

News Service: 028/99
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**PUBLIC STATEMENT
INDIA
WORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS THREATENED BECAUSE OF
OPPOSITION TO INDUSTRIAL PROJECTS IN ORISSA**

In a letter to the Chief Minister of Orissa today Amnesty International expressed grave concern about measures taken by the government against non-governmental organizations working with tribal communities in the Rayagada and Koraput districts of the state.

On 24 December 1998, the Government of Orissa issued a Show Cause Notice to Agragamee, a non-governmental organization (NGO). A similar notice was issued to another NGO, Lakshman Nayak Society for Rural Development, on 8 January 1999. The notices threatened the organizations with the withdrawal of official registration and funding on the basis of reports that they had been involved in criminal activities and had incited tribal people to violence in an attempt to prevent the establishment of industrial projects in the district. Two more organizations, Ankuran and Women's Integrated Development Agency (WIDA), have been threatened with funding withdrawal.

While Amnesty International recognizes the responsibility of the local authorities to investigate criminal activities, the organization is concerned about wider moves to restrict freedom of association or NGO activity.

The area where the organizations are working is characterized by widespread opposition to the construction of bauxite mines and aluminium processing plants by several companies.

The government actions appear to be at the instigation of district officials. The District Collector and Superintendent of Police of Rayagada district were reported as saying that those opposing the establishment of aluminium plants in the area should be imprisoned under the National Security Act (NSA), which allows for administrative detention for a period of up to one year. In a report submitted in April 1998, the Collector is reported to have argued that "when the development of the people is at stake, the government has to choose either of the two: continuance of such NGOs or large-scale industrialisation of the district".

While Amnesty International takes no position on the construction of industrial projects, it defends the right of individuals to peacefully protest against such projects without fear of suppression by the state and other interests. The organization believes that -- far from curtailing their activities -- the state has an obligation to protect human rights defenders, whose rights and responsibilities were spelt out in December in a United Nations Declaration.

In view of reports that the Orissa government has in the last few days drafted in several platoons of police and that tension is building in the district where previous protests have been met with excessive force by police, Amnesty International is seeking to remind the government of

its obligation to find a way of balancing respect for human rights with attempts to achieve economic growth.

Reports have indicated the collusion and acquiescence of the police in the harassment and violence against protesters. Local police have consistently failed to take action to prevent this violence and, in some cases, they have reportedly refused to file cases against those responsible for it. In addition, there are allegations that police officials have falsely filed charges against local people and activists at the behest of vested interests in an attempt to harass and intimidate them.

In addition to addressing the Government of Orissa, Amnesty International will call on the companies involved in construction of the mines and processing plants to co-operate in investigations into abuses of human rights and to make representations to the government of Orissa to ensure respect for human rights.

Amnesty International calls on all companies to promote respect for human rights, including engaging in discussion with community leaders and voluntary organizations on the role of the company in the broader community. It also considers that multinational companies have a responsibility to use their influence with governments to protest against human rights violations in the countries in which they operate.

Background

Amnesty International and human rights groups in India are witnessing increasing suppression of civil and political rights in the name of development. Individuals and organizations attempting to assert the right to peaceful assembly and expression as well as the right to realization of economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for their dignity are under attack from the state and commercial interests.

The Rayagada and Koraput districts of Orissa are populated by a large percentage of tribal people who have been gradually marginalised. In the last 50 years, thousands of hectares of land in tribal regions of Orissa have been taken from the local population and brought under dam projects, industries and mines. Those displaced have been poorly compensated, if at all, and many have lost their livelihoods and their homes.

Since 1993, several multinational companies have become involved in the development of mining and processing plants in the area which is rich in bauxite. Soon after the companies began to conduct surveys in the area, local people began to openly protest against these development projects, demanding information on the planned displacement and rehabilitation and calling for greater consultation. Tribal families who faced displacement or loss of land were reportedly offered monetary compensation. There are also allegations that some tribal people were forced to accept compensation under threat of violence and offered alcohol and other inducements. The granting of monetary compensation to tribal people rather than provision of equivalent land has been widely criticised by organizations working with tribal communities.

Non-governmental organizations working with tribal communities in the region on issues such as women's resources, literacy and education, capacity-building and land and water use, have supported these communities in asserting their right to information about the proposed plants and their right to livelihood. Protests against the projects have taken the form of peaceful marches, demonstrations and the establishment of road blocks. Some destruction of company property has also reportedly taken place.

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MEDIA ADVISORY

Open letter from Amnesty International to EU governments on the eve of EU-China human rights dialogue

As European Union (EU) governments prepare for their next round of human rights dialogue with China on 8 February 1999, Amnesty International's Secretary General, Pierre Sané, today wrote to all member states urging them to reevaluate the process in the light of "one of the most disturbing crackdowns in China in the past decade".

More than 70 dissenters have been detained and at least 15 high profile dissidents given heavy prison sentences or assigned to "re-education through labour" since October 1998. A widespread crackdown on suspected Uighur nationalists and independent Muslim leaders continues in Xinjiang. Reports persist of the torture and death in custody of prisoners of conscience in Tibet and an ongoing "patriotic education" campaign involving closure of monasteries or the expulsion of "unpatriotic" monks and nuns. Unofficial Christian groups also reported intensified repression at the end of 1998, involving numerous arrests.

These developments strike at the heart of the EU and other human rights dialogues and call into question China's sincerity in signing key human rights conventions in 1997 and 1998. They represent a serious setback on many of the core issues the EU and others have claimed to be pursuing and highlight China's contempt for international opinion and its sense of security from international censure. Mr Sané warned that there was a risk EU governments were becoming hostage to a dialogue process that is not producing results. The very effectiveness of dialogue will be compromised if the EU abandon other forms of pressure, including at the UN Commission of human rights. Amnesty International is therefore calling on all EU governments to:

- I. protest recent developments in China publicly and unequivocally;
- II. take preparatory steps towards tabling a resolution at the forthcoming Human Rights Commission highlighting concerns and the need for concrete progress;
- III. evaluate the dialogue progress, with a view to
 - setting concrete objectives and a time frame for their achievement;
 - improving public accountability and reporting on the content of dialogue

- sessions;
- ensuring the format of dialogue allows for the greatest possible diversity of participation on both sides;
 - improving coordination with other dialogue partners (such as the US, Australia and Canada) to avoid duplication and maximize effect.
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To receive a copy of the letter, or to arrange an interview, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 171 413 5566/5729, or +44 468 670 247.

