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India: Human rights defenders persecuted for challenging injustice

People who stand up for human rights in India are being subjected to threats, harassment, false criminal cases and in some cases torture, ill-treatment, "disappearances" and even political killings, Amnesty International said today in a new report on human rights defenders.

The Indian authorities are failing to protect human rights defenders or prevent these human rights abuses. In some cases they are directly responsible for the abuses while in others state agencies, particularly police under political influence, connive or acquiesce in the attacks.

"Human rights activists often pay a high price for their courage and commitment," Amnesty International said. "The death of an activist in Gujarat six days ago after he was detained and reportedly beaten by police highlights the urgent need for the Indian authorities to protect human rights defenders".

Colonel Save, an activist with the *Kinara Bachao Samiti* [Save the Coast Committee], which has protested the construction of a port in the coastal zone of Gujarat, was arrested in his home in the early hours of 20 April 2000. He was taken to the local police station, where fellow detainees say he was hit repeatedly by police before being placed in a crowded cell, despite pleadings that he had a heart condition. Colonel Save subsequently suffered a brain haemorrhage and died in hospital in Mumbai.

Excessive use of force by law enforcement agencies against peaceful protesters is just one concern highlighted by Amnesty International in its report. The report also documents the monitoring of their activities by the state, and restrictions on their freedom of opinion and expression. False criminal cases are frequently filed against individuals as a means of harassment by politicians, powerful landowners and businessmen, as well as the state.

Although the rights of vulnerable groups including dalits, adivasis, and members of religious minorities are protected in law, attacks on activists defending the rights of these communities demonstrate their continuing vulnerability and the urgent need for the Indian government to take practical steps to protect their rights.

Women who campaign for human rights in India also face discrimination from their own families, in the wider community, in the criminal justice system and from the authorities.

Human rights activists in areas of internal armed conflict are killed and “disappeared”, often accused of belonging to the armed opposition. Those who have tried to address human rights abuses by either side of the conflict, including journalists, have themselves been targeted by both security forces and armed opposition groups.

At a recent workshop held in New Delhi to discuss how to protect and support human rights defenders, a series of recommendations was endorsed to put to the government, to armed opposition groups and to economic actors, calling on them in the first instance to support and respect the role of human rights defenders.

On Wednesday the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva passed a resolution calling for a special representative to promote and protect human rights defenders.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 207 413 5566. Copies of the report are also available from India by calling on +91 11 651 0202. You can also visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>