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India: Probe murder of environmental activist Shehla Masood in Bhopal city

Authorities in India and Madhya Pradesh should ensure a thorough investigation and prosecute those responsible for the murder of Shehla Masood, a rights activist, who had sought to expose environmental violations of urban infrastructure projects and challenged mining plans in central India, Amnesty International said today.

35-year-old Shehla Masood was shot dead on 16 August outside her residence, as she was leaving in her car to attend an anti-corruption demonstration at her native Bhopal city in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Authorities in Madhya Pradesh have stated that they would ask the Central Bureau of Investigation to probe her murder.

Shehla had filed several petitions, under India's Right to Information Act demanding information on violations of environmental laws and negative impact of pollution on local communities due to urban infrastructure in Bhopal. Last year she had complained to the authorities of having received threats from a police official. This year, she had written letters to the authorities challenging mining plans in the protected forests of Chhattarpur district in the state.

In the last few years, a number of social activists have been targeted after they used India's Right to Information legislation to expose human rights violations and poor governance including corruption, a fact acknowledged by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders during her visit to India in January 2011.

The most recent attack was on 2 March when social activist Niyamat Ansari was abducted and killed in the eastern state of Jharkhand, after he used the legislation to expose embezzlement of funds meant for India's national-level minimum employment guarantee programme for the rural poor.

India's human rights organizations have been demanding that the authorities enact new legislation to ensure legal protection for those activists who received threats after filing petitions demanding crucial information affecting the livelihoods of local communities.

Amnesty International calls on the Indian authorities to:

- Conduct a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation into the murder of Shehla Masood and bring the perpetrators to justice in proceedings which meet international fair trial standards;
- Take all necessary measures to guarantee that human rights defenders and other social activists are able to carry out their legitimate and peaceful activities without fear of harassment and intimidation.

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