

AI INDEX: ASA 20/09/96

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE 1930 HRS GMT 06 MAY 1996

INDIA: GOVERNMENT AND ARMED OPPOSITION GROUPS SHOULD RESPECT HUMAN RIGHTS DURING JAMMU AND KASHMIR ELECTIONS

On the first day of elections in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, Amnesty International today called on the government and all armed groups to respect human rights and to stop targeting journalists and human rights defenders monitoring the election process.

“In an atmosphere in which political violence has been escalating and in which freedom of speech has been curtailed, it is vital that all political actors ensure human rights do not become a casualty of the electoral process,” Amnesty International said.

Journalists and human rights defenders, as well as political activists, have been particularly singled out for human rights abuses including killings, attacks and death threats by all involved in the conflict in recent weeks and months. Amnesty International is calling on the state forces to provide protection to all journalists and human rights defenders so that they may go about their duties without fear for their safety or lives. The organization is also urging armed opposition groups and armed groups working in cooperation with the security forces to cease targeting them for attacks.

“The government should give strict orders to all security forces to stop human rights violations and live up to international standards,” Amnesty International said. “The authorities should also take immediate steps to disarm and disband groups of so-called “renegades” (members of armed groups and criminal elements given direct support by security forces, who have committed numerous killings in recent weeks, apparently with official acquiescence).”

“Armed opposition groups should immediately and unconditionally stop human rights abuses such as hostage-taking, deliberate and arbitrary killings and torture including rape,” the organization said.

BACKGROUND

Abuses against journalists have been committed in an atmosphere of increasing censorship of the Jammu and Kashmir press since the elections were announced. This censorship has effectively been enforced by both the Indian Government and armed opposition groups. On 17 April, the state government threatened to press criminal charges against local newspaper editors who publish statements by “separatist” leaders or “inflammatory matter likely to foment...regional tension”. An armed opposition group responded to this directive warning the editors that they would be “dealt with severely” if they published government statements or material produced by “militant groups”.

In recent, but separate incidents, the bodies of human rights activist and lawyer, Jalil Andrabi, and journalist Ghulam Rasool Sheikh, were found in the Jhelum river. In both killings, “renegades” have been implicated. Earlier journalist, Ghulam Nabi Khayal, survived a grenade attack, allegedly by “renegades”.

Political leaders including Abdul Gani Lone and Syed Ali Shah Geelani have been the target for several attacks by unidentified persons - most recently on 12 April when hand grenades were thrown into both men’s houses. Lone has been quoted as saying “We are afraid of the gun, whoever holds it. Whether it is the “renegades”, the security forces or the militants. In case elections are held, the people will be ground between them”. Government authorities consistently claim that these attacks were perpetrated by armed opposition groups. However, “renegades” have been fully implicated in these attacks.

Human rights abuses by armed opposition groups persist. In late April, when an Awami Tehriq Party candidate could not be found by members of an armed opposition group, his brother was shot dead, apparently by members of the group. A party activist had been killed earlier while distributing campaign literature. On 9 April, members of an armed opposition group shot dead Ghulam Hassan Mir, a member of the Congress (I) party, at his home in Pulwama district.

In many cases, attributing responsibility for apparently political attacks is difficult because of the prevailing disregard for human rights. For example, on 21 February 1996 Yasin Malik, Chairman of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and its General Secretary, Shakeel Bakhshi, were attacked by unidentified gunmen while attending a religious meeting in Anantnag.

ENDS.../

For more information on Amnesty International’s concerns in India or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Mark Ogle, Press Office, International Secretariat:

Telephone: (+44) 171 413 5729

Fax.: (+44) 171 413 5815/5835