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New emergency powers bringing 'reign of terror'

Colombo accused of aiding death squads

Derek Brown in Colombo

NEWLY formed human rights groups in Sri Lanka have accused the government of using new emergency powers to set up death squads.

The Colombo District Citizens' Committee claims that at least 1,000 people have disappeared without trace this year. The committee says abductions and killings have increased dramatically since new powers were introduced on November 9, with the aim of curbing the growing militancy of Sinhalese rebels in the south.

The order allows junior police officers, or anyone authorised by them, to dispose of bodies without inquest.

This has outraged the Sinhalese Buddhist majority, which lays great store by family funerals. "The more dangerous human rights aspect of it is that people are being rounded up at night and killed, and their bodies disposed of," said the committee's president, Mr Prins Gunasekara.

The Colombo group, formed two weeks ago, has been inundated with horror stories. Its first list of incidents, many backed by affidavits from relatives and other witnesses, runs to nearly 100 names of people shot, tortured, beaten, or arrested. Some of the murders,

the committee acknowledges, could have been committed by criminals, or by the increasingly merciless Janatha Vimukthi, Peramuna (JVP) bands of armed Sinhalese militants.

But most, committee members insist, were the work of soldiers, police, Special Task Force paramilitary units, or members of the so-called Green Tigers, a name applied to any armed supporter of the ruling United National Party.

"The citizens' committee fears that this country is being slowly dragged towards anarchy and civil war," said a statement, which also talked of "a reign of terror" by government forces, both official and unofficial.

"We condemn all killings, no matter who does them," said the committee's treasurer, Dr Hema Gunatilake. "But our point is that the JVP killings are heavily publicised, while these state killings are not. And if the state descends to the level of the subversives, something is really wrong."

So far this year, Mr Gunasekara and other senior lawyers have lodged 460 habeas corpus cases, in effect accusing the authorities of responsibility for missing persons. Only one of the cases involves a disappearance in Tamil areas.

The establishment of a citizens' committee in the Sinhalese south carries an uncanny

echo of similar groups in the mainly Tamil north and east, which complained for years of atrocities. The grisly descriptions are identical: overnight cordon and search operations, youths taken away never to reappear, mutilated bodies dumped in rivers, and corpses burned on pyres of vehicle tyres.

The government claims that nearly all the killings in the south — at least 1,000 this year are officially admitted — were the work of the JVP and its associates, who are committed to violent Marxist revolution.

In its campaign against the government, and in protest against presidential elections due on December 19, the JVP has indeed paralysed and terrorised large areas of the south, with strikes enforced by intimidation, destruction of power lines, and widespread disruption of transport and government services. The official death toll is growing by 15 to 20 every day.

The savage irony of Sinhalese Sri Lanka's slide into chaos is that the North and East provinces are inching back to security, if not normality, after five years or more of bloody strife.

Last week, under Indian supervision, the people of Eastern Province turned out in impressive numbers to vote for a new council to run mainly Tamil areas.