

Substandard conditions for institutionalised children in Sri Lanka

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A report released in February documented the appalling conditions facing many thousands of Sri Lankan children who have been institutionalised in government and privately-run homes.

The report, entitled “Home Truths—Children’s Rights in Institutional Care in Sri Lanka”, was compiled by the organisation Save the Children, with support from the Canadian International Development Agency. The research was conducted in 2005 and involved a survey of 329 institutions, housing 15,068 children aged from 4 to 19 years throughout Sri Lanka. The institutions ranged from state-run facilities such as remand homes for child offenders, certified homes for victims of abuse and orphanages, to voluntary homes run by charities and religious organisations.

The document stated that “the conditions for children in state-run institutions were extremely poor” and noted that there is “a gap in the government’s declared policy and performance”. It also indicated that the conditions in many of the private institutions surveyed were little better.

A section entitled “Quality of Care” stated: “Examples of poor quality physical care included: lack of a balanced, varied and nutritious diet that regularly included protein, fruit, or vegetables; insufficient, poor quality, unattractive and unfashionable clothing; less than the minimum requirements in relation to sleeping arrangements, building and storage for children’s belongings; and poor sanitation leading to poor hygiene.

“In addition to overcrowding, in many state institutions there was poor sanitation and inadequate supplies of basic necessities such as water soap, and tooth paste.... As a result, skin diseases were common among the children.”

The researchers also reported that “some children

slept on cement floors in cold or in damp corridors in the rain”. In the North-East province, 38 percent of the institutions did not provide beds for children. Even where beds were provided, only 49.5 percent of children thought they were “adequate.” In the North-Eastern and Southern provinces, more than 50 percent of the institutions did not have areas for the children to play.

Due to substandard conditions, children in the worst institutions continuously suffered from medical problems. However, they were afraid to report illnesses, the researchers found, because “they felt that the staff assumed they were faking.” Often, no proper medical treatment was available. Cases were uncovered where other children had been instructed to care for sick children.

Education was also neglected. The report stated: “Education was not provided consistently to a high level throughout the institutions surveyed. There were no facilities or environment suitable for studies. No methodical records of the children were kept. There was no planning for the care and development of individual children.”

In the certified homes as many as 31 percent of the girls had been admitted due to abuse—often by family members or relatives. But no adequate specialist care was found to exist. Overall, counselling services were available in only 16 percent of state-run institutions.

The report quoted from interviews to show how the mental state of the children was being affected by the conditions in the institutions. Examples of what children told researchers included “we sleep like dogs”, “getting tasty food is a real problem”, “we cannot ask for fish or meat in our meals”, “there is no-one to tell our sorrows” and “does protection mean keeping us caged?”.

Aggravating their mental stress, between 30 and 50 percent of the children in the surveyed facilities had been institutionalised for longer than three years. A large number of the children had little contact with their families due to distance. Some 36 percent of the children in the Southern province institutions and 31 percent in the Western province were from other areas of the country such as the North-East. In other cases, homes had a policy of restricting or blocking parental contact.

The report documented the reasons why the children were living in the facilities. Poverty was the primary cause. With 45 percent of Sri Lanka's population living on less than \$US2 per day, thousands of families simply cannot afford to raise their children. In the North-East province, about 40 percent of the children were from poverty-stricken families, while another 14 percent had been institutionalised because their family had been displaced by the long-running civil war in the region.

Forty percent of the children in institutions in the Western province and 20 percent in the Southern province were also from poor families. Other reasons for institutionalisation, such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, desertion, petty crime or being orphaned, also related to poverty.

The report also found that most the staff did not have childcare training and were not paid sufficiently. Out of some 3,000 employees, only 200 staff members had a degree and just 30 had higher qualifications. Over half or around 1,700 staff had not completed advanced-level high school.

As for pay, about 1,750 were paid less than 3,000 rupees (\$US30) a month, with another 700 receiving between 3,000 to 6,000 rupees. At least 60 were classified as unpaid workers and over 100 were paid less than 1,000 rupees a month. Just 400 were being paid 6,000 rupees a month and only a handful received what could be considered a living wage.

As a result, staff turnover was high, children suffered abuse including corporal punishment and the inadequate resources allocated for their care were often pilfered.

The conditions facing institutionalised youth are just one example of the indifference the Sri Lankan ruling elite has toward the children of the poor.

Across the country, hundreds of thousands of children

endure deprivation and oppression. A 1999 National Survey on Child Labour sponsored by the International Labour Organisation—the last such survey to be done in Sri Lanka—found that as many as 926,037 children under 15 were working. Over 230,000 child labourers were not attending school. As many as 60,000 children dropped out of school each year, the survey found, mainly due to poverty.

In the face of these conditions, President Mahinda Rajapakse of the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) has cynically declared 2006 as the "Year of the Child". Speaking on February 1, he said: "We consider the provision of adequate pre-natal nourishment to every Sri Lankan child to be born; ensuring a healthy life to every child that is born; the establishment of a suitable environment that will be conducive to the development of these children; and ensuring their safety and protection; as the responsibility of the government and state."

Despite the rhetoric, Rajapakse's 2006 budget made no extra funding available for state-run institutions for children. Just 200 million rupees (\$US2 million) has been allocated for the refurbishment of privately-run homes, but the money is to be shared between facilities for children, the disabled and the elderly. A nominal 200 rupees per month allowance will be paid to the families of newborn children—an amount which is not enough to pay for even a week of milk at the current prices.



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