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India: Killings mar Republic Day

As killings continue in conflict-ridden parts of India in the run up to today's Republic Day, Amnesty International is calling for an end to politically motivated killings.

Yesterday, unidentified gunmen shot dead 23 civilians in the village of Vandhama, near the town of Ganderbal in Jammu and Kashmir. The victims, all civilians, included four children, nine women and 10 men. The attackers reportedly surrounded the village and opened indiscriminate fire at the civilian villagers, then torched a small Hindu temple and blew up a house.

"The use of a day of public importance to score political points by killing, injuring and maiming civilians, including women and children, should be condemned by everyone," Amnesty International said.

State government officials have held armed opposition groups responsible for the killings. However, none of these groups have claimed responsibility and there is no history of communal tension in the area. Shabir Shah, a leader of the All Parties Hurriyat [Freedom] Conference, a confederation of groupings that favour separation of Kashmir from India, stated that the act was carried out by criminals who intended to alienate Hindus from the Kashmiri Muslim majority. To Amnesty International's knowledge, the state has not initiated an inquiry into the killings.

Earlier, on the night of 13 January, 17 Hindus were killed in Kamrup district of the north-eastern state of Assam -- an area not known for communal tension. Unidentified gunmen suspected to be from the Bodo Liberation Tiger Force (BLTF) opened fire, resulting in the death of two children, nine women and six men. Despite condemnation of the killings by the state and central governments and by armed opposition groups active in the region, to Amnesty International's knowledge no inquiry has been launched to affix responsibility.

"Armed opposition groups must accept that they are bound by minimum standards of humanity which demand that civilians should never be targeted," Amnesty International said.

"Rather than prejudge who is responsible for these killings, the state governments should set up independent and impartial inquiries into the killings and take steps to make sure that human rights do not continue to be a casualty of the protracted conflicts."

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