

MEDIA RELEASE: 24.3.17

**LINE IN THE SAND: Foreign Correspondent**

**Airs Tuesday March 28 at 9.30pm on ABC & ABC iview**

**India’s building boom has spawned a “sand mafia” that is plundering the environment and even killing those who get in its way. But as Samantha Hawley reports, some people refuse to be intimidated.**

The world is running low on sand. It’s a basic ingredient in construction – think skyscrapers, shopping malls, roads and windows – and cities are growing faster and bigger than at any time in history.

In India, where the government promises to build the equivalent of a “new Chicago” every year, the demand is insatiable. Its construction industry is said to have tripled its sand consumption since 2000.

Legal supply can’t keep up. So now organised criminals are hitting pay dirt, pillaging millions of tonnes of sand from the nation’s beaches, riverbeds and hillsides. Construction wants sand hewn by water, not by wind. So it’s waterways, not deserts, that face devastation.

“This is probably the largest scam ever in our country,” Sumaira Abdulali tells Foreign Correspondent. The activist was beaten and hospitalised when she blocked trucks taking sand from her local beach.

She at least has her life. The sand mafia is prepared to kill. Ask farmer Brijmohan Yadav. He took on illegal sand miners and was kidnapped and beaten. He now lives in hiding, away from his family, in fear for his life and theirs.

Or Akaash Chauhan, whose father was asleep at home when three men stormed in and shot him dead. He had complained about the sand mafia trashing communal land. Akaash’s brother died mysteriously a year later.

“My father’s fight has become my fight,” Akaash tells reporter Samantha Hawley. “Sand mining is ongoing – my father was against it, I am against it and so is my family.”

Akaash names the chief murder suspect, then bravely guides the Foreign Correspondent team to where illegal miners are working. As the team films, a tall man materialises and confronts them. His name is Sonu. He is the accused killer. The crew must decide - stay or go?

Despite a near-blanket ban on unlicensed sand mining across India, the sand mafia operates with near impunity.

“I have to give money to the inspector and the officer at the checkpoint,” says a tractor driver, adding that what’s left after the bribe is barely enough for food. He is one of the sand mafia’s many foot soldiers.

At best, officials are blind to the obvious. “No mafia… You are probably mistaken in believing that sand mining is going on here,” protests a magistrate in charge of an area where illegal mining is carried out routinely and brazenly in full daylight.

With authorities paralysed by inertia or corruption, it’s up to a small band of activists to take the fight to the sand mafia and expose the dirty secret at the heart of India’s construction frenzy.

*Line in the Sand*: Foreign Correspondent 9.30 pm Tuesday March 28 and 10.30 am Thursday March 30 on ABC TV, and at 6.30 pm Sunday April 2 on News24. Also on iview.

**ENDS**

For more information or images, please contact Acting News Publicist Safia van der Zwan on vanderzwan.safia@abc.net.au or 02 8333 3846