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INDIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONCERNED AT ABDUCTION OF JOURNALISTS
IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR

Yesterday's hostage-taking of 19 journalists in Jammu and Kashmir highlights yet again the unacceptable situation where "renegade" groups -- who support the Indian Government and are backed by security forces -- are able to commit human rights abuses with impunity, Amnesty International said today.

"While we welcome their speedy release, actions of this kind against journalists to gain political advantage are totally unacceptable," the human rights organization said.

The 19 journalists were kidnapped on 8 July in Anantnag district of Jammu and Kashmir by a so-called "renegade" group, the Jammu and Kashmir Ikhwan, who had threatened to kill four of them if their demands were not met. They were reportedly released 10 hours after they were kidnapped following the intervention of officers of the Rashtriya Rifles, a counter-insurgency wing of the army which allegedly sponsors the armed group. However, none of the members of Ikhwan appear to have been charged for their illegal action.

"The Indian Government has a responsibility to control armed militias so that they do not commit human rights abuses like hostage-taking and deliberate killings," Amnesty International said. "It also has a responsibility to ensure that journalists can report freely, safely and without fear."

The journalists, including correspondents from *Agence France Presse (AFP)* and *Reuters*, as well as local journalists, were abducted at gunpoint in the morning of 8 July by members of the Jammu and Kashmir Ikhwan in Anantnag in southern Kashmir.

Last week, the Jammu and Kashmir Ikhwan had ordered all Srinagar-based newspapers to cease publication. The ban was ignored but it is not known if this prompted the hostage-taking.

"This incident comes on top of threats to journalists from other armed groups opposed to the government," Amnesty International said. "Freedom of the press is again under attack from both sides of the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir."

BACKGROUND

Over the past few months, journalists have been severely restricted in the exercise of their professional duties by threats and attacks from all sides, the government, the renegades as well as from armed opposition groups. During the recent elections in Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha, all locally based media were shut down.

On 19 April 1996, the Kashmir Press, a representative body of local newspapers, suspended publication after the Hizbul Mujahideen -- one of several armed groups opposed to the government operating in Jammu and Kashmir -- imposed a ban forbidding the publication of any government statement or advertisement. Two days earlier, the Indian Government had directed the papers not to carry any statement of any member of an armed opposition group which might hamper elections, such as threats to candidates contesting the elections. any violation of the directive, the Union Home Ministry warned, would invite penal action. Despite persistent threats by armed opposition groups, Kashmir-based editors announced the resumption of publication on 17 June.

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