

International

Silent no more: Nepal's wartime rape survivors demand recognition

After years of waiting for redress, they are now sharing their experiences

KATHMANDU: Beaten and raped by police officers as a child, Mira was among the many victims of sexual violence during Nepal's civil war—and is now one of the few to recount her ordeal. Guerrilla attacks and forced disappearances were daily facts of life on both sides of the Himalayan republic's decade-long Maoist insurgency. The conflict ended in 2006 with a peace deal that brought the rebels into government and promised justice for those who had suffered in the fighting. But 16 years after the war ended, civilian courts have handed down just two convictions for civil war-era crimes, while rape survivors are frustrated that their traumas have been met with official indifference.



Victims of sexual violence during Nepal's civil war

After years of waiting for redress, they are now sharing their experiences in a demand for recognition. "They have failed to even mention our cases," Mira, who asked to use a pseudonym, told AFP. "The least they could do is recognize that these incidents happened." Mira was just 12 years old in 1999 when she was arrested for participating in a cultural outreach programme run by the Maoist rebels. She spent months

in custody, during which she said she suffered repeated rapes at the hands of officers who also beat her mercilessly.

"I was beyond recognition—my face was swollen, my body was swollen," she said. "My womb keeps hurting, my body keeps hurting. I still have to take medicines." More than 17,000 people were killed and many thousands more were forced to flee their homes before the 2006 peace deal. The settlement included the promise of impartial investigations of wartime atrocities. But it did not include provisions for survivors of sexual violence, who were less willing to report their experiences, and who were also left out of an interim compensation scheme for conflict victims.

"Incidents of rape had taken place during the 10-year war. The government must admit this, and address this," Devi Khadka, coordinator of the National Organisation of Conflict Rape Victims, told AFP. The civil war had just begun in 1997 when Khadka, then a teenager, was herself raped by security forces in custody, she said. She joined the Maoist insurgency, rising steadily through the ranks, and has served in parliament, but battled depression for years. "I stayed silent for a long time, for many reasons. But no one else spoke up. I felt I had to raise my voice for all of us," she said.

'How will we punish them?'

Nepali society traditionally ties chastity to the honour of women and their households, and the stigma of rape often compels victims to keep silent. Already suffering from physical and mental trauma, those that do come forward are often ostracised by their families and

Amnesty International said it was "extremely disturbed by reports and images emerging from the explosions at Insein Prison... No one should die delivering parcels to their loved ones."

Inmates in Myanmar's jails often rely on friends or family for food and medicine supplies. Rights groups say hundreds of political prisoners are held in Insein, including former British ambassador to Myanmar Vicky Bowman and Japanese journalist Toru Kubota.

Hearings at a special court inside the prison compound were cancelled for the day after the blasts, according to a local lawyer who did not want to give their name.

Turmoil

Conflict has spiralled in Myanmar since the coup. Self-declared civilian "people's defence forces" (PDF) have sprung up to fight the junta, surprising the military with their effectiveness, some analysts say. Across the country, there are almost daily killings of low-level junta officials or anti-coup activists, with details murky and reprisals often following quickly.

While most of the violence has occurred in rural areas, Yangon has also been rocked by a spate of bombings. In July, a bomb blast near a shopping mall in the city killed two people and wounded 11.

An explosion near a bus stop in a busy neighbourhood in May killed one man and wounded nine people. The junta later said the bomb had gone off accidentally and that the victim had been in contact with PDF groups it has declared "terrorists".

More than 2,300 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent since the coup and over 15,000 arrested, according to a local monitoring group. The junta blames anti-coup fighters for the deaths of almost 3,900 civilians. — AFP



KATHMANDU, Nepal: In this picture taken on June 17, 2022, coordinator of the National Organisation of Conflict Rape Victims Devi Khadka speaks during an interview with AFP in Kathmandu. — AFP

struggle to support themselves.

"What we need is support for our livelihood, for our health and for our children's future," said Reenu, who was raped by Maoist soldiers during the conflict. She added that the immediate needs of victims were a bigger priority than bringing perpetrators to justice.

"Many women don't even know who wronged them, so how will we punish them?" she asked. Nepal's two transitional justice commissions began operations in 2015 but have failed to resolve a single case, despite

receiving over 60,000 complaints of murders, torture and unexplained disappearances.

More than 300 cases of rape and sexual violence have been registered by the commission, but activists say the formal reports are a small fraction of the true total. Survivors are reluctant to come forward because the government has failed to "create a secure environment" for them to do so, said Mandira Sharma, a senior legal adviser for the International Commission of Jurists. "But these are serious crimes," she told AFP. "The state is obligated to take action against the perpetrator."

'Scared to give us justice'

Critics say Nepal's truth and reconciliation process has been poorly designed from the outset and plagued by chronic funding shortfalls. It also lacks political support to proceed, with former Maoist rebels and political leaders among those blamed for presiding over wartime atrocities now in government ranks.

The finance minister in June announced a financial support programme for wartime survivors of sexual violence—the first compensation of its kind. But months after the announcement, not a single victim has received any money.

"The older this conflict gets, the more problems for women like me," a 33-year-old woman who said she was raped by security forces as a teenager told AFP. "The government is aware that women and children suffered sexual violence in the war," she said. "But it is scared to give us justice. What if their own people need to be punished?" — AFP

Bomb blasts outside Myanmar prison kill 8

YANGON, Myanmar: At least two bombs exploded outside a prison in Myanmar's commercial hub Yangon on Wednesday, killing eight people and wounding 18. The Southeast Asian nation has been in turmoil since a military coup last year, with swathes of the country engulfed by fighting.

The bombs hit a crowd queuing to drop off parcels for inmates at Insein Prison, junta authorities said in a statement, without specifying the number of explosions. They blamed "terrorists" and said the dead included three prison staff and a 10-year-old girl.

The junta added that security forces had defused another "homemade mine" found nearby. One witness queuing at the parcel counter told AFP the first blast hit around 9:30 am (0300 GMT). "Then another two went off quickly. After that we heard shooting as well," said the witness, who requested anonymity.

"I saw some people bleeding. The glass around the counter was all shattered." According to another witness, security forces locked down the area around the sprawling colonial-era prison after the explosions. Pictures in local media purporting to capture the aftermath showed what appeared to be blood stains on the floor around a counter, and shattered windows behind.

There was no claim of responsibility. A junta spokesman did not respond to a request for comment.



YANGON, Myanmar: File photo shows an entrance of Insein prison in Yangon. Multiple bomb blasts outside a prison in Myanmar's commercial hub Yangon killed eight and wounded 18 people. — AFP

Climate change puts a billion children at 'extreme risk'

THE HAGUE, Netherland: Some one billion children are at "extremely high risk" due to climate change harms, a rights group warned on Wednesday, adding that youths' living standards failed to improve in the last decade.

The KidsRights index, based on figures supplied by UN agencies, also said more than one-third of the world's children, some 820 million, were currently exposed to heatwaves. Water scarcity affected 920 million children worldwide, while diseases such as malaria and dengue affected some 600 million children, or one in every four, Dutch NGO KidsRights said.

The KidsRights Index is the first and only ranking that measures how children's rights are respected annually, ranking Iceland, Sweden, and Finland as the best for children's rights and Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Chad as the worst, out of 185 countries. Of the top three nations, only Sweden's ranking changed from the previous year, moving to second from fourth place. Marc Dullaert, founder

and chairman of KidsRights, described this year's report as "alarming for our current and future generations of children."

"A rapidly changing climate is now threatening their futures and their basic rights," he said. "There has been no significant progress in the standards of children's lives over the past decade and on top of that their livelihoods have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic," Dullaert added.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on children, who were unable to get food or medicine due to disruptions and the closure of clinics, leading to some 286,000 under the age of five years dying as a result, KidsRights said. For the first time in two decades, the number of child labourers has risen to 160 million, representing an increase of 8.4 million over the last four years, said the KidsRights Index, which is compiled together with Rotterdam's Erasmus University.

KidsRights highlighted Angola and Bangladesh, saying the two countries significantly improved their scores in regards to children's rights. Angola has more than halved its under-five child mortality, while Bangladesh has reduced the number of underweight children under five years by almost half.

But the report also slapped Montenegro for low vaccination numbers, ranked 49 on the index. The survey uses UN data to measure how countries measure up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. — AFP

Pulitzer-winning photographer stopped from flying to US

NEW DELHI: Indian authorities have prevented an award-winning photographer from flying to the United States to collect her Pulitzer Prize, the latest of several Kashmiri journalists barred from leaving the country.

Sanna Irshad Mattoo was one of four journalists working for Reuters news agency that took home the prestigious award for feature photography this year. The 28-year-old has won plaudits for documenting life in Indian-administered Kashmir, a disputed and highly militarised Himalayan territory home to a decades-old insurgency. Mattoo was stopped by immigration authorities at New Delhi airport late Tuesday and prevented from boarding while two of her colleagues were permitted to leave the country. She later tweeted a picture of her ticket that was stamped "cancelled without prejudice".

"I don't know what to say... this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me," Mattoo, who is also a fellow of the prestigious Magnum Foundation, told AFP. "Only I was stopped without any reason and the others were allowed to go. Maybe it has something to do with me being a Kashmiri."

Tuesday was the second time this year that Mattoo was prevented from leaving India. In July she was stopped in a similar manner at the same airport

while on her way to Paris for a book launch and photography exhibition. India has sought to entrench its control of Kashmir, which is also claimed in full by neighbouring Pakistan and which has been a constant source of tension between the nuclear-armed archrivals. Thousands have been killed there since the start of a rebellion against Indian rule in 1989, and more than half a million troops are permanently stationed in the region.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government stripped the territory of its limited autonomy in 2019, severing internet connections for months and detaining political leaders to forestall an anticipated backlash.

Foreign journalists have been barred from Kashmir and local reporters based in the territory say they have come under pressure to tone down their work.

'Arbitrary and excessive'

Several other Kashmiri journalists have also been prevented by authorities from travelling abroad in the past three years. Independent journalist Aakash Hassan, a regular contributor to the Guardian newspaper, was not allowed to board a flight from New Delhi to Sri Lanka for work in July.

He told AFP that months later, he has still received no information from authorities as to why he was denied permission to travel. "Given the pattern, it looks like it only happens to Kashmiri journalists," Hassan told AFP. The decision to prevent Mattoo from leaving was "arbitrary and excessive", Beh Lih Yi of the Committee to Protect Journalists said in a statement. She called on India to cease "all forms of harassment and intimidation" against journalists working in Kashmir. — AFP

HK court allows UK trial lawyer for Jimmy Lai

HONG KONG, China: A Hong Kong court on Wednesday allowed a veteran British lawyer to represent jailed pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai at his upcoming national security trial despite opposition from city authorities. Lai and a group of executives from the now-shuttered Apple Daily newspaper are being prosecuted for "colluding with foreign forces", an offence under a new security law China imposed on Hong Kong to stamp out dissent.

The trial is set to start in December and last for 30 days. Lai's legal team had wanted him to be represented by Tim Owen, a London-based lawyer, but the application was opposed by both Hong Kong's secretary for justice and Bar Association.

On Wednesday Jeremy Poon, chief judge of Hong Kong's High Court, ruled in favour of allowing Owen to represent Lai. "It is clearly in the public interest to admit an overseas specialist as eminent as Mr Owen so that the court will have the best assistance to tackle the formidable task at hand," Poon wrote in his judgement.

Lawyers from common law jurisdictions are able to work within Hong Kong's legal system, particularly for cases where their specific expertise may be required. Owen is a king's counsel—a senior trial lawyer in Britain—and a member of the international firm Matrix Chambers. He has previously worked in Hong Kong's courts including as a lead defence lawyer for British banker Rurik Jutting who was convicted of murdering two women. He also represented a police officer who appealed a conviction for assaulting a democracy protester in 2014.

The parties opposed to Owen's appointment argued Lai's national security trial was not especially complex and that the British lawyer would not "add a significant dimension". But Poon disagreed. "This case will be of immense importance to the development of local jurisprudence on the application of the National Security Law and the protection of the freedom of expression," he wrote. Lai, 74, is one of Hong Kong's best-known pro-democracy activists. He faces up to life in prison if convicted. He is already in jail for taking part in an illegal protest. For years, his Apple Daily tabloid newspaper was scathing in its criticism of China's Communist Party and openly supportive of democracy.—AFP



Sam Rainsy

Cambodia sentences exiled opposition figure to life

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia: Cambodia sentenced exiled opposition figure Sam Rainsy to life imprisonment on Wednesday for allegedly attempting to cede territory to a foreign entity, according to a court ruling. The case related to the politician's promises to protect the rights of the country's indigenous people, who continue to face discrimination mostly over land rights. A document from the Phnom Penh Municipal Court — seen by AFP — said Rainsy had been "sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of attempting to hand over a part of national territory to a foreign entity" in 2013. The court also stripped him of all political rights, it added.

It relates to a 2013 meeting between Rainsy and a leader of the US-based Montagnard Foundation, which works to protect the rights of indigenous minorities in Vietnam. A video posted by an anonymous Facebook account in 2018 appeared to show him pledging to uphold the rights of Cambodia's indigenous people.

Rainsy and the Montagnard Foundation's then-leader Kok Ssor also signed a document with three articles from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on minorities' self-determination rights. But Cambodian authorities accused him of treachery, and of attempting to give land to foreigners. Montagnard people are a mostly Christian ethnic minority group that lives in Vietnam's mountainous Central Highlands region. Rainsy has lived in France since 2015 to avoid jail on a number of convictions he says are politically motivated, including a 25-year sentence passed in March last year.—AFP