

INDIABonded labourers in Punjab and their relatives
Members of *Volunteers for Social Justice*

Landlords in Punjab have attempted to abduct bonded labourers (who work unwaged to pay off loans from the landlords) from the office of an organisation campaigning for their rights. Bonded labour is illegal in India, but the law is widely flouted.

Volunteers for Social Justice, a human rights organization based in Phillaur, in the Jalandhar district of Punjab, works on behalf of bonded labourers. At around 7am on 7 February 2000 several landlords went to the organisation's office asking for the coordinator, Jai Singh, who was not there. At around 12.30pm several landlords confronted his daughter and Amar Singh (a bonded labourer who had taken refuge with the organisation) outside the office. After an argument Amar Singh ran to the office for help. The landlords followed him and reportedly forced their way into the office and attempted to abduct several other bonded labourers who were in the offices. They reportedly beat one of the bonded labourers, Mukand Singh, before they left.

Volunteers for Social Justice called the local police immediately. It is not known if the police recorded a case, but after media reports and public pressure police visited the offices of Volunteers for Social Justice on 9 February to take written statement from those present on 7 February.

This appears to be the latest in a series of events in which bonded labourers and those defending their rights have been harassed and threatened by vested interests.

On 10 December 1999, Volunteers for Social Justice filed cases with the District Magistrate for the release of Amar Singh and another bonded labourer, Charan Singh, who were bonded to a landlord in the village of Dhangi Tehsil Nabha. As no action had been taken to release the two men by late December, they took refuge in the offices of Volunteers for Social Justice. Amnesty International has received worrying reports that police have threatened the men's relatives at the behest of landlords. Amar Singh's brother-in-law and Charan Singh's son-in-law have reportedly been picked up by police in recent months and threatened with imprisonment if the two men do not return to work or repay the debt they owe to the landlords.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Bonded labour, a form of slavery, is illegal in India. Article 23 of the Indian Constitution prohibits the use of forced labour, and bonded labour is specifically outlawed under the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976. It is also prohibited by international human rights treaties to which India is a party. Despite this, the practice of bonded labour continues in many states of India. The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, which provides for cases of bonded labour to be brought before district magistrates who can order the release and rehabilitation of bonded labourers and for the setting up of Vigilance Committees in districts, is often not implemented. Employers are able to ensure that police turn a blind eye to their activities, labourers are often unaware of their rights and police themselves are often unaware of the provisions of the Act. Bonded labourers who do take steps to free themselves from bondage face overwhelming pressures from landlords and are regularly subjected to torture and ill-treatment. A number of human rights organizations

in India are involved in campaigning against bonded labour and filing cases for the release of labourers.

Amnesty International has raised many concerns about the situation of human rights defenders in India. It is particularly concerned about attacks on human rights defenders who have challenged corrupt and illegal practices and allegations that sections of the police and/or state authorities often act in connivance with those involved in such practices.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing concern about the attack on bonded labourers by landlords at the office of Volunteers for Social Justice in Phillaur, Jalandhar district of Punjab on 7 February and calling for an immediate impartial investigation;
- expressing fear for the safety of workers of Volunteers for Social Justice including its Coordinator Jai Singh;
- expressing fear for the safety of bonded labourers and their relatives who have been threatened by landlords in Jalandhar district of Punjab;
- calling for the immediate release of relatives of Amar Singh and Charan Singh, who appear to have been detained by police to force the two men to return to bonded labour;
- calling on the government to take steps to protect bonded labourers from the illegal actions of landlords, to implement provisions of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act 1976 and to take action against police officials who abuse or fail to implement its provisions;
- urging the authorities to give a commitment that human rights defenders will be free to carry out their peaceful activities without fear of harassment and that action will be taken against anyone interfering with those activities, in accordance with UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms adopted by the General Assembly in December 1998.

APPEALS TO:

Mr Prakash Singh Badal
Chief Minister of Punjab
Office of the Chief Minister
Civil Secretariat
Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Telegrams: Chief Minister, Punjab, India

Faxes: +91 172 740936

Salutation: Dear Chief Minister

Director General of Police, Punjab
Police Headquarters
Chandigarh
Punjab, India

Telegrams: Director General of Police, Chandigarh, India

Faxes: +91 172 740 9011

Salutation: Dear Director General

COPIES TO:

Minister of State for Labour
Ministry of Labour
Shram Shakti Bhavan
New Delhi 110 001, India

and to diplomatic representatives of India accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 23 March 2000.