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India: Targeted killings of members of minority groups must stop

Amnesty International is gravely concerned about the killing of at least 35 members of the Hindu minority in two targeted attacks in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. At least a further ten individuals are reported to be in critical condition as a result of the attacks.

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Jammu and Kashmir to ensure the prompt and independent investigation of the incidents with a view to bringing the perpetrators to justice. The organisation also appeals to armed groups to refrain from violence against civilians, including torture and deliberate killings. Deliberate attacks on civilians can never be justified and are prohibited under international law.

The attacks occurred just two days before scheduled talks between Indian Prime Minister Manmoham Singh and leaders of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), a coalition of two dozen separatist groups, which begin on 3 May. Separately, a new round of talks between India and Pakistan began on 2 May to discuss further confidence-building measures including the opening up of more border crossing points and movement of goods across the border.

Government spokespersons said that an armed group had carried out the killings to register their protest at the talks. No group has claimed responsibility. A spokesman for the Hizbul Mujahideen, one of the largest armed groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir, called the attacks a "deep-rooted conspiracy to defame militants". He said the attacks did not serve the "liberation movement" and blamed it on Indian intelligence agents. Army spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Vijay Batra rejected this allegation as "utterly unthinkable". Indian security services had warned of an increase in violence in the lead-up to Wednesday's talks.

Gunmen reportedly stormed two different locations in Hindu dominated areas of Thawa village in Doda district on the night of 30 April, herding the men into the headman's house. A surviving victim later said that the armed men had come wearing police and army uniforms and had told villagers that security officials wanted to hold a meeting. When the assembled men questioned why they were made to wait, over 20 men were shot dead at point-blank range. At least a further 11 men were injured. Slightly earlier, armed men in nearby Udhampur district abducted 13 Hindu villagers; their bodies were later found in nearby woods. Following the attacks, hundreds of extra army troops were rushed to the state to trace the perpetrators of the killings.

Background

Local observers believe that between 45,000 and 60,000 people have died since an armed insurgency began in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1989. Some 30 armed opposition groups are active in the state, all of which oppose Indian rule: some want independence, while others want to secede to

Pakistan. As a result of the conflict, thousands of Hindus have fled the state and have for years been living in camps near Jammu and New Delhi.

Peace talks began more than two years ago between India and Pakistan, which both claim sovereignty over the entirety of the currently divided region of Kashmir. The talks brought about a ceasefire along the Line of Control between the two parts of Kashmir in November 2003; led to bus connections between the two sides of the border; and involved a series of talks between the two sides beginning in 2004. On several occasions during this process, armed groups have used violence in attempts to stall the talks which they oppose. Amnesty International has repeatedly called on them to cease using violence against civilians.

Armed groups have been accused of killing some 350 Hindus and Sikhs in the past six years in the state, with some 116 members of the minority communities reportedly killed in the year 2000 alone. Since the beginning of peace talks, human rights violations committed by state agents have declined somewhat, though arbitrary detention, abuse of preventive detention laws, torture, deaths in custody and "disappearances" continue to be reported. Violence by armed groups does not appear to have substantively reduced during this period.