

Sri Lanka's abduction industry has top academic in its grip

The distraught family of Sri Lanka's most high profile kidnap victim is begging the authorities to accept his resignation as vice-chancellor of a university, the key demand of abductors who seized him from under the very nose of the government over a month ago.

In a case that has raised international stink, S. Raveendranath, 55, who has headed the Eastern University of Sri Lanka for around three years, sensationally disappeared Dec 15 from near a conference hall in a supposedly high security area of Colombo.

Since then, the Tamil man's wife has almost stopped eating and spends her days and nights in agony on bed, their son-in-law and trainee eye surgeon Muthusamy Malaravan, 36, told IANS over telephone from their Colombo home. 'She is crying all the time. The family members are in severe mental trauma.'

Adding to the worry is Raveendranath's feeble health. He is a diabetic and suffers from hypertension, both of which necessitate regulate doses of medicines. Any slip up can lead to a stroke that can prove fatal.

Malaravan, who has stopped doing surgeries because of the tension he is in, has one humble request to the University Grants Commission (UGC): Please accept my father-in-law's resignation as vice-chancellor so that the kidnappers let him go.

The abductors, widely believed to be the breakaway Tamil Tigers faction headed by Karuna, apparently want Raveendranath, who is from the north of the island, out of the university near the eastern town of Batticaloa, in a zone they consider as their own.

The UGC has different ideas. It thinks that if it were to give into the demand of the abductors, its 'prestige' will be hit. That 'prestige' is prolonging the agony of an already distressed family - the missing man's wife, two daughters and son-in-law.

In a violence-torn country where kidnappings of Tamils, the rich as well as the not so rich, have become routine, Raveendranath has still attracted a lot of attention in Sri Lanka and abroad as one who joined the Eastern University in 1981 as an assistant lecturer and rose to become the acting vice-chancellor in 2004 before assuming full charge in 2005.

And it was in 2004 that Karuna, the once famed regional commander of the Liberation Tigers of Tami Eelam (LTTE), broke away with his supporters. He has since been locked in a bloody turf war with the dominant LTTE for control of Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic east, apparently with Colombo's backing.

'It is more than one month and nobody is telling us where my father-in-law is,' said Malaravan. 'We have no single clue, nothing. They (police) are blank. Police do meet us, but that is all. And worse, there is no eyewitness to what really happened that day.'

'UGC has my father-in-law's resignation. They only need to make it public. We are requesting them to do it. We are ready to give 100 percent firm assurance that my father-in-law will have nothing to do with the university once he is freed. We will not file any case. We pray to god every day.'

The family has knocked on every single door in Colombo: President Mahinda Rajapakse, military officials, foreign embassies, Sri Lankan and global NGOs, the media and also the Colombo-based office of the Karuna group, which is laying the blame for the kidnapping on LTTE.

Raveendranath's problems came in the open when armed men abducted the dean of the arts faculty in September 2005 demanding the vice-chancellor's resignation. On Oct 2, he sent his resignation to UGC, and soon the dean was released. According to the family, the UGC asked him to work in Colombo. He complied. So he remained the vice-chancellor.

On two later occasions, Raveendranath received telephonic threats: 'You are still working. You are not obeying us. You will be in danger.' He reported the calls to UGC but his resignation was still not accepted. On Dec 15 he disappeared, becoming the most high profile of Tamils who have gone missing in Sri Lanka in recent times.

Malaravan details all that his father-in-law has done for the Eastern University and the linkages he has forged with universities around the world including India. The efforts are visible from the support generated for him in Western academic circles, including the US, Britain, France, Denmark, France, Sweden, Canada and Japan. But he remains missing.

Does the family have hope? 'We are still positive but worried,' says Malaravan. 'UGC must accept his resignation. If everyone works together, I think he can be released. He is a neutral man. Even if there is one phone call saying he is well, we shall be happy. Even that is not there.'

M.R. Narayan Swamy (© IANS / India eNews)