

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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India: Punjab - Twenty years on impunity continues

Welcoming the extension of the tenure of Nanavati Commission of Inquiry, on the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and other parts of the country, Amnesty International urges the Indian authorities to ensure that the perpetrators of the violence carried out against the Sikh community, in 1984, be brought to justice.

The United Progressive Alliance in its Common Minimum Programme stated that improving the justice sector and addressing the issues of communal violence was one of its goals. Amnesty International believes that ending impunity for past abuses is critical to achieving these objectives.

Amnesty International calls on the Indian authorities to end impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations carried out in Punjab state between the mid 1980's and 1990's, including the 1984 riots in Delhi. During this period, a range of human rights violations were perpetrated but few people have been brought to justice.

"Until justice is delivered to victims and their families the wounds left by this period remain open," said Amnesty International.

Only a small minority of the police officers responsible for a range of human rights violations, including torture, deaths in custody, extra-judicial killings and 'disappearances', were brought to justice in the Punjab state. There have been a small number of prosecutions but in many cases impunity has prevailed.

In 1996, the Supreme Court ordered the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to examine the findings of the Central Bureau of Investigations that 2,097 people had been illegally cremated by police officials in Amritsar district between 1984 and 1994. In March 2004, through public notices in newspapers the NHRC encouraged the families of the victims to file their claims before the Commission.

Background Information

The decade of violent political opposition in Punjab -- which lasted from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s -- started when a movement within the Sikh community in Punjab turned to violence to achieve an independent state for the Sikhs in the early 1980s.

To deal with the violence in the state, Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, authorized an army assault on the Golden Temple, the centre of the Sikh religion, in June 1984. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the leader of Akali Dal, the largest Sikh political party demanding official recognition of the Sikh faith and greater political autonomy, together with many of his supporters, were killed in an assault on the Golden Temple, known as Operation Blue Star.

Indira Gandhi was assassinated on 31 October 1984 in retaliation. Her assassination was followed by a

period of violence known as the anti-Sikh riots.

From the early 1980s, armed opposition groups targeted and killed police officers, elected representatives and civil servants. The security forces resorted to unlawful and indiscriminate arrests, torture and extrajudicial executions. Thousands of civilians were the victims of abuses committed by both sides.

Armed opposition ended in Punjab just over a decade ago, resulting in a marked decrease of human rights violations in the state. However, thousands of families are still waiting to see justice or know the fate of their relatives who "disappeared" that period.

In its 2003 report, *India: Break the cycle of impunity and torture in Punjab*, Amnesty International linked the continuation of serious human rights violations in the Punjab to the culture of impunity developed during the period of militancy and reinforced by subsequent inaction. The organization found that regular incidents of torture and custodial violence in the Punjab occur even today.