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Pakistan: Mass arrests a bad omen for human rights protection

As arrests of political activists in Lahore and neighbouring towns continued for a fourth day, Amnesty International said that human rights protection had taken a plunge.

"Many people had little to celebrate today -- Pakistan Day -- as they spend the day behind bars," the organization said. "People have been detained simply for exercising their right to express their political opinion. We regard them as prisoners of conscience and urge the government of Chief Executive General Musharraf to immediately and unconditionally release them."

The arrests of activists began on Tuesday while they were preparing for national day rallies to protest restrictions on political activities. A rally called by the 18-party Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) was to take place today in Mochi Gate in central Lahore, the traditional site of political rallies and protests. ARD leaders were expected to call for the resignation of the military government and immediate general elections under an interim civilian government of national consensus.

In his Pakistan Day message, General Musharraf called on Pakistanis at home and abroad to "renew their resolve to inculcate in

themselves unity, solidarity and harmony in every facet of national affairs. A social order free from exploitation, discrimination and justice cannot be established without the active support of the people."

"These profound words mean little when basic rights to freedom of expression and assembly are being denied," Amnesty International said.

"We urge the government of Pakistan once again to repeal the restrictions on fundamental rights guaranteed under the constitution of Pakistan and to ensure that no one is held on such grounds."

The exact number of arrests has been difficult to establish. According to opposition party sources at least 2,000 people have been arrested in Lahore and other towns but police put the number at about 200. As news of arrests spread and activists went into hiding, police arrested family members in their stead. While some detainees appear not to be held on any formal grounds, most are detained under provisions of the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance.

Today, police stopped politicians from leaving their homes to attend the rally. The Lahore home of the leader of ARD, Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan was under virtual siege with nobody allowed to leave or enter the house. Leading politicians of all major parties were ordered by police to remain at home and stay away from Mochi Gate which was meanwhile blocked off by barbed wire amidst a massive presence of police in Lahore. Access roads to the city were controlled by police to stop political activists from reaching the rally.

Background

The national and provincial assemblies were suspended following the military takeover on 12 October 1999 and political activities in public

places were banned in March 2000 prior to the visit the then President of the USA, Bill Clinton.

In May 2000, the Supreme Court of Pakistan gave the government of General Musharraf three years from the time of the takeover to complete its reform program and to hold elections at all levels. A first round of local council elections, which were held on a non-party basis, took place at the end of December 2000 in 18 districts and the second round took place on 21 March 2001 in another 20 districts. General Musharraf has promised elections at the provincial and subsequently at the national level before the deadline of October 2002.

Pakistan Day: 23 March is the day in 1940 when the Muslim League adopted the Pakistan Resolution and Muslims throughout the sub-continent began to campaign for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the region.

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