MEDIA FOCUS: Understanding Western systems vital to regaining custody of children in Sweden

KUALA LUMPUR: A WELL-KNOWN Indian lawyer and activist has called for active and sustained media interest in the plight of the Malaysian couple and their four children currently in custody in Sweden.

Suranya Aiyar, a mother of two who has actively campaigned against the confiscation of children by foreign authorities, said a proper understanding of the Western child protection systems was vital to securing the return of the children of Tourism Malaysia director in Sweden Azizul Raheem Awalludin and his wife Shalwati Nurshal.

Azizul and Shalwati have been held in Swedish jail since Dec 18 after they allegedly smacked their son for not praying.

All forms of corporal punishment were formally banned in Sweden since 1979.

The couple's four children have since been placed in foster care, a situation that has proven uncomfortable for them mainly because they are being cared for by a non-Muslim couple, who keep non-Halal food and have a pet dog.

Suranya, who has stopped practising law to take of her children, said that such battles against child protection authorities were part of an ongoing humanitarian crisis in some first world countries.

The New Delhi-based activist who has been writing and campaigning on a voluntary basis against such cases, said there had been past cases of families being punished by draconian laws that allowed children to be permanently taken from their families and barred from returning to their home country on very flimsy grounds.

"There have been similar cases regarding Indian families, such as the Bhattacharya family in Norway and the Saha family in the United States where the Indian government intervened and succeeded at having the children repatriated to India.

"In another case of the Vallabhaneni family in Norway, where the parents were alleged to have physically punished their child, the Indian government succeeded at appealing to the authorities to grant a reprieve of the last one third of their jail term, though they were unsuccessful at preventing the incarceration of the parents.

"Many who witness such cases do not believe that absolute confiscation of children from their parents, their home and their country is ever justified," she said in a letter to the New Sunday Times.

Suranya, who personally campaigned in several cases involving Indian families, said there was extreme reluctance on the part of the foreign authorities to return the children to their families.
"In the Indian cases in which I campaigned with the Indian government to intervene, I noted as the case progressed that there was extreme reluctance on the part of the foreign authorities to return the children, even to family members other than those against whom allegation of neglect or abuse were made.

It took sustained pressure at the highest level. In the Bhattacharya case, our Prime Minister had to intervene and in the other two cases, it was necessary to involve the foreign minister directly," she said.

Suranya said the health of the children in foster care was also cause for concern.

"There is a high incidence of children falling ill, getting injured and dying in foster care. In the US case there were three instances where the little boy, less than a year old when he was taken away, was found to have been injured or required hospitalisation for dehydration associated with fever and cold.

"So you are advised to insist that officials from your embassies are permitted to visit the children frequently to ensure that they are not being neglected or abused in foster care."

She added that foreigners, low-income families, and those whose way of living or religious beliefs were overtly different from the country of residence were often targeted by the child protection agencies in these countries. "In some cases, the foreign authorities would not even allow family members other than those against whom the allegation of abuse was made to claim the children."

Suranya also alleged that the foreign authorities at the centre of such cases told lies to keep hold of the children and prevent them from being reunited with their parents.