

## FEATURE



Sri Lanka Army troops patrolling Jaffna town.  
Photo Lakruwan Wanniarachchi/AFP/Getty Images

## Where are the 'missing' Tamils?

Western officials, rights watchdogs sound alarm

Andrew Mills  
Toronto Star

A FEW weeks ago, after midnight, a white van full of what appeared to be government soldiers pulled up in front of Kanakan Sasikaran's house.

They kicked in the back door and about 15 men, some of them with black masks, stormed into the house. They hauled Sasikaran, 29, from his bed, dragged him out to the van and, just before speeding off, struck his wife in the face with the butt of an AK-47 assault rifle.

There has been no trace of Sasikaran since.

Now, his weary relatives search for news at the Red Cross, the police station and, on this particular afternoon, in the hot waiting room of the human rights commission.

It operates an arm's-length government agency that tries to record the troubling spike in killings and disappearances of

Tamils here in the last six months.

Neither the army, nor the police say they picked Sasikaran up, according to his 45-year-old uncle Sittambalam Mohandas. His nephew, he says, worked as a tractor driver and has no connections to the Tamil Tigers.

"We don't know whether he is still alive or not," Mohandas says. "And if he is alive, where is he? We don't know the answers."

In Jaffna, more than 100 Tamil civilians have been killed and 255 have been reported missing so far this year, according to Mudiappah Remadious, a lawyer at the human rights commission.

The strong evidence has Remadious convinced that the Sinhalese-dominated security forces are behind at least 40 of the disappearances and most of the killings.

As Sri Lanka teeters at the brink of all-out civil war, the recent string of killings and disappearances of Tamils living in government-controlled areas is a chilling signal of the bloody ethnic fight that looms ahead.

Neither the government nor the Tamil Tigers who are fighting to create an independent homeland for the Tamil minority have yet declared war here.

Nevertheless, fighting and attacks have killed more than 700

people - more than half of them civilians - so far this year.

Diplomats and rights watchdogs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are sounding the alarm about the killing and disappearance of Tamil civilians, which is spinning the cycle of violence out of control.

As the Tamil Tigers have stepped up their suicide bombings and attacks on military, government and civilian targets, the security forces appear to have responded by taking revenge on Tamil civilians.

It has already created a culture of fear among Tamil civilians.

Some 50,000 mainly Tamil refugees have left their homes since the end of April, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Some have moved into territory controlled by the Tamil Tigers, others have paid smugglers to ferry them to India.

An estimated 40,000 soldiers patrol the 500,000 Tamils on the Jaffna peninsula. In Jaffna town, troops in full combat gear line the streets at 20-metre intervals.

And when their 15-truck convoys barrel through the centre of town, civilians are forced to the roadside.

Across town, a Roman Catholic priest who's also been record-

ing the human rights violations unfolding around him worries that a government plan to terrify Tamil civilians is working, especially in Jaffna.

On his desk sit two file folders, one labelled "killing list" and the other labelled "missing."

He pulls a spreadsheet from the "missing" file and begins to read: "April. 38 missing. Nine traced. 29 not traced. May. 55 missing. 18 traced. 37 not traced."

The soft-spoken priest looks up: "We haven't finished (the month) yet, but the number is still increasing." He fears many of these missing Tamils are already dead.

"It's schematized killing," he says. "To threaten the people. To keep them under pressure. To send the message that the government can save the life and the government can destroy the life."

The priest doesn't want his name published because so the security forces don't hinder his work. The military, however, claims that its soldiers have nothing to do with the disappearances or killings.

"Civilians get caught in the crossfire also, but there are no organized killings," says army spokesman Brig. Prasad Samarasinghe. "And about the disappearances, of course the army is not responsible for this. Whenever someone is

taken into custody, they are handed over to the police."

But when pressed, Samarasinghe admits that there may be "a few bad eggs."

"When you take 1,000 people in the army, you get one or two corrupted people, right," he says. "If we find them and they are found guilty they will definitely be court martialled and punished."

"There is very good evidence that the security forces have once again started killing civilians and quite indiscriminately," says a Western diplomat in Colombo, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Most recently, for example, the Tigers were thought to be behind the bombing of a bus last month that killed 68 and injured 66 civilians. Two days later, members of the Navy hurled grenades into a church in the western town of Pesalai, where 3,000, mainly Tamil refugees, had taken shelter.

The grenade blew one woman's head off and injured 47 others inside the church, according to a report by Ryappu Joseph, the bishop of Mannar, and filed with the Vatican.

"See the cruelty here. I don't think anything like this happens

Continued on page 11