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Thousands call for release of Prisoners of Conscience Soni Sori and Lingaram Kodopi

Over 10,300 people have supported an Amnesty International India campaign seeking the release of Adivasi activists Soni Sori and Lingaram Kodopi. Amnesty International India submitted its campaign petition to Raman Singh, Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, today.

Amnesty International India considers Soni Sori and Lingaram Kodopi to be Prisoners of Conscience, who have been arrested on false charges solely because they criticized human rights violations by security forces in Chhattisgarh. The organization is urging authorities in Chhattisgarh to drop all charges against the activists and release them immediately and unconditionally.

“People from across India are calling for Soni Sori and Lingaram Kodopi’s release,” said Shashikumar Velath, Programmes Director at Amnesty International India.

Soni Sori has been in detention since October 2011 and Lingaram Kodopi since September 2011. Soni Sori has been acquitted in five cases filed against her, and has been granted bail in another case. Lingaram Kodopi has been acquitted in one of two cases filed against him.

One of the pending cases against both involves charges that they had acted as couriers and transferred funds from a corporate mining firm, Essar, to armed Maoists as “protection money” in September 2011 to ensure the firms unhindered operations.

On 7 July 2013, the Chhattisgarh High Court denied bail to Soni Sori and Lingaram Kodopi on the grounds of the “nature of allegation, quality of evidence and the seriousness of the offence.” A general manager at an Essar steel plant and a contractor for Essar, also arrested in the case and facing the same charges were released on bail in January 2012 and February 2012 respectively.

The Supreme Court will hear bail applications by both Lingaram Kodopi and Soni Sori on 30 September 2013.

Soni Sori has alleged that she was tortured while she was in police custody on 8 and 9 October 2011. In letters written to the Supreme Court, she said that police officials had stripped and sexually assaulted her and given her electric shocks. On 29 October 2011, a government hospital examined her under court order, and reported that two stones had been inserted in her vagina and one in her rectum, and that she had annular tears in her spine.

The senior police official who Soni Sori said had ordered and supervised her torture was conferred a gallantry award by the President of India in January 2012.

“There must not be selective outrage when it comes to cases of violence against women. Authorities in Chhattisgarh must independently investigate Soni Sori’s allegations of torture and sexual assault,” said Shashikumar Velath.

“Authorities must realize that listening to the concerns of Adivasis will do much more to bring peace to Chhattisgarh than silencing their voices.”

Background Information

Soni Sori, a 36 year old school-teacher and her nephew Lingaram Kodopi, a 26-year old journalist, were critical of human rights violations committed both by security forces and armed Maoists in Chhattisgarh.

In April 2010, at a public hearing in Delhi, Lingaram Kodopi detailed violations committed by security forces against Adivasis in Chhattisgarh, following which the state police announced that he was the prime suspect in an armed Maoist attack on a local Congress party leader’s residence.

In March 2011, Lingaram Kodopi also highlighted the killing of three Adivasis by security forces during a confrontation in three villages. During the attack, two persons went missing and at least five women were sexually assaulted. Lingaram Kodopi was eventually arrested in September 2011 on false charges of aiding armed Maoists.

Soni Sori’s husband, Anil Futane, was arrested in 2011 for allegedly planning and executing an attack on a local Congress party leader. He was acquitted on 1 May 2013, after spending three years in jail, during which time he was allegedly tortured. He died on 2 August 2013. Soni Sori was denied temporary release on bail to perform her husband’s last rites.

Soni Sori has been acquitted in five cases against her, and Lingaram Kodopi in one of the two cases against him.

In 2012, Sori was acquitted in two cases in which she was accused of attacking a police station in Kuakonda and blowing up a government office in Kuakonda in 2010.

In February 2013, a trial court acquitted her of being involved in an attack on a police team near an Essar plant in Kirandul, and of being part of a Maoist armed group team which attempted to blow up trucks belonging to Essar.

In early May 2013, a trial court acquitted Soni Sori, Lingaram Kodopi and 15 other persons accused of conspiring and participating in the attack against a local Congress party leader at Nakulnar in Chhattisgarh in July 2010.

In late May, another court granted Soni Sori bail in a case in which police claim she had participated in the torching of vehicles in Nerli Ghat in September 2010.

A number of social and political activists and human rights defenders in Chhattisgarh have faced false charges and imprisonment for highlighting the human rights situation in the state. Among them are Binayak Sen of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, and Kartam Joga, an Adivasi leader of the Communist Party of India, both declared as Prisoners of Conscience by Amnesty International.

Binayak Sen spent more than two years in prison and was released on bail by India's Supreme Court in April 2011 after he was convicted of sedition and sentenced to life imprisonment by a lower court. Kartam Joga was acquitted of all charges and released in January 2013 after spending over two years in prison.

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