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Pakistan: The arrest of Najam Sethi -- part of a pattern of intimidation, threats and arbitrary arrest of journalists

The beating, arrest and incommunicado detention of Najam Sethi, editor of *The Friday Times*, forms part of a pattern of recent attacks and arbitrary arrests of journalists who have publicly criticised Pakistan's government, Amnesty International said today.

Najam Sethi was arrested on 8 May after 20 men in plainclothes, accompanied by two senior police officers in uniform, broke into his house in Lahore without warrant. After reportedly beating him heavily on the head, neck and shoulders, they tied his wife up and dragged him out of the house.

"The government of Pakistan should immediately release Najam Sethi and other journalists arbitrarily detained over the last few weeks," Amnesty International said. "The authorities must also ensure that no other journalists are prevented from carrying out their professional duties for fear of physical violence, threats, harassment, arbitrary arrest and detention."

"In cases where criminal charges have been brought and where there is a strong possibility that these are false, independent judicial inquiries should immediately be set up to investigate these."

While official sources state that Najam Sethi was detained for his alleged connection with the Indian intelligence services, journalists in Pakistan believe his arrest to be connected with interviews he gave to a BBC team currently investigating corruption allegations against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family.

A habeas corpus petition was filed on 9 May by Najam Sethi's wife in the Lahore High Court, asking that he be brought before the court to satisfy it that he had not been physically harmed and that he be set free. However, the Lahore High Court declined to direct the government to bring him before the court and give assurances for his safety. In today's hearing the court directed the government to reveal on 12 May where he has been taken and on what grounds.

Najam Sethi's arrest comes at a time of considerable public debate within Pakistan over government corruption following the conviction last month of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and her husband Asif Zardari for allegedly receiving kickbacks from a Swiss anti-fraud unit.

Other journalists harassed in the same context include Mehmood Ahmed Khan Lodhi, a journalist with the APP news agency, who also assisted the BBC team. He was arrested on 2 May and questioned for two days before being released. On 5 May the car belonging to Imtiaz Alam, editor of *Current Affairs*, was set on fire by unidentified men. He had been receiving threatening phone calls for some time.

Amnesty International is also concerned at the arrest and unacknowledged detention of Hussain Haqqani who was arrested on 4 May in Rawalpindi reportedly by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA). The official news agency APP said that he had been arrested for alleged “financial irregularities” committed when he was an official in the previous government.

Other journalists targeted in the recent past include the editor-in-chief of *The Frontier Post*, Rehmat Shah Afridi who was arrested on possibly politically motivated drug charges and is currently in judicial custody. Earlier in the year, Mir Shakil-ur Rahman, the owner of the Jang group of newspapers, was systematically harassed by the government in an apparent effort to silence criticism.

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