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India: Authorities must protect north Indian minorities in Mumbai against violent attacks

Authorities in the western Indian state of Maharashtra should take urgent steps to protect people of north Indian origin in Mumbai city and elsewhere in the state against renewed attacks, said Amnesty International.

The last three days have seen attacks by supporters of Maharashtra Navnirman Samithi (MNS), a regional party, on people of north Indian origin in Mumbai city, culminating in the deaths of four people, three of them in one clash. The city also witnessed widespread arson and destruction of property including taxis and commercial establishments belonging to people of north Indian origin. Similar attacks were also reported from some other towns of Maharashtra. Hundreds of immigrants from north Indian states have left Mumbai following the attacks.

During the last year, MNS leaders made several speeches threatening people of north Indian origin living in Mumbai and immigrants from north Indian states who migrate to Mumbai in search of economic opportunities.

Eyewitnesses informed Amnesty International that the violence intensified after the arrest of the party's leader, Raj Thackeray, from a government guest house in Ratnagiri, and his 200 supporters on October 21. Yesterday, hundreds of MNS supporters defied the curfew orders and faced baton-charges by the police in Kalyan, a city suburb, where Raj Thackeray was produced in a court on charges of provoking hatred among communities, rioting, assault and causing damage to private and public property. He was later released on bail.

In view of speeches made by Raj Thackeray in MNS meetings over the past few weeks inciting violence against people of north Indian origin, the authorities should have taken action at an earlier stage, in particular by putting in place effective measures to provide such people with protection, said Amnesty International. The latest speeches targeted people of north Indian origin who were competing in examinations for jobs in Indian railways, one of the biggest employers in the country.

Among the dead was Pawan Mahato, who hailed from Bihar, a north Indian state. While the police claimed that he died due to a railway accident, some reports said he died while fleeing an attack by MNS supporters. Another person, Jeetu, sustained severe injuries after he fell from a train while fleeing attackers. Following the attacks, an angry crowd torched a train in Bihar state after forcing the passengers to alight.

Amnesty International urges the Government of Maharashtra to:

- immediately take measures to protect persons of north Indian origin in Mumbai city and elsewhere in the state from incitement to violence and the subsequent attacks against

them, ensuring that such measures comply with international human rights law and standards

- ensure that prompt, effective, independent and impartial investigations are conducted into the attacks, and that those responsible are brought to justice.

Amnesty International also reminds the MNS that advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to violence is aimed at destroying the rights of others and as such is not protected under international human rights law relating to freedom of expression.

Background

The recent attacks have evoked widespread condemnation from political parties across India who have demanded stringent legal action against the MNS and Raj Thackeray. People of north Indian origin constitute around 19 per cent of Mumbai's population of 10 million.

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