

The Guardian

Sri Lanka accused of ill-treating women it suspects of Tamil Tiger links

Women's group says government detaining females in ex-war zone in inhuman conditions and denying them medical facilities



Sri Lankan military has resumed search operations similar to those carried out during 25-year civil war. Photograph: Ishara S Kodikara/AFP/Getty Images

Associated Press in Colombo

Wed 9 Apr 2014 07:12 EDT

A Sri Lankan women's rights group has claimed the government is arresting innocent female relatives of men it suspects are trying to revive the Tamil Tiger rebel group and subjecting them to ill-treatment.

Women's Action Network described the cases of six women it says were arrested from the north and east, the former civil war zone, because authorities suspected their male associates or family members had rebel links.

The group's statement said the criminal investigation department had detained the women in inhuman conditions, adding that some were elderly or needed medical and psychiatric care but were being denied those facilities.

Sri Lanka's government claims that the defeated Tamil Tigers are trying to regroup and that it is taking preventive measures.

However, ethnic Tamil politicians deny this and say this is being used as an excuse to maintain a high military presence and keep the people in fear.

Police spokesman Ajith Rohana said the women were detained for offences under the Prevention of Terrorism Act, including harbouring terrorist suspects. He said he would investigate allegations of medical care being denied to the detainees.

Police and the military resumed cordon and search operations similar to those carried out during the civil war to catch a person they identified as "Gopi", said to be the new leader of the Tamil Tigers. The women's network said police arrested five women for alleged links to Gopi.

Sharmila Gajeepan, 26, was pregnant when authorities arrested her claiming she was the wife of Gopi, which she denies. She said she had a miscarriage while being questioned and was not only denied medical care but on the same night was transported by train to a detention centre nearly 60 miles away, the statement said.

Police are also holding her 63-year-old mother-in-law and an elderly woman who is her helper, the statement said.

Balendran Jeyakumari, a leading activist in the effort to find missing people from the civil war, has been detained on charges that she harboured Gopi at her home. Jeyakumari's 13-year-old daughter, who was arrested with her, is in the custody of childcare officials.

Human rights groups have called Jeyakumari's arrest an attempt to intimidate activists into silence. A government book published a photograph of Jeyakumari's 15-year-old son being held in military custody, but authorities have denied any knowledge of him.

One detainee is accused of being a lover of Gopi. Another is a 61-year-old woman whose sons work abroad and sent her substantial sums of money regularly, the group said. Sri Lanka's government says expatriate Tamils could be sending money for terrorist activities.

"It doesn't appear that the officers treat these women as human beings. Officials transporting by train a woman, who on the same day had suffered a miscarriage without any medical help, is distressing," the statement said.

"Post-war the government is boastful about its achievements on women's rights and celebrates the Women's Day with much fanfare. But such degrading treatment of women is unacceptable."

Sri Lanka's military crushed the Tamil rebels in May 2009, ending a 25-year separatist campaign. According to a United Nations report, 40,000 ethnic Tamil civilians were killed in the final months of the fighting.

The UN human rights council last month authorised an investigation into crimes committed by

both sides in the civil war.

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