

REVIEWING CHILD ABUSE-RELATED MEDIA REPORTS

Collective action 'a must' for proper law enforcement

BY PEACE / ECPAT

In April of this year (2023), Sri Lanka witnessed 65 reported incidents of child abuse, involving 78 child victims (some incidents had multiple victims and/or perpetrators). Among the victims, 54% were female, 40% were male, and 6% were unspecified. A significant portion (47%) of the abusers were acquaintances of the child but not related to them. Among the districts, Matara had the highest reported rate of child abuse at 9%, followed by the Kalutara, Monaragala, and Ratnapura districts, each at 7.7%.

The most prevalent form of violence against children was sexual abuse, accounting for 33.3% of the reported incidents, followed by physical abuse and neglect at 21.8% each. Disturbingly, there was an increase in negligence by primary school caregivers, leading to nearly 40 schoolchildren suffering from food poisoning.

Tragically, April also marked the mysterious death of a 16-year-old schoolgirl. She jumped naked from the third floor of a motel building, resulting in her death. Further details surrounding this incident are still being investigated.

Child abuse categories

The statistics provided for April show 65 reported incidents of child abuse and that sexual abuse is once again the most common form of abuse, accounting for (33.3%) of all the incidents reported. In a few cases, multiple perpetrators were involved in the violation. Neglect and physical abuse follow closely behind at (21.8%) each. Abduction and homicide also continue to be significant concerns, with six and four cases, respectively. There were comparatively fewer instances of drug abuse, emotional abuse, and trafficking, with only one case each. Suicide accounted for (2.6%) of the reported cases.

Out of the 78 victims involved in 65 child abuse incidents that were reported, 26 (33%) experienced sexual abuse, which was the highest percentage of any category. Physical abuse and negligence come next with 17 victims (22%) each followed by six abductions and five homicides. Overall, the data shows that victims of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and negligence account for 60% of all the cases.

Victims by gender

Data from the media monitoring team shows that females made up the majority of the reported child abuse victims, with 42 (54%) of female



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People of all ages should play major role to create safe environment for the young

victims, 31 (40%) males, and 5 (6%) unspecified. This indicates that girls are more vulnerable to abuse than boys, with a significantly higher number of female victims. Yet, the majority of the victims of negligence-related cases were male children at 70%.

Age group of the victims

Children between the ages of 15 and 18 account for the highest percentage of child abuse victims, comprising 43.6% of all victims. The second most targeted age range is between 10 and 14 years old, comprising 23.1% of the victims. Sexual abuse is the most common form of abuse in these two age groups, with 41.2% of the victims aged 15-18 and 38.9% of the victims aged 10-14 being subjected to sexual abuse.

Children aged six to 10 years make up 12.8% of the victims, while children under the age of five account for 7.7% of the victims. Infants and toddlers under the age of one make up 5.1% of all the victims, indicating that even the youngest children are not immune to abuse.

It is important to note that 7.7% of the victims fall under an unspecified age group, which highlights the need for more accurate data collection and reporting.

Geographic distribution

The district with the highest reported rate of child abuse is Matara at 9%, followed closely by the Kalutara, Monaragala, and Ratnapura districts with rates of 7.7%. Meanwhile, districts such as Batticaloa and Trincomalee have the lowest reported rates of child abuse, with each reporting only one case.

However, it is important to note that this data only represents reported cases and does not account for the actual number of child abuse incidents that occur. Many cases still go unreported due to a lack of awareness and understanding of the issue, as well as fear and shame among the victims. This highlights the need for greater efforts to increase awareness about child abuse and to create a safe

environment for the victims to report abusive situations.

Child abusers

Based on the reported incidents of child abuse in the month, it can be seen that the total number of incidents reported in the media was 65, with 66 perpetrators involved. Out of the 66 perpetrators, 31 were known to the child and 28 were related. From this data, it can be inferred that the majority of the abusers (47%) are not related to the child but known to them, whether they are close to the victim or not.

The data for the month reinforces the findings of previous reports, which suggest that the majority of the abusers are not strangers but rather individuals who are known to the child.

Negligence of the most vulnerable

In April, there were two incidents that impacted a vulnerable group of children, aged between five and three-years-old. These incidents involved food poisoning while in the care of their respective primary schools and nurseries, resulting in 39 children being hospitalised. It is alarming to note that the caregivers failed to take necessary precautionary measures such as food testing and maintaining high standards of food quality. The Ministry of Education must take responsibility for ensuring that both private and Government primary institutions take measures to prevent such incidents from occurring in the future. It is the Government's responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of its most important and vulnerable citizens.

The tragic death of a 16-year-old schoolgirl

(In order to maintain people's privacy, their real names are not disclosed below)

The whole nation was left in shock when the body of 16-year-old schoolgirl Shehani was discovered near the railway tracks in Kalutara on 6 May. Reports revealed that

Shehani had taken a fatal fall from the third floor of a nearby five-storey building, which is reportedly used for leisure accommodation. An investigation into the mystery surrounding Shehani's death revealed a sorrowful story with three young people associated with the tragedy, all of whom have been identified as suspects in the case. The primary suspect is 29-year-old Sumith, while the other two suspects are Shehani's 19-year-old friend Amalka and Amalka's 22-year-old boyfriend Ruwan. Investigations have uncovered a worrying pattern of events surrounding the suspicious case. Reports have suggested that Ruwan helped arrange a meeting between Shehani and Sumith, who was allegedly paying Ruwan a sum of Rs. 20,000 for his services, with an advanced payment of Rs. 12,000 deposited in his bank account. Sumith has confessed to visiting the building on 6 May with Ruwan and Amalka, where all four had rented two rooms on the third floor. He has also admitted that they had been drinking alcohol. Moreover, it appears that this was the first time that Sumith had met Shehani, with Ruwan's introductions being the link.

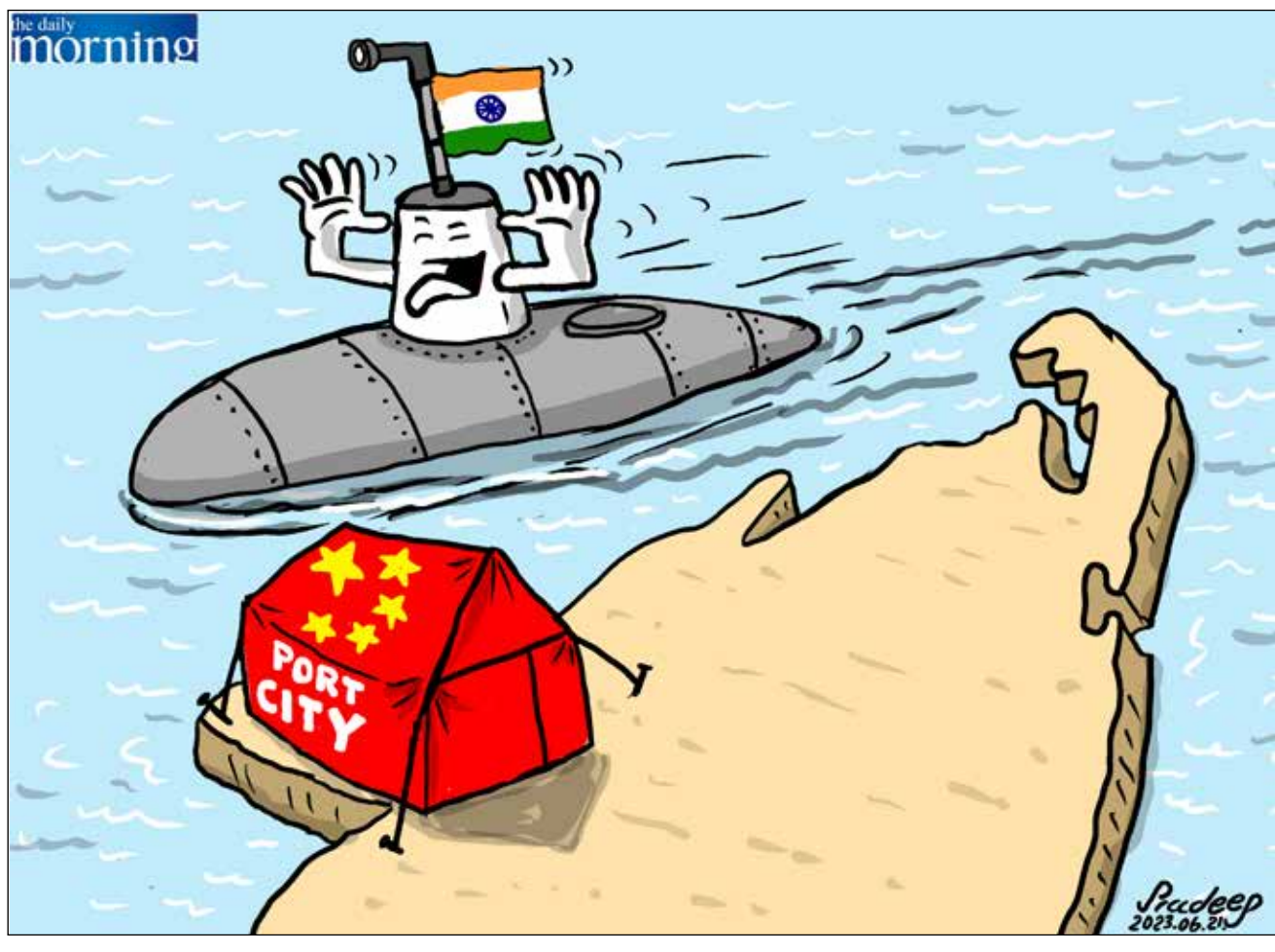
The tragedy of what happened in the hotel between those involved has left an innocent teenage schoolgirl dead. Unfortunately, incidents such as these have become too familiar. But, have we truly learned any lessons from the lives that have been lost? It is a million rupee question to ask. The sexual exploitation of children is a blight on our society that goes relatively unnoticed by parents, institutions and the law enforcement. We all have a duty to ensure the safety and innocence of our children, and doing so requires accountability and a proactive effort to prevent such heinous crimes against children.

As a result of this heart-breaking case, the Government has announced the introduction of new laws to protect children from sexual abuse. Sadly, this is not the first such occurrence, where only after a child has sacrificed her life to a sexual predator do the rulers take notice. Nevertheless, we appreciate the Government's decisive action in strengthening the law in order to protect young lives. However, this legal action should not be limited to law books. It must be supplemented by a multi-faceted action plan, with the Government, the civil society and the law enforcement shouldering the responsibility of protecting children from sexual exploitation.

To effect this, an atmosphere of greater awareness should be created amongst people of all ages and walks of life – schoolchildren, teachers, parents, legal guardians, private corporations and Government organisations should all be educated on the issue at hand and encouraged to play a role in creating a safe environment for the young. Only through such concerted collective action can we ensure the implementation and enforcement of these laws.

(Protecting Environment and Children Everywhere (PEACE) / End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism Sri Lanka (ECPAT) is a non-governmental organisation focused on child protection by way of ending the sexual abuse and exploitation of children)

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