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Armed opposition groups should release hostages

Amnesty International is calling on members of armed opposition groups in Tripura to release all those they are holding hostage and to commit themselves publicly to abiding by international humanitarian law.

On 8 April, an armed group abducted 30 passengers travelling on a private bus between Agartala (Tripura) and Guwahati (Assam). Several of the passengers were subsequently released but six persons, including one employee of the travel company, remain in the custody of the unknown group.

On 11 April a driver was reportedly released with a letter from the Borok Army (the armed wing of the National Liberation Front of Tripura - NLFT) which was handed over to police. The letter reportedly demanded a ransom in return for each of the hostages' release, and a threat to kill the remaining hostages if the security forces were not immediately withdrawn and army operations suspended in the Dhalai district of Tripura where the hostage-taking took place. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958 which confers wide powers to shoot to kill with virtual impunity, continues to be enforced in 19 police station areas in the four districts of Tripura.

This letter has reinforced allegations that the NLFT is responsible for the abductions. However, in a communication faxed to the International Secretariat of Amnesty International in London on 3 April, the President of the NLFT, Mg. D. Balthang, stated that the NLFT was "*maintaining the international law of human rights*" and that officers of the Borok Army "*never encourage to any army men to involve in violation of human rights*"[sic].

Amnesty International is calling on the NLFT to demonstrate its commitment to upholding human rights by publicly stating that it will not violate international humanitarian law by indulging in hostage-taking and deliberate and arbitrary killing of civilians. The NLFT should also make clear its role in the recent hostage incidents and release any hostages immediately.

The human rights organization similarly calls on other armed opposition groups operating in Tripura, including the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), to publicly state their commitment to abiding by international humanitarian law and release all hostages accordingly. All those exercising command are called upon to convey to their cadre obligations to respect the basic principles of humanitarian law and to ensure full adherence to these principles.

Armed opposition groups have an international legal obligation to respect fundamental rights. All parties to a conflict, including armed opposition groups, are bound by the provisions of Article 3, common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 which prohibit the torture and

ill-treatment, hostage-taking and deliberate and arbitrary killing of all persons taking no active part in hostilities.

Government figures indicate that during 1997, approximately 400 people were kidnapped by armed groups in Tripura and more than 1300 over a five-year period from 1 April 1993 to 31 March 1998. During the past five years, government figures state almost 1200 people have been released on payment of ransom or have escaped. However, many remain in the custody of armed groups -- their fate and whereabouts unknown to their families, while some have been declared dead by their abductors.

The high incidence of hostage taking in this small state in the far north-eastern part of India -- recorded as having a population of less than 3 million in the 1991 census of India -- has had a significant impact on life in the state. Truck owners' fear of damage to their property and truck drivers' fear of abduction have prevented deliveries to some remote areas of Dhalai district, leading to chronic food shortages and reports of deaths by starvation.

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