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## **PUBLIC STATEMENT**

### **India**

#### **On anniversary - fate of hostages must not be forgotten**

Amnesty International today reiterated its appeal to armed opposition groups active in India to release hostages taken in the past. Their fate should not be forgotten and Amnesty International continues to share the concern of their families who have not given up hope.

July 4 marks one year after social and environmental activist, Sanjay Ghosh, was detained by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) in the north-eastern state of Assam. Following Amnesty International's appeals for the immediate and unconditional release of this prisoner of conscience, a series of contradictory statements were issued by ULFA – to date his fate and whereabouts remain unclear.

Members of Sanjay's family, including his wife, and his colleagues working in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) continue to campaign for his release and are currently on a visit to Assam in an effort to seek details of his whereabouts. However, in a press statement issued last week, ULFA reiterated its opposition to NGO activity in the state whom they claim are working as agents of the central government – they reportedly threatened “dire consequences” should the visit to find Sanjay proceed.

Amnesty International believes this kind of action can only undermine the security of people whose relatives, friends or colleagues are taken hostage. It is vital that their security is safeguarded and further abuses are prevented.

July 4 also marks the third anniversary of the abduction of three men – British tourists Keith Mangan and Paul Wells and American Fred Hutchings while they were trekking in the mountainous northern state of Jammu and Kashmir. In the days that followed, German Dirk Hasert and Norwegian student Hans Christian Ostro were also abducted. With the exception of Hans Christian Ostro, whose dead body was recovered in August 1995, the fate and whereabouts of these men remains unknown.

"It is a sad and difficult time for the families of the victims, "Amnesty International said. "We call on the armed groups involved in these abuses to clarify their role in the abductions and to release those who continue to be held hostage, in contravention of the basic standards of humanity."

Despite repeated calls for adherence to the principles of international humanitarian law -- which prohibits hostage taking, torture and killing of civilians by armed opposition groups -- Amnesty International continues to receive reports that demonstrate the continuation of these activities by various armed opposition groups in India.

Abuses by armed opposition groups in India receive widespread condemnation by the Government of India, and are used as a justification for the continued army and police operations that lead to human rights violations, including killings and "disappearances" in many parts of the country.

The situation is clouded by the links between official security forces and armed groups. In Jammu and Kashmir, so-called "renegade" groups, former members of armed opposition groups who now side with the government, reportedly carry out human rights violations with the acquiescence or connivance of, or even on the orders of, state agents.

A similar situation exists in the north-east region, where former members of armed opposition groups who have surrendered have been known to carry out acts on behalf of, or with the complicity of, state officials. Moreover, even those armed opposition groups that act in opposition to the government often find allies within the security forces.

Home Minister L K Advani, referring to the recurrent losses of weapons by armed police units in the north-eastern states, was reported by *Reuters* on 8 May 1998 as saying "*In the majority of these cases, the losses seem to be on account of deliberate collusion with the militants or on account of professional ineptitude of the police personnel.*"

Amnesty International considers it vital that the forces in the parts of India beset by internal armed conflict make efforts to prevent further killing and abductions. The introduction of adequate training is a necessary step towards ensuring that human rights do not continue to be undermined.  
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