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Tortured Afghan girl to go to India for treatment

By RAHIM FAIEZ and PATRICK QUINN

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KABUL, Afghanistan — A 15-year-old Afghan girl severely tortured for months by her in-laws in an attempt to force her into prostitution will be sent to India for medical treatment, an Afghan official said Tuesday.

Sahar Gul's mother-in-law and sister-in-law were arrested and her husband was being sought, said Interior Ministry spokesman Sediq Sediqi.

The case has shocked Afghanistan, though rights activists say serious abuses against women and girls in the conservative society are common. President Hamid Karzai has said that whoever used violence against Gul will be punished.



This photo taken Wednesday, Dec. 28, 2011 shows Sahar Gul, a 15-year-old Afghan wife, being carried in a wheelchair to a hospital in Baghlan, north of Kabul, Afghanistan. Afghan President Hamid Karzai said police will arrest members of a family accused of torturing and illegally detaining their son's teenage wife Gul for the past six months while trying to force her into a life of crime.

According to officials in northeastern Baghlan province, the in-laws kept Gul in a basement for six months, ripped her fingernails out, tortured her with hot irons and broke her fingers. Police freed her last week.

The public health and women's affairs ministers visited Gul, who is now in a Kabul hospital. She was freed from a basement at her husband's home last week after her uncle called the local police.

"It is a violent act that is unacceptable in the 21st century," Sediqi told reporters. "We are thankful of Sahar Gul's uncle."

He added that "if the police had not arrived in time she may have died."

Gul was married about seven months ago. Jawad Basharat, spokesman for the provincial police chief in Baghlan, said an arrest warrant had been issued for her husband, who is serving in the Afghan army.

"After police found out about the small girl Sahar Gul they took action and found her in the basement of the house in very bad condition," Basharat said. "Her nails were pulled out, she has injuries in all parts of her body, there are signs of burning on her body, she was suffering from different kinds of injuries."

He said that her mother-in-law and other members of the family were reportedly involved in what he described as "criminal activities," which he said included selling alcohol and prostitution.

According to preliminary reports, Basharat said, "they tried to force her into prostitution and she did not agree. This was one of the reasons that they detained her in the basement for six months." Rahima Zarifi, the provincial director of women's affairs in Baghlan, said a commission had been set up under Karzai's orders to investigate the case.

"According to the neighbors in the area, Sahar Gul's in-law's were not good people. Besides selling alcohol, they were involved in prostitution and that is why they put pressure on Sahar Gul to join with them. She was not happy with it and that is why they put her in the basement, detained her for six months and tortured her," Zarifi said. "They pulled out her nails. You can see the signs of torture and abuse all over her body, several types of torture and abuse. They even burned her with hot irons."

Health Minister Suraya Dalil said that despite progress in women's rights, work remained to be done.

"This is the very most extreme case that we have seen. That a child, that a girl child has been abused, has been physically abused, psychologically abused. It is an issue that shows that we are still need to work a lot with regard to education, with regard to awareness, with regard to social and economic development," Dalil said.

Despite much progress since the fall of the Taliban 10 years ago, women's rights in Afghanistan remain a problem area in a country with a strict patriarchal culture

Under Taliban rule, girls' schools were banned and women could only leave the house accompanied by a male family member.

A U.N. report issued in November found that a 2009 law meant to protect Afghan women from a host of abusive practices, including rape, forced marriage and the trading of women to settle disputes was being undermined by spotty enforcement.

The Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women was passed in August 2009 and had raised hopes among women's rights activists that Afghan women would get to fight back against abuses that had been ignored under Taliban rule. The law criminalized many abuses for the first time, including domestic violence, child marriage, driving a woman to resort to suicide and the selling and buying of women.

Yet the report found only a small percentage of reported crimes against women are pursued by the Afghan government.

Between March 2010 and March 2011, prosecutors opened 594 investigations involving crimes under the law. That's only 26 percent of the 2,299 incidents registered by the Afghan human rights commission, the U.N. report said. Prosecutors filed indictments in only 155 cases, or 7 percent of the total number of crimes reported.

Sometimes victims were pressured to withdraw their complaints or to settle for mediation by traditional councils, the report said. Sometimes prosecutors didn't proceed with mandatory investigations for violent acts like rape or prostitution. Other times, police simply ignored complaints, the report said.