

KIDNAPPINGS BLIGHT WAR-SCARRED KABUL

KABUL: The bruises, scabs and chain markings have long faded but Haji Ghulam is still visibly traumatised by his month-long abduction, one of dozens of victims of a violent crime surge that has beset the Afghan capital. While the relatively rare kidnappings of foreigners instantly grab international headlines, this chilling wave of abductions of ordinary Afghans such as Ghulam remains a hidden scourge that has put the city on edge.

Afghan police, already stretched on multiple insurgent battlefronts, are struggling to rein in kidnapping rings that target not just the wealthy-but anyone that appears to have money. "On a cold spring day last year I was driving home from work with my son and cousin when we were waylaid by two cars with armed men in military uniforms," Ghulam, a 53-year-old professional money changer, said with a stammer, his lips and face twitching.

"I thought they were policemen, but they beat my son and cousin and dragged me to their vehicle. I was blindfolded, slapped, beaten. They drove for an hour and dropped me in a tiny hole in the ground," he told AFP at his home in Kabul. His kidnapers tortured him and sent his recorded screams to his family, demanding a ransom of \$2 million, a gargantuan sum in one of the world's poorest countries. He was fed little more than a piece of bread every day.

A month later, security officials discovered Ghulam in that hole in a small house on the outskirts of Kabul, maimed, emaciated and enchained. His kidnapers are still at large. Ghulam, who now walks with a limp and uses an armoured vehicle and private guards for his protection, is one of the lucky ones. In one case, a 14-year-old Afghan boy was abducted and then brutally murdered, his body dumped in downtown Kabul. In another incident, a city shopkeeper's ear was sliced off by his kidnapper and sent to his family to press them to pay up. Recently a Kabul businessman sold off his entire property to pay ransom for his kidnapped son, but he remains in captivity. Reliable official statistics are hard to obtain, but Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce and Industries says around 80 businessmen were kidnapped around the country last year. Experts believe many other cases went unreported for fear of reprisals from the kidnapers.

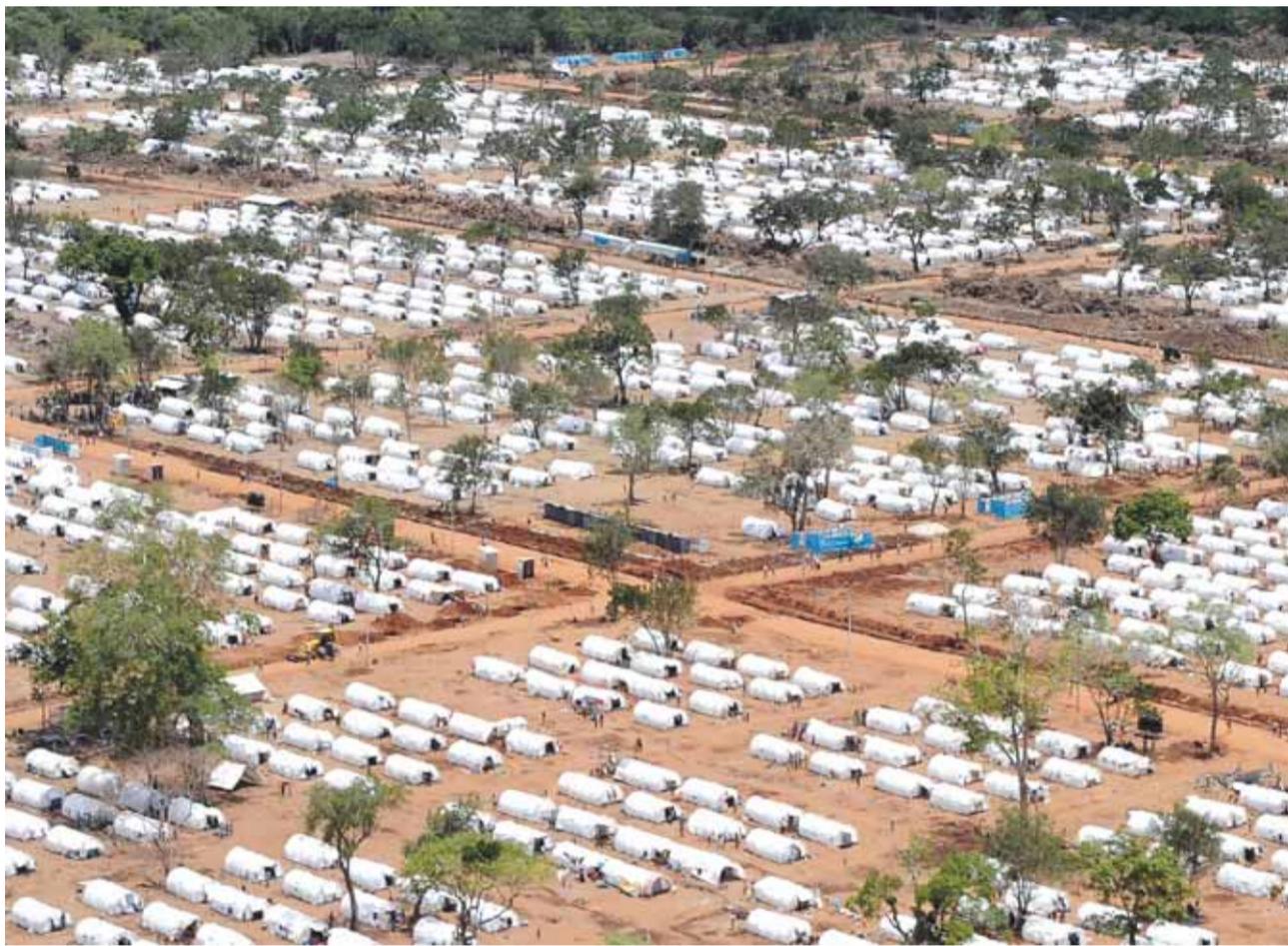
Crime city

Kidnappings and extortion have become a cottage industry, while car thefts are common. In fact Kabul, is a city so riddled with crime that displaying wealth can be tantamount to a death sentence. The situation is exacerbated by rampant poverty and rising unemployment. The kidnapping rings appear to be feeding off growing insecurity as Afghan law enforcement remain stretched by the Taliban, Islamic State jihadists and other militant groups.

The fledgling and under resourced police force is struggling to effectively combat crime, which has contributed to an unprecedented exodus of Afghans towards Europe. "In addition to the threat of bombings, the city is plagued by kidnapers and extortionists," Haji Zeerak, a spokesman for money changers in Kabul's Shahzada market, told AFP. "Because of this business is down and more people are fleeing the country," he said, adding that nearly 100 money changers were kidnapped last year. In another shocking incident, armed men recently stole \$1.2 million from a money changer in Kabul after stopping his car. When the money changers took the issue to President Ashraf Ghani, police arrested a criminal gang said to be behind it but the money is yet to be recovered, Zeerak said.— AFP



KABUL: In this photograph taken on February 28, 2017, Afghan money changers count banknotes in the courtyard of the currency exchange Sarayee Shahzada market. — AFP



MANIK FARM: This file photograph taken on May 23, 2009 shows a general view of thousands of UNHCR tents, occupied by Internally Displaced People (IDP). — AFP

SRI LANKA RISKING CENSURE AS PREZ FALTERS ON WAR LEGACY

ISLAND WITH ITS FIRST REAL SHOT AT A LASTING PEACE

COLOMBO: President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in Sri Lanka promising justice for war crimes, breaking from his hawkish predecessor and presenting the island with its first real shot at a lasting peace. But that optimism has been sorely tested as Sirisena, having missed a two-year deadline to investigate war-era abuses, declared he would never prosecute his soldiers, rejecting outright fresh UN calls for an international trial.

"I am not going to allow non-governmental organizations to dictate how to run my government," he said a day after the UN criticized Sri Lanka's "worrying slow" progress in facing its wartime past. "I will not listen to their calls to prosecute my troops."

His defiant tone marked a sharp shift from the conciliatory approach that had earned praise from the international community, and drew unfavorable comparisons to Sri Lanka's wartime leader Mahinda Rajapakse.

The strongman resisted international pressure to probe allegations government forces under his control killed up to 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final months of the war, which ended in May 2009. "Sirisena's remarks are worrisome and alarmingly reminiscent of speeches by his rival and predecessor Mahinda Rajapakse," the International Crisis Group's Alan Keenan told AFP.

Sirisena has made inroads towards shedding Sri Lanka's status as global pariah since defeating Rajapakse in January 2015. A member of the majority Sinhalese community, he received the support of the Tamil minority

after promising accountability for excesses carried out by the largely Sinhalese military.

In October 2015 he went one step further, agreeing to a UN Human Rights Council resolution which called for special tribunals and gave Sri Lanka 18 months to establish credible investigations. But the deadline lapsed without those commitments being met. "We put too much trust in him, and he's badly disappointed us," said Eswarapatham Saravanapavan, a politician from the war-ravaged Tamil heartland of Jaffna. "We didn't ask for handouts. All we wanted was justice."

Politically constrained

Tamils abroad, fed up with inaction, have been pressuring the Geneva-based rights council to censure Sirisena at meetings later this month, Saravanapavan said. In a new report last week the council acknowledged Sri Lanka had taken some steps towards reconciliation but cautioned the measures had been "inadequate, lacked coordination and a sense of urgency".

Sirisena's blunt rejection of fresh demands for tribunals with foreign judges has raised concerns that no military personnel may ever be held accountable. But experts say the president is juggling pressures from a muscular army, which opposes any trials, and an unwieldy political coalition that helped bring him to power. "The political constraints facing Sirisena from a popular military are considerable, and the participation of foreign judges has always been a hard sell for many

Sinhalese," Keenan said. There have been symbolic gestures towards reconciliation. The national anthem was sung in Tamil during national day celebrations last year for the first time in 67 years—an unthinkable act under Rajapakse. Swathes of military-occupied land have been returned to Tamils in Jaffna, where Sirisena hit the streets last week promising reconciliation just moments after railing against the UN. But there have been false steps, too.

Draconian anti-terror laws have not been repealed as promised, and rights groups expressed outrage when Sirisena sent a police officer implicated in abuse to defend his administration at a UN inquiry into torture. The president also raised eyebrows in November when he asked US-president elect Donald Trump to use America's clout at the UN to clear Sri Lanka's war crimes record.

Diplomatic sources say a UN rights council session later this month poses a key test for Sri Lanka, which narrowly avoided a censure motion soon after Sirisena came to power. The island nation bought time on that occasion by promising to address past abuses—an approach it has taken again with Sri Lanka's foreign minister appealing for a second chance.

It's a worrying case of *deja vu* for those who backed Sirisena in his shock victory over Rajapakse, often despite threats to their own lives. "The president's mandate was for reform. We are very disappointed he has not kept his pledges," said civil society leader Sarath Wijesuriya. — AFP