

EXTERNAL

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Fear for safety

10 June 1997

INDIAT. Puroshotham and other human rights defenders in Andhra Pradesh

Amnesty International has today learnt of the latest in a series of attacks on human rights activists in the state of Andhra Pradesh. This incident heightens the organization's concern for the safety of human rights defenders in the state following attacks and threats against several of them in recent months.

On 27 May 1997, Mr T. Puroshotham, joint secretary of the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC - a state human rights organization) and a lawyer, was attacked from behind while returning to his home at around 8pm. The attack took place in front of a police station when four men hit him on the head with an iron rod. Mr Puroshotham claims that he was attacked by police in plain clothes and has made a statement to police to this effect. A few days after the incident, the "Green Tigers" (see below), claimed responsibility for the attack.

Mr Puroshotham is currently recovering in hospital from serious head injuries but his condition is said to be improving.

It is alleged by human rights activists in Andhra Pradesh state that the "Green Tigers" is a group which has been deliberately set up by the Andhra Pradesh Government in the past few months with the help of police in order to counter the activities of human rights defenders who have highlighted human rights violations by police.

A few days before the attack, Mr Purosotham had filed a writ petition in the High Court of Andhra Pradesh, seeking a direction from the court to the Mahaboobnagar police authorities to preserve the dead bodies of two people killed in an exchange of fire with police on 21 May, so that they could be identified by their relatives. The High Court gave an order in accordance with his request and on the day of his attack, Mr Puroshotham had accompanied the parents of the dead men to Mahaboobnagar to collect the bodies from the mortuary. Mr Purosotham was reportedly verbally abused by police officials at the police station.

This attack is the latest of several incidents which have increased concerns for the safety of human rights activists in Andhra Pradesh in recent months.

On the evening of 6 April 1997 Gaddar, a popular ballad-singer and poet was shot at by several men at his home. Along with the APCLC, Gaddar had been campaigning against the police practice of cremating as "unidentified" the bodies of suspected *naxalites* (see Background Information below) killed in "encounters" with police and demanding that the bodies be handed over to relatives. He was seriously injured in the attack and underwent surgery to remove five bullets. Although the police denied any involvement in the incident and launched an investigation, civil liberties organizations and many others allege that the police were behind the shooting of Gaddar and that the attack was carried out by a section of the Andhra Pradesh police known as the "Greyhounds" who are trained to counter the activities of *naxalites*.

On 24 April 1997, a statement was issued by the "Green Tigers", claiming responsibility for the attack on Gaddar and alleging that APCLC activists and other alleged "*naxalite* sympathisers" - naming Dr Varavara Rao, Dr K Balagopal and Mr K G Kannabiran of the APCLC, as well as Gaddar - had instigated *naxalites*

to commit abuses. The statement warned them to cease these activities. This threat was repeated in an interview with a "district secretary" of the group published in a national newspaper on 10 May.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Andhra Pradesh is the site of armed conflict between police and members of left-wing groups, known as *naxalites* calling among other things for radical land reform. The most prominent of these groups is the People's War Group (PWG), a faction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), a Maoist organization. The PWG has violently opposed the authorities in the state, attacking police, politicians and strategic economic and industrial targets. In response to these attacks, police have resorted to widespread extrajudicial executions of suspected *naxalites*.

Human rights defenders in the state -- most notably the APCLC -- have raised concerns about human rights violations by police against *naxalites* for many years. They have carefully documented hundreds of incidents in which alleged extrajudicial executions have been carried out. Moreover, the APCLC has consistently condemned abuses by the *naxalites* and called on them to abide by international humanitarian law.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) recently found that in several cases of alleged "encounter killings" in the state, the fundamental right to life, guaranteed by Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, had been violated and issued directives to ensure the impartial investigation of future incidents. According to recent reports from the APCLC, the NHRC's directives have not so far been implemented and around 70 further incidents of "encounter" killings have taken place since November 1996.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing grave concern about the attack on Mr T. Puroshotam, an APCLC activist, on 27 May 1997 and calling for an immediate investigation into the incident to be carried out by an impartial authority;
- urging the authorities to ensure the safety of human rights activists in the Andhra Pradesh state;
- expressing concern about threats made by members of the "Green Tigers" against human rights activists in Andhra Pradesh;
- explaining that Amnesty International calls on armed opposition groups in India to abide by minimum humanitarian standards which prohibit the arbitrary killing of civilians, torture and ill-treatment and hostage-taking.

To the Minister of Home Affairs, also:

- urging him to establish a prompt and impartial inquiry into allegations that the "Green Tigers" organization is linked to the state authorities and to the police in Andhra Pradesh.

APPEALS TO:

Mr Chandrababu Naidu
 Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh
 Office of the Chief Minister
 Raj Bhavan, Hyderabad 500 001, Andhra Pradesh, India
Faxes: +91 40 234 828/216 886 (if answered, ask for fax)
Telegrams: Chief Minister, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India
Salutation: Dear Chief Minister

Mr Indrajit Gupta
Minister of Home Affairs
Ministry of Home Affairs
North Block, New Delhi 110 001, India
Faxes: +91 11 301 5750
Telegrams: Home Minister, New Delhi, India
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

Diplomatic representatives of India accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 24 July 1997.