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INDIA: PROTESTERS AGAINST MISS WORLD CONTEST IN DANGER OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Amnesty International is concerned at the possibility of arbitrary detention and ill-treatment of protesters by the police and paramilitary forces over the coming weekend as thousands are expected to demonstrate against the Miss World contest taking place in Bangalore.

“The use of excessive force, preventive detention and false charges in the lead up to this event does not bode well for the weekend,” Amnesty International said. “We urge the state government to ensure that the forces deployed act with restraint.”

The Karnataka state government is expected to deploy at least 8,500 extra security personnel by 23 November to preserve law and order during the finals of the contest. One thousand of these are reported to be from the paramilitary Rapid Action Force.

This morning, Bangalore police reportedly detained 35 people suspected of organizing protests. Police Commissioner S.C. Burman warned that up to 200 could be detained by the end of the day. Amnesty International urges that they be released, if not charged with recognisable criminal offences.

Amnesty International does not condone the use of violence by protesters opposing the contest, but insists that peaceful dissent should be allowed. If the protests escalate, the security forces should not use excessive force or rely on administrative measures or false criminal charges to detain people.

On 19 November, the High Court of Karnataka decided that opponents to the contest should not be prevented from peacefully and democratically protesting against the event, subject to prohibitory and regulatory orders. The court also prohibited the deployment of the Border Security Force or the army and ordered the state government to ensure minimum use of force. However, the Supreme Court of India today overturned these orders holding them to be unsustainable.

Amnesty International takes no position on the Miss World contest, but believes that everyone has the right to freely and peacefully express their beliefs -- a right included in Article 19 of the Constitution of India.

Background

Opposition in India to the Miss World contest ranges across the political and social spectrum. While some are concerned at the apparent commodification of the female form, others consider that the contest undermines Indian culture. The nature of the resistance has ranged from peaceful to more violent forms of protest -- last week, a man died after setting himself on fire.

On 29 October, 16 activists of the Mahila Jagruti Sangha, including three juvenile girls, were arrested as a result of a demonstration against sponsorship of the contest by an Indian company, Godrej, during which they allegedly caused damage to electrical goods in a showroom. While detained, the women were reportedly beaten by the police. When brought before the Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, the women were not provided with a lawyer, and were remanded in judicial custody on the basis of non-bailable charges which local observers believe to be false. They were nonetheless released on 15 November.

Amnesty International has received reports that excessive force, including *lathi charges* (baton charges) have been used by police personnel to suppress protest throughout India, using the provisions in Chapter X of the Code of Criminal Procedure and in other enactments, including the Police Acts. The organization therefore urges the Government of Karnataka to ensure that the security forces act with restraint when seeking to maintain public order.

On 17 November, protestors, including activists of the All India Women's Democratic Association (AIDWA) were reportedly beaten by the police during a demonstration -- at least 400 were detained till the evening. These arrests were made under sections 34 and 35 of the Karnataka Police Act, 1963 which provides the police with wide powers "to prohibit certain acts for prevention of disorder".

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