

**Jan 26, 2006**

## **Hubby was strangling me, says flat fire victim**

**One of her three children still unconscious, the other two are awake**

**By Lim Wei Chean and K.C. Vijayan**

HER voice hoarse, Mrs Geraldine Prabhakaran, whose family was rescued from their blazing Tampines flat early on Tuesday morning, clung to her MP's hand while lying on her hospital bed and blurted out: 'I was in the prayer room and he was strangling me.'

'I called for the kids but they did not come,' the obviously agitated 33-year-old mother of three said as she recounted her struggle with her husband to Mr Ong Kian Min, her Member of Parliament, who paid her a visit in Changi General Hospital yesterday afternoon.

Mrs Prabhakaran, her husband Richard, 35, and three sons were rescued from their blazing seventh-floor Tampines flat, which police suspect was deliberately set on fire.

All five suffered smoke inhalation and were unconscious when pulled from their home.

Late last night, one of the children, 10-year-old twin Shaswin, was still unconscious, but in a stable condition in an intensive care ward at the KK Women's & Children's Hospital.

The worst off was Mr Prabhakaran, who suffered extensive brain damage. According to his father, doctors said he had taken a turn for the worse late last night and his chances are slim.

But Shaswin's twin, Sharwin, and the family's youngest child, Pirawin, seven, had both regained consciousness.

Last night, Sharwin was sitting up reading a book and Pirawin was awake and could recognise his relatives. Neither could talk as they were still hooked up to breathing tubes in the ICU.

Mrs Prabhakaran was yesterday moved out of intensive care and into a regular ward at Changi General.

The plight of her sons was foremost on Mrs Prabhakaran's mind when the visitors, who included grassroots leaders, turned up. She asked how they were, how long she had been in hospital and the condition of her husband.

She was concerned about the children missing school, about losing her job and about the family's finances.

She had just started a new job as an office administrator on Monday, the day before the blaze.

Mr Ong assured her that the Town Council would do all it could to help the family get back on their feet.

When asked what happened, she seemed unsure how the fire had started. However, her family did

not allow her to dwell long on the incident as it agitated her.

Meanwhile, police investigations are continuing, said spokesman Lily Lee. A key person expected to provide clues to the couple's relationship is the 25-year-old maid who walked out of the Prabhakarans' employ a day after a violent quarrel erupted on Jan 16.

Police were called and classified the case as voluntarily causing hurt and then advised the wife to lodge a magistrate's complaint and seek a personal protection order.

The Filipino maid had worked for the Prabhakarans since September 2004. It is understood police interviewed her yesterday.

Part of the couple's woes appear rooted in their differing plans for the family. It emerged that Mr Prabhakaran wanted to relocate the family to Australia but his wife apparently had objections. He left for Sydney to work as a paramedic in February last year but resigned and returned eight months later.

While relatives remain mystified about the circumstances behind the fire, some differences surfaced between the two families.

Mrs Prabhakaran's eldest sister Mary Francis, 50, a housewife, tried to persuade her to bar her in-laws from visiting her in hospital.

But she refused, insisting: 'I respect them.'

#### **ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY JESSICA LIM**

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