

India: State continues to obstruct justice in Punjab

Seven police officers charged with the abduction and murder of Harjit Singh in Punjab nine years ago have still not been arrested and efforts to cover up the truth about police killings in the state continue, Amnesty International said ahead of the anniversary of his "disappearance" (29 April).

Unlike hundreds of others who "disappeared" in Punjab in the 1980s and early 1990s, the fate of Harjit Singh has been clarified by the courts. Warrants for the arrest of seven police officers on charges of his abduction and murder were issued on 8 April 2000. Over a year later, the arrests have still not taken place.

An inquiry carried out by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on the orders of the High Court concluded at the end of 1999 that Harjit Singh was shot dead by police as a result of a family dispute and that police had falsely filed a report claiming that Harjit Singh had terrorist connections and was killed in an "encounter". The inquiry further documented the falsification of evidence by senior police officials.

"Harjit Singh's case, which has crept through the court system at an achingly slow pace, highlights a continuing policy of impunity for human rights violations carried out by police in Punjab."

In December 1996, after receiving a CBI report on allegations that police had illegally cremated hundreds of bodies of people they had shot dead, the Supreme Court, talked of "flagrant violation of human rights on a mass scale". Yet due to continued efforts by the state to prevent the truth from emerging, the CBI report has not even been made public and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), whom the Supreme

Court requested to examine these issues, has made no real progress towards ensuring justice.

Amnesty International understands that the Union and Punjab governments may oppose the publication of the December 1996 CBI report at a hearing of the NHRC on 3 May.

"As it was found in the case of Harjit Singh, there is indeed much for the state to be ashamed of and to wish to hide. But there is no legal or moral justification for it to continue to cover up these crimes and to deny justice to thousands of victims and their relatives" Amnesty International said.

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