

**Statement by Women's Action Network on the recent attacks on women, impunity and the lack of the rule of law – Sri Lanka**

*This report is based on interviews given by affected women and women's organizations working in the North and East.*

In the month of August 2011 many women in the north and the east have been attacked individually, and the female population terrorized more generally, by unidentified men, attackers now colloquially referred to as 'Grease Yakas'. These incidents and the response of law enforcement and government agencies indicate a larger problem in the law and order situation in the north and east: the systemic failure of the rule of law and the consistent inability, or unwillingness, of law enforcement authorities and the state to hold the assailants accountable. While noting that there have been alleged attacks outside the north and east, this statement concentrates on these regions alone.

Women in the North and East have just begun rebuilding their lives post war. A significant proportion of households there are headed by women, many of whom have no secure housing. These communities are therefore fragile and vulnerable. It is in this context that these attacks must be understood. Even though many have been assailants who have specifically attacked women purely to create terror and fear in these communities, a number of copycat incidents have also been perpetrated showing other individuals using this opportunity to both harass women and commit petty thefts and robberies.

People in the North and East have been living in fear for the last 30 years. Due to the war, these people have faced death, loss of family members, arrests and detention and are just beginning to rebuild their lives. These concerted attacks by the 'grease yakas' have brought back terror into people's lives, especially the lives of women. Women have borne the brunt of the war and are now forced to live without security and safety once again. In number of communities the level of fear is so high that it has resulted in panic and where the community has been forced to find its own security. In this context of police inaction, people have begun to take law and order into their hands. It is the fear within the community and among people and the lack of faith in the protection provided by the state that has led people to attack alleged assailants or other suspicious persons. This has resumed vigilante justice and cases of individuals being targeted which has also contributed to lawlessness and further militarization.

Violence against women has seen a drastic rise in the North and the East. Justice for women who have faced violence has been low in Sri Lanka. Violence against women cases are rarely taken to court; even in the cases of rape, rapists are rarely jailed. This culture of impunity regarding violence against women is reflected once again in these attacks by 'grease yakas'. There is a lack of concern regarding the women who have been attacked, a sensationalization – often amounting to trivialization – of the incidents by the media, women who have been attacked have been accused of lying and some hospital authorities have even refused to treat them. Due to these attacks women have been forced to stay indoors. Their mobility is restricted and their access to employment curtailed. Many women in these areas work as daily wage laborers, as farmers and as minor staff in government offices. Due to fear and family concerns about safety these women have had to stop

going to work, hindering their economic rights and also affecting the families they support. Several women single handedly support their families financially. In many villages women have been gathering in a common place at night, finding safety in numbers just as they did during the time of war. These women have for several nights been unable to even go out for nature calls and sleep uneasily at night. Muslim women have been facing additional problem as they have been unable to observe their religious rituals during this holy month of Ramadan.

The majority of attacks have been carried out at night mainly targeting women. In number of cases documented in this statement the individual women saw the potential attackers in their own properties. In cases where the assailant has been seen, the men have been dressed in black with their faces covered in cloth or soot. In some cases the women suffered minor injuries.

In several instances when women have called out for help or cried in fear the attacker has taken flight in the direction of nearby army/navy camps or military check points. Many women have stated that the attacker has sharp metal nails attached to his fingers. The eyewitnesses and affected women have complained that even with army/navy camps within the village/ town area the military personal have not intervened or helped people when they have called out for help.

However, while people have alleged that there is a connection between the military and the attackers, this is yet to be proven.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that neither the army nor the police have taken any action in many cases and in several instances provided the assailant protection without arresting or interrogating him. To date none of such assailants captured and handed over to law enforcement authority have been brought to court. The police officially maintain that there are no such people as "grease devils". However, contradicting themselves, police in several instances have provided information about "grease devil" issues in different parts of the country and in several cases have had meetings and asked the public to call a number if they catch the "grease devils". People in frustration have sought to take law in to their own hands. This has led to several attackers being beaten by the villagers; and the military, in turn, retaliating and shooting randomly at the villagers. There were many reported cases of death, the latest being the loss of life of a policeman in Puttalam on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2011. This situation has also resulted in innocent people being attacked by the villagers on mere suspicion and some of the villagers who captured or chased the "grease man" being beaten up by the military and police. This lack of law and order is deplorable.

The north and east have been very tense the last few weeks due to local frustration and anger at being attacked and the lack of protection and the impunity with which the assailants have been able to function. This has caused severe friction between the villagers and the army/ navy and the police.

Several women have complained that even though there are military check points and more military check points and special task forces have been brought in, several new people have been spotted around the village in civilian clothing. Even though these women themselves have been stopped at the check points when entering the camps, these people who do not belong to the village have been allowed to enter the village/town area freely.

The Women's Action Network is in a position to identify the following specific incidents:

- **Puttalam**

August 12, 2011- **Karamba, Kalpiti**- a woman saw the attacker jump the fence and try to enter her house. She raised her voice calling out for help, at which time the assailant climbed a tree. However the villagers were not able to locate him. The woman described the man as having his mouth covered and wearing underwear and a shirt. His hands had long black nails..

August 17, 2011, **Maligapuram**- a man in black was found on top of a toilet. The woman seeing the man shouted out for help due to which the assailant ran away. The police arrived at the scene even though the villagers had not informed the police. However no one was able to find the attacker.

August 19, 2011-**Kalpiti town** a woman preparing to pray and break her fast had gone outside to wash her face. A man in black grabbed her and scraped her hand hurting her. She screamed and called out for help. Villagers arrived at the scene and took the woman to hospital. However the doctor refused to treat her stating that she was fabricating the story. The woman was then taken to a private hospital where she was given treatment. The villagers also caught the alleged attacker and beat him. Many of the villagers identified the attacker as a police officer from the near by police station. The police arrived on the scene and took custody of the attacker and admitted him to hospital and the assailant was treated by the doctors and taken in an ambulance to Chilaw hospital. Seeing this double standard in treatment the villagers attacked the hospital.

August 20, 2011- **Palavi**. A woman saw the attacker and raised her voice due to which the assailant ran away. The villagers were not able to find the attacker.

August 21, 2011- **Manal Kundu** two unknown men appeared at a government officer's house and villagers started chasing them. Police appeared in the scene and villagers started attacking the police. Police open fired and two villagers got injured and later a group of villagers attacked the police and killed one police officer. As this statement was drafted more military has been brought in and Puttalam town looks like a war zone according to eyewitness accounts.

- **Trincomalee**

Women were attacked on August 8, in **Serunuwera**, 10<sup>th</sup> in **Bharathipuram** and on the 12<sup>th</sup> in **Mahaweligama** by an 'unknown' man dressed in black.

On August 9<sup>th</sup> a women was attacked by the alleged 'Grease Yaka' and sustained injuries on her neck. The woman was taken to hospital. She was from the **Sangama** village.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August villagers spotted the 'Grease Yaka' in **Muttur -Habeeb Nagar**. As the villagers chased the assailant, he ran in to the Navy camp in that area. The villagers demanded that the man be sent out. However the navy personal refused to do so. In anger the villagers set fire to the check post in front of the navy camp.

On 14<sup>th</sup> August the grease man was spotted in **Kinniya**. As the military personnel provided no support and seemed to be protecting the alleged assailant the villagers grew angry and clashed with the military. The police was brought in to calm the situation. However in anger the villagers set the police vehicle on fire. Unable to control the situation the military began shooting at people and 4 villagers were injured and 25 people were arrested.

- **Mannar**

August 8<sup>th</sup> a young woman living with her grandmother was attacked by a man in **Sannar**. The assailant injured her breast. The young woman has been in shock and has refused to go to hospital.

Since August 14<sup>th</sup> women in **Pesalai** and **Kataspathri** have been attacked on a daily basis. In all cases the assailants managed to escape. In a few cases the women were hurt and in the rest the women were able to call out for help.

August 18<sup>th</sup> several attacks took place in **Pesalai**. On that day there were continuous power cuts. This added towards the fear and also obstructed the villagers from staying vigilant.

August 19<sup>th</sup> three men entered a women's hostel run for children. The young girls seeing the attackers called out for help. The three men hearing the cry for help escaped fearing capture.

On August 19<sup>th</sup> a man jumped in to a woman's house in **Erukampiti** and hearing the noise she called out for help. Due to which the man ran towards the nearby army camp.

August 20<sup>th</sup> in division 1 and 5 of **Pesalai** a man jumped over the fence and people chased him towards a police point towards the sea side. Three boys who chased him saw the man change his clothes inside the navy check point and demanded the assailant to come out. The navy personnel from the other check point arrived in the scene and attacked the three boys who have been admitted to hospital. Therefore the villagers gathered in the church and the navy, army, police heads attended the meeting and stated that military personnel did not attack villagers and if the villagers surround the camp again they will be shot. They also informed the villagers that they should capture the assailant and hand him over to the military. Around 150 military staff attended that meeting.

August 21<sup>st</sup> a man, who tried to attack a woman in **Panang Kattukottu, Santhipuram** was attacked by the villagers. The assailant ran in to the Buddhist temple in that area.

On the same night a man attacked a woman near the military camp on **Thalwadu road, Mannar town**. The child saw the assailant and called out to the mother. The assailant hearing the cry ran out. The family followed the assailant out and found two policemen standing outside. When they complained to the policemen the policemen laughed and shrugged in response.

- **Mullaitivu**

August 15, 2011 villagers in Mullaitivu were informed by the police that the 'Grease Yaka' has been spotted in the area and that villagers should be alert and stay indoors. The villagers had a meeting at the mosque and set up a committee to stay watch through the night. The policeman said be

careful and gave number to call. The people gathered at the Mosque and formed a committee and put on duty.

August 16, 2011- At ten p.m. in **Thanniruttu** a man was found lurking near a house. The women seeing the man cried out and he ran away. On the same night another man was found in dark clothes in **Neeravipitti** however he too was able to run away before the villagers could catch him.

August 17, 2011- in **Hijarapuram** a women had taken her child to shrub to go to the bathroom. The child had called out to the mother seeing a man standing there. When the woman ran towards the child and shone her torch she states that she saw a 'ghost' the man was fully covered in black. The attacker saw the woman and flashed a red laser light on her eye, which hurt her eyes and using that moment he ran away. At that moment the women raised her voice and several villagers arrived at that place and started chasing the man. August 18, 2011- **Hijarapuram**, the 'Grease Yaka' was spotted again and was seen to run towards the army camp when the villagers chased him.

August 19, 2011- **Niravipitti**- a 15 year old young Tamil women had gone outside to use the toilet and even though she scanned the area with her torch before she used the toilet while she was getting up she saw a man covered in black staring at her. She screamed out and fainted due to fear. She has no recollection as to what took place subsequently. The villagers who heard her scream arrived at the scene of the commotion but no one from the army camp came to help or to inquire as to what was taking place. A little while later an unknown man appeared on a bike claiming to be lost and asked for directions. On his bike was a parcel that was wrapped in black. Suspecting him to be the attacker the villagers began interrogating him. However he was able to escape on his bike.

### **Recommendations**

The government has stated that the military presence in the north and the east was for the protection of the people. Even though there is a high military presence in all these areas, these assailants have been able to come and go freely. These incidents have made it clear that the high military presence has not been able to provide protection. The civil enforcement authority, namely the police, is a body trained to protect people and enforce order and law within the area. However the police have been unable to take any measures to curb these attacks and have in many instances told community leaders that they are unable to take any action due to the overall control of the military. We request that the civil administration be brought in full force. The police needs to uphold its commitment to human rights and increase its community outreach and strengthen its approach in addressing violence against women.

In a few cases women have been refused medical care at the hospitals. Doctors have stated that these attacks were fabrications and therefore they will not be given medical attention. These women have been forced to seek private medical care. This is a deliberate act of the hospital to deny these women treatment and also a refusal to acknowledge that these women have been attacked. The government must ensure that women are able to access free medical care, which is their right as citizens of Sri Lanka.

Civilians have the right to information and we request that these attacks not be hidden and those attacked be given proper medical care in the government hospitals and that their complaints regarding the attack must be registered.

The media reports on the matter reveal complete disregard to peoples' vulnerabilities. They have created panic and terror in the minds of the local people. The news reports have failed to bring to the public the harm caused to women, who are the primary victims of these attacks. We call upon the media to act responsibly, reducing panic and reporting incidents after proper investigations are done. Media bodies should also ensure to protect women's identities, ensure that women are not portrayed in a disrespectful manner or their stories treated in jest.

While there are several allegations being made for the motivation behind the attacks, no steps have been taken by the authorities, apart from arresting civilians who have taken the law into their hands or captured or chased the assailants. While we do not believe in vigilante justice we also hope the authorities understand peoples' fear and their need to take control of the situation and to protect women. We ask that strong action be taken by the state to protect these women. Such action should not result in further militarization of the north and east, which has been the state's response, but a return to civil law enforcement.

In this context, we ask that women be represented in consultative and investigative bodies. Remembering our commitment as a nation to women's equality, right to employment, life, liberty and movement we hope that the Sri Lankan government will take stringent action against the perpetrators, bring law and order through the civil administration and ensure that impunity in regards to violence against women is brought to an end. .

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