

SPECIAL REPORTS

ON a bleak Sunday morning last fortnight, the residents of Kalutara, 50 miles south of Colombo, woke up to a sickening stench. The curious made their way to the bus shelter near the main road from where it emanated. What they saw was nauseating—a body, its upper half charred beyond recognition. The smell of burnt rubber told how the death had taken place—by necklacing, a method in which an automobile tyre is thrown around the neck of the victim and set alight.

For two days the rotting body lay by the roadside. No one touched it. And with good reason. It was the body of a suspected Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (jvp) activist killed by security forces—another victim in a largely unreported war fought by the Sri Lankan Government in the southern province of the island. Says a bystander: "No one will touch the body. The same fate awaits anyone who dares to give it a decent burial."

For more than five years now, since the jvp was proscribed a second time, the Sri Lankan Government has been fighting a desperate battle against it. Last fortnight the Government launched another assault. Hundreds of youth in the southern provincial towns of Kalutara, Bentota, Ambalangoda and Galle were rounded up under emergency powers. Scores of them were later found burnt to death.

Typically, a convoy of Sri Lankan security forces arrives at a village or town and takes into custody all the youth in the neighbourhood. Last week, an army patrol hauled in 200 suspected jvp activists in the town of Panadura. Two days later, four bodies were found "necklaced" at Bandaragama, a nearby village. Wyman d'Silva, whose son Ajit Wasantha, 21, was taken away, has no idea what has happened to him. "I can only hope and pray," he says. Adds Deepika Kalyani, whose husband, Ranjit Abeyasinghe, 21, was also picked up: "I have heard about what they do. I'm scared."

And not surprisingly. Deprived of



A 'necklaced' JVP activist

reporting less than 10 per cent occupancy. Few tourists land in Colombo and fewer still venture down south, now known as jvp territory. In village after village beyond Matara town, it is the jvp writ which runs. Every village observes a curfew starting 9 p.m. each night—imposed by the radical group. The Sri Lankan security forces rarely move out at night and when they do, it is only in big convoys.

The raging unrest in the south has destroyed Sri Lanka's once-excellent education system. Universities in the south have been closed for nearly two years. Colombo's five universities opened briefly last June but were shut down after student unrest—a euphemism for pro-jvp

JVP
Macabre Retaliation

Security forces, rebels wage a bitter war

and anti-government activity. Hundreds of students were arrested when security forces entered the Colombo University last fortnight. Says Arjuna d'Souza, a senior lecturer at the open university in Nawala: "Prolonged periods of academic inactivity have forced students into political activity."

Now, the jvp has struck in the heart of Colombo. Last fortnight, its cadres assassinated the director-general of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, Thevis Guruge, who was on the four-member censor board appointed by the Government only the previous fortnight. A few days earlier, jvp men had used Claymore mines to blow up a security post in the city, killing four soldiers and an officer. Despite the surface calm, Colombo residents live in constant fear. Armed soldiers, drawn from all three wings of the services guard major avenues and landmarks.

Yet the Government maintains a facade of calm. But the man on the street is clearly unnerved. Asked how he felt about the battle between the Government and the jvp which had now entered Colombo, Nandan Hettiarachy, a city banker, answered with just one word: "Clueless." As an afterthought, he added another: "Desperate."

In the past three months, three lawyers taking up human rights cases have been killed. The last was Charita Lankapura, shot dead on July 7 at Slave Island, Colombo, by two unidentified gunmen. Lankapura, who was on the advisory committee of the Students for Human Rights, had filed hundreds of habeas corpus petitions on behalf of people in southern areas who had "disappeared". Prins Gunasekhara, former MP, president of the Lawyers for Democracy and founder of the Centre for Human Rights in Galle, says: "In the guise of combating the jvp, the Government is giving a free run to its trigger-happy security forces and UNP cadres." He too has received death threats.

The brutal face-off between the Sri Lankan security forces and the jvp has virtually paralysed southern Sri Lanka. Tourism, once the principal revenue earner, has hit rock bottom with hotels

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—CHIDANAND RAJGHATTA