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India: Human lives must not become pawns on a political chessboard

The killing of 36 Sikhs on Monday evening near Srinagar by unidentified gunmen was probably intended to call attention to the volatile situation in Jammu and Kashmir during the arrival of US President Bill Clinton in India, Amnesty International said today stressing concern for the innocent lives lost.

“Once more, human beings are being killed to score political points”, Amnesty International said. “The conflict in Kashmir has cost too many lives already. All sides, the government and the armed groups, have contributed to abuses which the civilian population has had to endure for far too long. This must end,” Amnesty International said.

The identity of the perpetrators remains uncertain as contradictory accounts are reported from Jammu and Kashmir. Director General of Police, Gurbachan Jagat, stated that some 30 Muslim rebels in Indian army uniforms and speaking Urdu approached Chadisinghpooora village and told the mostly Sikh inhabitants that they were carrying out a search operation. They reportedly separated men and women and shot dead 36 men and boys.

Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani spoke of a new “deliberate design” of armed groups to “cleanse” the state of the Sikh minority. “Till now, the militants have targeted the Hindu community and have tried to see that the Kashmir valley is cleansed of this particular community. Now the objective also seems to be to see that the Sikhs also will begin a process of migration.”

No armed group has so far claimed responsibility for the deliberate and arbitrary killing, several Kashmiri political parties have condemned the killing. Mirvaiz Moulvi Umar Farooq, a spiritual leader in Kashmir and spokesperson of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (a conglomerate of 23 political parties), condemned the killing, claiming that it had been carried out by the state security agencies in order to discredit the separatist movement.

The Indian government has blamed the attack on the Hizbul Mujahideen and Lashkar-i-Taiba. However a spokesman for the Hizbul Mujahideen said; “Mujahideen have nothing against the Sikh community which sympathises with our struggle. We assure them that there never was and never will be any danger to Sikhs from Kashmiri freedom fighters”.

Amnesty International urges the Government of Jammu and Kashmir to set up an impartial and independent judicial inquiry into the incident with a view to identifying the perpetrators and bringing them to justice.

Background

The human rights situation in Jammu and Kashmir has been grave for over a decade with dozens of cases of torture, deaths in custody and extrajudicial killings reported every year. Currently the entire leadership of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference is held in preventive detention following their peaceful calls for an election boycott in the autumn of 1999.

Mirvais Moulvi Umar Farooq was placed under house arrest on 20 March, and Shabir Shah, president of the Jammu and Kashmir Democratic Freedom Party was arrested on 19 March, as it was anticipated by the state authorities that they would lead demonstrations during Bill

Clinton's visit to India. Amnesty International considers both men to be prisoners of conscience held solely for the non-violence expression of their political opinion and urges the authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them.

Armed groups have also committed numerous abuses in the state. These include alleged killings of members of Hindu minorities particularly in the Doda and Udhampur district in the south of the state. Amnesty International has repeatedly urged armed groups to abide by standards of international humanitarian law which forbid the torture, hostage-taking and killing of unarmed civilians in areas of armed conflict. No attacks on members of the Sikh community have previously been reported.

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