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USA: Government should re-issue visa for Pakistani human rights defender

Amnesty International today called on the US government to re-issue a visa to Pakistani human rights defender Amina Masood, after an earlier visa was revoked on "security and related grounds".

The organization also asked the US authorities to clarify why the previous visa was revoked. Despite Amnesty International's request to them to explain the precise grounds on which Amina's visa was withdrawn, no response has been forthcoming. Amina Masood had been invited by Amnesty International on a speaker's tour of Europe and the USA to campaign on enforced disappearances in Pakistan.

"It is baffling that the US authorities deem Amina Masood a threat to US security," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific Director. "Over the past three years Amina has campaigned peacefully, tirelessly and with great dignity for the government of Pakistan to reveal the fate and whereabouts of hundreds of disappeared people – including her own husband Masood Janjua – while condemning acts of terrorism."

The US Embassy in Islamabad issued Amina Masood with a visa on 12 August. However, as she was about to board a plane en route to Washington DC on 13 September, an embassy official called to say that her visa had been revoked and warned her that, if she boarded the plane, she would not be allowed to enter the United States and would be deported back to Pakistan.

She was told by the embassy official that her visa had been withdrawn under Section 212(a) 3 of the US Immigration and Nationality Act, which covers "security and related grounds". This section relates to acts such as espionage, sabotage and terrorist activities.

Amnesty International also calls on the US authorities to co-operate with Pakistan's new government to resolve all cases of enforced disappearance and to ensure the practice is brought to an end.

"The US government must ensure that it is not complicit in, contributing to, or tolerating the practice of enforced disappearances in Pakistan. Many people who have been secretly detained in detention centres in Pakistan say they were interrogated by Pakistani intelligence agencies but also by foreign intelligence agencies", said Sam Zarifi.

"At a time when there is rising anti-Americanism in Pakistan and when many Pakistanis blame the US government for encouraging the practice of enforced disappearances and other human rights violations in their country, the US government should re-issue a visa to Amina Masood."

Background

Amina Masood is the founder and chairperson of Defence of Human Rights, a Pakistani organisation that

campaigns for the release of the disappeared. She speaks for 563 families of the disappeared.

She co-founded the group after her husband Masood Janjua was apprehended while travelling on a bus three years ago. His fate and whereabouts remain unknown.

Since Pakistan joined the US-led “war on terror” in late 2001, hundreds of people suspected of links to terrorist activity or nationalist groups have been subjected to enforced disappearance. They have been arbitrarily detained and held in secret facilities. Denied access to lawyers, families or courts and held outside the all protection of the law, they are victims of enforced disappearance. Most, if not all, are subjected to torture and other ill-treatment.

Over the past few weeks Amina Masood has raised the issue of enforced disappearances in meetings with government officials in the UK, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.