

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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India: Armed groups target civilians once again

Amnesty International deplores the targeting and killing of at least 69 non-Assamese people living in Upper Assam in North East India over the last six days.

The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a secessionist armed group, is widely believed to have been responsible for the recent attacks and to have also been behind similar targeting of non-Assamese people in the past.

Amnesty International seeks to remind ULFA that international humanitarian law, which applies to all parties to internal armed conflict, clearly prohibits the killing of civilians. The organisation calls on ULFA to immediately cease such activities

Amnesty International understands that the majority of those deliberately targeted in attacks since Friday 5 January 2007 by the armed group included mostly migrant Bihari labourers or permanent settlers of Bihari origin, as well a minority of victims from West Bengal.

Various newspapers and observers are now reporting that groups of non-Assamese people are fleeing districts in Upper Assam amidst fear that they may be targeted for further attack.

Amnesty International is increasingly concerned by reports that such violence may intensify in the run up to Republic Day (26 January) and the 33rd National Games due to be held in the state capital, Guwahati, in February 2007. The organisation is further concerned that those from North East India travelling on trains through Bihar may be subjected to reprisal attacks.

Amnesty International understands that since the attacks at least 10,000 paramilitary forces have been dispatched to the affected region to provide protection and security to residents, and that the army, police and paramilitary are preparing an imminent joint offensive against suspected ULFA units. The organisation notes reports on 9 January that which the Defence Minister has stated that "no quarter" would be given to ULFA.

Amnesty International recognizes the responsibility of the government to ensure law and order, but urges security personnel to adhere strictly to international human rights standards, including the use of force only when proportionate and necessary.

All parties to a conflict, including armed opposition groups, are bound by the provisions of Article 3, common to the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 which prohibit among other things the torture and ill-treatment, hostage-taking and deliberate and arbitrary killing of all persons taking no active part in hostilities.

Background:

Reports say that the first attack was carried out by ULFA on the evening of 5 January 2007 in Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district and it resulted in the killing of 45 individuals – mostly those employed in brick kiln work. The reports say that that this was followed by three separate attacks in Sibsagar and Dibrugarh district on the evening of 7 January, in which armed groups targeted and killed 17 Hindi-speaking people. News of the killing of another two individuals was reported on 8 January 2007.

The killings come in the wake of reports that preliminary discussions between the People's Consultative Group (a group of civil society leaders nominated by ULFA) and the Government of India have reached an impasse over future directions towards peace. Observers have noted that the specific targeting of non-Assamese groups in Upper Assam, as opposed to the group's stronghold in Lower Assam, is a deliberate strategy by ULFA.

Amnesty International is aware that the ULFA has previously been accused of carrying out similar attacks on civilians who have settled in Assam. In January 2001 the organization issued a press release (AI Index: ASA 20/002/2001) highlighting concerns for the safety of non-Assamese settlers – mainly Bihari and Nepali – amid reports that at least

100 people had been killed.