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PAKISTAN: IMPARTIAL INQUIRY NECESSARY INTO KILLING OF CHILD ACTIVIST

Pakistani authorities should investigate the killing of a 12-year-old child rights activist which is alleged to be the work of carpet industry owners acting with government tolerance.

"Iqbal Masih, who played an important role in freeing children in Pakistan from bonded labour, was apparently killed for speaking out for the basic rights of his fellow young citizens," Amnesty International said.

"Fear and violence, the weapons used to silence human rights defenders around the world, have been used yet again in Pakistan," the organization said.

Iqbal Masih was shot dead in his home town of Muridke in Punjab province while cycling on Sunday, 16 April. The boy, who was formerly a child bonded labourer in a carpet-making factory, later became an activist who helped other child labourers learn their rights and gain freedom.

The organization believes his death fits a pattern of collusion between powerful business families, political groups and local police authorities that has resulted in other such threats and killings.

Although Amnesty International understands that an arrest has been made in connection with the death of Iqbal Masih, it believes that all those responsible for the killing, including those who may have ordered it, should be brought to justice. Amnesty International is also urging that a full, impartial and independent investigation be carried out into allegations that the authorities are implicated in abuses against human rights defenders.

Systematic government failure to bring those responsible for such killings to justice further suggests an official policy of acquiescence to human rights abuses.

"The government rarely investigates such killings, so few people are ever tried, convicted or punished, and therefore people know they can get away with murder," Amnesty International said.

Iqbal Masih had repeatedly received death threats in connection with activities over the last months and a spokesperson for the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF) expressed his belief that the death may have been the work of those sectors who opposed Iqbal's activism. The BLLF claims that Iqbal's success in freeing other children from bondage had adversely affected the profitability of the local carpet industry.

Amnesty International is also calling on the Pakistan government to take preventative measures to guarantee the safety of children and others campaigning against bonded labour.

BACKGROUND ON IQBAL MASIH

At the age of four, Iqbal Masih was sold into labour bondage to a carpet factory owner in Punjab. His father received a loan of Rs 600 (\$12) from a carpet factor owner for his eldest son's wedding. To repay the loan, Iqbal worked over 12 hours every day in the carpet factory. Due to the exorbitant interest rates charged, however, the debt actually increased over several years to Rs. 13,000. At his place of work Iqbal was said to have been beaten, abused and chained to the loom by the owner.

In 1992, Iqbal Masih attended a meeting of the BLLF during which he learned about his rights. He rose to give an impromptu speech at the gathering which was printed in the local papers. He refused to return to his owner and instead obtained a "letter of freedom" used by a BLLF lawyer to confront the business owner that kept him in bondage.

Bonded labour is prohibited under the Abolition of Bonded Labour Act which was passed by parliament in Pakistan in 1992 but is rarely enforced. There are an estimated 7.5 million child bonded labourers in Pakistan today according to ILO estimates; of these more than half a million work in the carpet industry.

Iqbal Masih subsequently enrolled in a BLLF-run school for freed bonded children and actively participated in getting other children freed from bonded labour. In December 1994 he received the Reebok Youth in Action Award; a representative of the Reebok Human Rights Program who met him at the time described him as a courageous child mature beyond his years in spite of his small malnourished body.

Iqbal often spoke up in front of large audiences to testify about the realities of the life of child bonded labourers and helped many other children to free themselves from working under conditions of bondage, according to fellow activists.

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