

2 August 2000

AI Index ASA 20/037/2000 - News Service Nr. 148

India: Civilians must not be pawns in political process in Jammu and Kashmir

Amnesty International today condemned the killing of at least 93 people, mostly Hindu civilians, in seven separate incidents across Jammu and Kashmir over the past 24 hours as political actors in the state disagree about an emerging peace process.

"Political debate and dissent occur in any democratic society and must be allowed as part of the exercise of fundamental rights -- it should never take the form of killing innocent civilians who are used as pawns to score a point or to undermine the other side's gains," the organization said.

No armed group has claimed responsibility for the killings. An umbrella organization of armed groups, the Muttahida Jihad Council, issued a statement from Muzaffarabad in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (the region of Kashmir under Pakistani administration) denying any involvement in the massacres and instead accused the Indian government of involvement. This view is shared by many others in Jammu and Kashmir. An Indian army spokesman, Brigadier Subroto Ghosh was quoted as saying that the army had taken measures to counter further attacks and believed that the Lashkar-e-Toiba was responsible for the attacks.

The killings come in the wake of last week's unconditional three month unilateral cease-fire offer by the largest armed group in Jammu and Kashmir, the Hizbul Mujahideen. It called on other armed groups to join in the cease-fire but this offer has been rejected. Other armed

groups in Jammu and Kashmir reportedly declared they would step up their armed struggle.

An alliance of armed groups rejected the offer, stating that "India has never been sincere about talks". The All Parties Hurriyat Conference, a conglomerate of some 23 parties with which the Union government had expressed a readiness to enter into a dialogue, said the cease-fire offer was "hasty" and might lead to "confusion and chaos".

The Government of India responded by ceasing operations against the Hizbul Mujahideen and is reportedly in contact with the group's leaders to formalize how the talks will be held. The Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Dr Farooq Abdullah said on 31 July that the talks would be 'unconditional and open'. Previously, the Union Government has stated that all talks have to be within the framework of the Indian Constitution, a formula which precludes discussion of independence of Jammu and Kashmir.

The Indian Government has announced it would protect the cease-fire and the emerging peace effort in Jammu and Kashmir. It laid the blame for the killings on "groups owing allegiance to Pakistan or groups directly ordered by Pakistan ... to derail the peace process" (Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee).

Details of numbers of victims, the incidents and their sequence are still unclear. Some of the reported incidents include an attack on 1 August in Pogal Peristan village in Doda district. Fourteen Hindus were shot dead in the evening as they were called to come out of their homes by armed attackers. A former militant and six members of his family, including women and children were shot dead in Baramullah district.

Five Hindu labourers were shot dead in village Sund Achabal. In the evening, 30 people, including 23 Hindu pilgrims, two police officers and five local Muslims, were shot dead in Pahalgam when armed men swooped on a market, threw hand grenades and opened automatic fire.

An indefinite curfew was imposed in several areas including Pahalgam and Hindu majority areas in the south of the state. The Union Government is to announce new security measures for Jammu and Kashmir later today. A plethora of special laws have already been in place in the state for years.

Amnesty International urges the Government of Jammu and Kashmir to take measures to prevent further abuses against civilians and to ensure that the recent killings are investigated by judicial inquiries with a view to holding the perpetrators to account. All too often unlawful killings go uninvestigated and those responsible get away without punishment.

In Jammu and Kashmir, large scale massacres have gone without an inquiry and unpunished. The massacre at Chitthisinghpora in which 36 Sikh civilians were deliberately killed in March 2000 has not been subjected to judicial scrutiny while several men, allegedly involved in the killing were subsequently killed by security forces in highly suspicious circumstances.

"The armed groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir must also abide by international standards of humanitarian law applicable to situations of armed conflict. These standards are fully binding on armed groups and prohibit their taking hostages and torturing or killing unarmed civilians," Amnesty International said.

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