism. I don't want bombs to go off. But that doesn't mean the government should conduct mass arrests without even giving proof or updates to the families."

In a neighborhood where alleyways hold tea shops and temples with shrines to Hindu gods, many Tamils worry and wait for their missing relatives to appear.

Mithralatha, the grandmother whose son is missing, said she was surprised how the war has affected her family. Her son married a Sinhalese in what is known here as "a mixed-fruit marriage."

"My son was Tamil, but he was never involved in anything with the rebel movements," she said. "I can't believe that this has happened."

Her oldest granddaughter, Vartha Rasta, spends her afternoons caring for siblings. She doesn't see the issue as complicated.

"We just want our father back," she said as her grandmother cried.