

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 33/010/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 111
15 June 2007

Pakistan: Amnesty International condemns the arbitrary arrests and detention of political activists

Amnesty International is concerned at reports of arbitrary arrests and detention of several hundred political activists belonging to different opposition parties in Pakistan in the past two weeks.

According to media reports and human rights groups, most of the party workers and political activists have been detained in prisons across Punjab province, while others have been detained in other parts of the country. Activists are reportedly being held under three forms of detention: some are believed to be held under preventive detention orders, ranging from 30 to 90 days, others appear to be arbitrarily held without reference to any law, while other political activists are being detained for allegedly breaching restrictions on public gatherings imposed by the government under section 144 of the Code of Criminal of Procedure.

The arrests have reportedly taken place in an attempt to prevent people from participating in welcoming rallies for the suspended Chief Justice to Faisalabad, in Punjab, on June 16. Similar waves of arbitrary detention were reported in recent weeks when the Chief Justice travelled to other parts of the country to address lawyers' gatherings and opposition rallies.

Amnesty International is also concerned at reports that elderly workers were dragged from their homes in the middle of the night and that some activists have been detained in prisons far from their homes making it difficult for their families to contact them.

Across Punjab, police have reportedly arrested activists belonging to the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), the Mutthhida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) and other political parties. Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of a number of woman political activists who have reportedly been arrested.

The Pakistan government has claimed that preventative detention has been used to preserve law and order under the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance. Amnesty International is concerned that the Pakistan government, besides resorting to preventive detention, is also increasingly using Section 144 of the Criminal Code of Procedure in violation of the rights to freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of peaceful assembly and association, enshrined in Articles 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Pakistan's Constitution also guarantees the right to Freedom of Assembly and Association under articles 16 and 17 respectively.

Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure prohibits a gathering of more than four people in public without police authorization, while a magistrate can prohibit meetings of five or more persons.

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Pakistan to respect Pakistan's own constitutional safeguards and international human rights standards and to guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association of its people. Amnesty International urges the Government of Pakistan to immediately release all of the political activists arbitrarily detained to prevent them exercising their rights to peaceful assembly in this latest crackdown.

Those seeking to exercise their rights of peaceful assembly and expression must be secure from violence by security personnel in the name of maintaining public order.

