

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 20/017/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 189
2 October 2007

India: Continued harassment of defenders of women workers' rights and campaigners abroad

Amnesty International is concerned by the continuing harassment of defenders of women workers' rights in the garments export industry in Bangalore city in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, as well as associated campaigning activists based in the Netherlands.

The harassment has included the filing of apparently false criminal charges against them, aimed at curbing their freedom of expression.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned by arrest warrants issued in India against seven Netherlands-based activists of the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) and the India Committee of the Netherlands (ICN), on September 29. The activists travel frequently to India where they are at risk of arrest as a result of the charges against them.

The activists have been part of an international campaign highlighting violations of labour rights of women workers in two garment export companies in Bangalore (Fibres and Fabrics International and its subsidiary Jeans Knit). Garments produced by these two industries are exported to the Netherlands and other countries in the West.

Amnesty International understands that the practice of filing apparently unsubstantiated criminal charges against defenders of workers' rights in several parts of India is not new, and that the Indian authorities have repeatedly failed to take action to prevent this practice.

India, as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), has specific obligations under Article 19 of the ICCPR to safeguard the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression and association. Amnesty International is concerned that the harassment and intimidation aimed at these activists flies in the face of international human rights law.

The organization urges the Government of Karnataka and India's National Human Rights Commission to ensure that:

- o the right to freedom of expression of trade unions in Bangalore and activists based in the Netherlands is respected;
- o reports of harassment including the filing of apparently false criminal charges against the activists are investigated by an independent, impartial and competent body;
- o charges against the activists are dropped, unless they are charged with a recognisably criminal offence;
- o the government upholds its obligation under international law that workers are not forced to work under conditions that amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Amnesty International also calls on India to adopt all legislative, administrative and other steps as may be necessary to ensure the rights and freedoms for the defence of human rights as set out in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998).

Background

Similar criminal charges were filed last year against representatives of at least five local trade unions that had highlighted the violation of women workers' rights since September 2005. These violations, which were brought to light following a series of interviews with women workers, related to physical and psychological intimidation of female workers, compulsion to meet high production targets resulting in unpaid overtime and the threat of loss of jobs if production speed targets were not met. Other intimidating tactics reportedly included refusing to issue letters of employment and identity cards, lack of provision of crèche, rest rooms, canteen facilities and adequate safety measures.

Subsequent to the filing of the charges in July 2006, these trade unions felt restrained from circulating reports of the

above-mentioned violations. The filing of charges against the activists based in Netherlands is aimed at curbing the circulation of these reports in countries to which the companies' garments are exported.