

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL WEB FEATURE

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Opposition defiant in Pakistan despite arrests

Mass arrests of opposition activists in Pakistan have increased in scale to such a degree that it's reported that there are no places left in jails to hold them. In Lahore City alone, seven sub-jails have been established. Prison administrations have been told to keep detainees in tents.

Opposition party leader Benazir Bhutto has again been placed in what amounts to house arrest for three days. This follows her walking through a police blockade around her house today (Thursday) to address a public gathering that had been denied permission by the authorities. Mass arrests of workers from her party started yesterday, when she refused to cancel the public gathering in Rawalpindi. Across Punjab Province, more than 4,000 Pakistan People's Party workers have been arrested.

An alliance of religious political parties has also announced that it will start street agitation from 14 November.

Lawyers across the country are facing extreme difficulties in their efforts to locate and meet the detainees. Even where places of detention are known, access is not being granted by the authorities.

Senior lawyers arrested on the day of emergency, including Aitzaz Ahsan, the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, have been detained incommunicado. Mr Ahsan's counsel has not been allowed to see his client in jail despite his repeated applications to the Chief Commissioner in Islamabad. Mr Ahsan is also reported to be held in solitary confinement. The whereabouts of other senior lawyers is not known.

The government initially charged people with anti-terrorism charges, but now charges of sedition are being issued. Three politicians and one trade unionist were charged with sedition yesterday. They were arrested on Tuesday in Karachi for making speeches and participating in an anti-emergency demonstration outside the press club. Karachi police have also filed a case of sedition against eight lawyers, but none of them has so far been arrested.

The government is also in the process of introducing amendments to provide legal authority for the intelligence agencies to detain any citizen on suspicion of terrorism. This will allow them authorities to hold any citizen in arbitrary detention without any specific charges. Military laws are also to be amended to allow the trial of civilians by military authorities under the Army Act. The attorney general has confirmed the process of such amendments.

Independent TV and radio channels are still not permitted to broadcast within Pakistan. BBC and CNN were yesterday permitted to transmit within Pakistan.

However today, in view of the mass arrests and telecast of Pakistan People's Party rally, the channels were taken off air again.

Journalists observed a 'black day' in Pakistan today in protest at the media restrictions. Two daily newspapers have been served official notices to bring their editorial policy in line with the new press laws or they face official action.

[Do not archive] Thursday 15 November has been announced as an International Day of Action on Pakistan. Amnesty International will be organising actions to coincide with actions by journalists in Pakistan and other groups including the International Federation of Journalists. Further details of events will be announced next week.

[Caption] Benazir Bhutto, Pakistani opposition leader, speaks to supporters outside her home in Islamabad © APGraphicsBank