

PUBLIC

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Further information on UA 107/99 (ASA 33/11/99, 14 May 1999) and follow-up (ASA 33/13/99, 21 May 1999) - Prisoner of conscience/fear of torture

PAKISTAN Najam Sethi (m), journalist

Journalist Najam Sethi was released on 2 June 1999 after the government announced that it was withdrawing the charges filed against him.

Najam Sethi, editor of the national newspaper the *Friday Times*, was arbitrarily arrested and severely beaten by the police on 8 May. He was held in the custody of the Intelligence Bureau before being transferred to the custody of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), the military intelligence agency. Government officials said that his arrest was connected with a speech he had given to the India-Pakistan Friendship Society in New Delhi on problems facing Pakistan, and accused him of anti-state activities. However, other journalists and commentators believe his arrest was connected with his contact with a BBC team investigating corruption in Pakistan.

On 31 May, at a Supreme Court hearing of a habeas corpus petition filed by Sethi's wife, the Attorney General told the court that the journalist could not be tried under the Army Act, but said that the government would be proceeding against him on the basis of a First Information Report (FIR) lodged by a Pakistan Muslim League parliamentarian on 29 May. The FIR charged Najam Sethi with involvement in anti-state activities under several sections of Pakistan's Penal Code and the Prevention of Anti-National Activities Act, 1974.

Following the court hearing, Najam Sethi was transferred from ISI custody to police custody on seven days remand. His lawyer filed an application for bail which was heard by the Supreme Court on 2 June, when the Attorney General announced that the government was withdrawing the charges. Najam Sethi was released after the remand order was cancelled.

The Supreme Court disposed of the bail application, but stated that it would still consider the matter of court jurisdiction in cases of civilians arrested by the ISI after the summer recess.

On his release, Najam Sethi told reporters at his home that it was a great day for the freedom of the press in Pakistan. He also expressed his gratitude for the support extended by the press at home as well as international press and human rights organisations and all others.

Amnesty International welcomes the release of Najam Sethi, although the organisation remains seriously concerned about journalists in Pakistan being targeted by the authorities for their journalistic activities.

No more action is required by the Urgent Action network on this case. Thank you to all who sent appeals.