

UN CONCERNED AT SERIOUS ABUSES, TORTURE IN SRI LANKA

GENEVA: The UN yesterday warned that a range of serious abuses, including torture, appear to remain widespread in Sri Lanka and criticized the country's slow progress in addressing wartime crimes. "A number of serious human rights violations... are reportedly continuing to occur in Sri Lanka, including the harassment or surveillance of human rights defenders and victims of violations, police abuse and excessive use of force," the UN human rights office said in a statement.

It expressed alarm while launching a report on Sri Lanka's progress in deal-

ing with crimes committed during its 37-year Tamil separatist conflict that ended in 2009.

In particular, "the use of torture remains a serious concern," the report said, pointing to the nation's own Human Rights Commission's acknowledgement of complaints illustrating the "routine use of torture by the police throughout the country as a means of interrogation and investigation." "The prevailing culture of impunity for perpetrating torture has undoubtedly contributed to this situation," the report said.

Sense of urgency

Such abuses are continuing even as Sri Lanka's "worryingly slow" progress addressing its wartime past risks derailing the move toward lasting peace, the rights office warned. President Maithripala Sirisena's government has agreed to a United Nations resolution which, among other things, called for special war crimes tribunals and reparations for victims of the conflict, which claimed at least 100,000 lives. In the report launched yesterday, the UN human rights office acknowledged that the government had made posi-

tive advances on constitutional and legal reforms, land restitution and symbolic gestures towards reconciliation.

But it cautioned that the measures taken so far had been "inadequate, lacked coordination and a sense of urgency." UN rights chief Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein was concerned that "hard-won gains could prove illusory if they are not tethered to a comprehensive, robust strategy," the statement said. "I urge the government and people of Sri Lanka to prioritize justice alongside reconciliation to ensure that the horrors of the past are firmly dealt with, never to recur," he said. —AFP

FRESH FEAR OF HONOR VIOLENCE STALKS PAKISTANI VICTIM

GUJRANWALA, Pakistan: In early three years after Saba Qaiser's father and uncle shot her in the face, rolled her in a rug and threw her in a river for marrying without their consent, the 21-year-old from Pakistan's Punjab province is again afraid for her life. After surviving the attack in the city of Gujranwala, 225 kilometers from Islamabad, Qaiser was determined to ensure the men were brought to justice. It was a rare move in a nation where hundreds of women and men are killed each year by their families over perceived damage to "honor" for slights such as eloping or mingling with the opposite sex.

Even though Qaiser's father and uncle were arrested and jailed, Qaiser was pressured by relatives to forgive them under a law that until last October allowed killers who had been pardoned by family members to walk free. Since the case did not go to trial, the men were released after two months in jail. "Although I had to tell the court that I had forgiven them, I never did from my heart," said Qaiser, whose story was told in the 2016 Oscar-winning documentary, "A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness" by filmmaker Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy.

Her uncle never forgot the "dishonor" she had brought on the family, and when he came across a trailer for Obaid-Chinoy's film last year, he was furious, Qaiser said. "He came to my house at night and asked for me and started shooting from his pistol. I was lucky to survive his attack," said Qaiser, whose left cheek bears a scar running from mouth to temple from the previous attack. Qaiser's father and uncle were once again taken into custody, in April 2016, and are expected to be freed later this month after Qaiser decided not to press charges against them.

Women's rights campaigners say the case illustrates the difficulties of prosecuting such crimes despite new legislation against "honor killings", which removed the loophole that once enabled pardoned killers to go free. The new law was passed in October, three months after the murder of an outspoken social media star, Qandeel Baloch, whose brother was arrested in connection with her death by strangulation. The new law still gives victims' relatives the option of forgiving attackers, but only in cases where the culprits have been sentenced to death. Even if a pardon is given, attackers face a mandatory life sentence. Yet the nature of honor violence means many crimes are never reported in Pakistan since most attackers are close kin often living under the same roof as their victims, activists say.

Family bonds

After the attack, Qaiser's mother was forbidden by her husband from seeing Qaiser and forced to move to the northwestern city of Sargodha in Punjab province, 175 kilometers away from her daughter. She visits her husband in prison every week. But as soon as the visit is over, she secretly sees her daughter. "My husband is not angry at her. It's his brother who provokes him and after they are out of the jail, we will break ties with him," she said. But Qaiser fears the matter will not end there.

"He'll be madder at me and will want to harm me for sending him to jail for the second time," she said in the dimly-lit room where she lives with her husband and two children. —Reuters



Surkhet, Nepal: In this photograph, Nepalese women Pabitra Giri, left, and Yum Kumari Giri, right, sit by a fire as they live in a Chhaupadi hut in Surkhet District, some 520km west of Kathmandu. —AFP

HINDU RITUAL FORCES NEPALI WOMEN INTO MONTHLY EXILE

PRACTICE CONSIDERS MENSTRUATING WOMEN UNTOUCHABLE

SURKHET: The small thatched hut in western Nepal has no walls to keep out the cold. Inside is a raised platform where Pabitra Giri sleeps during her period, banished from her home by a centuries-old Hindu ritual. Below the hut, known as a chhaupadi, Giri lights a small fire to keep her warm. The smoke rises up to the small cramped area where she sleeps, making her eyes water. "We think that if we don't follow chhaupadi bad things will happen and if we do, it (the gods) will favor us. I feel it does good, so I follow it during my periods," Giri, 23, explained.

"Now I am used to it. I used to be afraid in the beginning because I was away from my family during dark nights and the place is like this," Giri said gesturing around her. The practice is linked to Hinduism and considers women untouchable when they menstruate. They are banished from the home-barred from touching food, religious icons, cattle and men-and forced into a monthly exile sleeping in basic huts. In some areas, women are also made to spend up to a month in the chhaupadi after they have given birth.

Two women recently died while following chhaupadi-one of smoke inhalation after she lit a fire for warmth, while the other death is unexplained. These incidents have spurred fresh impetus to

end the practice. Chhaupadi was banned a decade ago, but new legislation currently before parliament will criminalize the practice, making it an imprisonable offence to force women to follow the ritual. "Women were accepting chhaupadi as tradition. After defining chhaupadi an offence by law the tradition will be discouraged saving rights and lives of many women," Krishna Bhakta Pokhrel, a lawmaker pushing the bill, said.

For the gods

But previous attempts to stop chhaupadi have failed to address the deep superstitious beliefs that underpin it. Even in the capital Kathmandu, three in four homes practice some form of restriction on women during their periods, usually banning them from the kitchen and prayer room, said Pema Lhaki, a women's right activist who has campaigned for years to end chhaupadi. Most attempts to end the ritual have focused on destroying the chhaupadi but that hasn't stopped women being banned from their homes-instead, in some areas, it has seen women forced to sleep in even more rudimentary huts or even outside, Lhaki said.

"Until we make the woman herself make the decision, the destruction of menstrual huts is more for external pur-

poses. The menstrual huts should remain. Success is when they remain but they don't go into them," she said, accusing the government of encouraging the chhaupadi to be destroyed to meet quotas set by international donors. In a village a few miles from where Giri lives, Khagisara Regmi is considering building a chhaupadi. After her husband died eight years ago, the 40-year-old found it too difficult to follow chhaupadi-which would bar her from cooking or touching her son when she was menstruating-while bringing up her four young children.

But a few years ago, her only son started having fits. When a nearby hospital failed to cure them, Regmi turned to the local shaman who told her that her son's seizures were because she hadn't followed the ancient ritual. "Because I didn't observe purity the gods were displeased. It wasn't favorable for my son," she said. It is often the village shamans-who fill a void left by woefully poor medical services in rural Nepal-and the elderly who are the guardians of the ritual.

Sabitra Giri, 70, defiantly told AFP that the Maoists during Nepal's brutal civil war tried to end chhaupadi as part of an anti-religion drive-but failed. "You can cut me but while I'm alive this practice will continue," she said. — AFP