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India: Escalating harassment of opposition leaders and journalists in Jammu and Kashmir

The Government in Jammu and Kashmir and the Indian Government should act now to ensure that political activists are not detained for participating in legitimate protests -- and that journalists are not beaten and harassed for pursuing their professional duties, Amnesty International said today.

Leaders of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) -- which comprises some 30 groups which oppose accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India -- have been subjected to an accelerated sequence of arbitrary arrests in the recent past. Journalists attempting to cover the arrests and other abuses have been beaten and insulted for engaging in their professional activities.

“By repeatedly arresting APHC leaders the government appears to be using a policy of intimidation. Legitimate forms of protest are being stifled by arbitrary arrests and harassment which are likely to reinforce militancy,” Amnesty International warned. “This is accompanied by a policy of muffling the press so that no news of repression can reach the outside world.”

In one week alone, several senior APHC leaders were arrested three times. Five APHC leaders, including its chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, and dozens of supporters were arrested on 25 June when the APHC announced a protest action planned for 27 June. They were released after several hours.

Several APHC leaders, including Syed Ali Gilani, were again arrested on 26 June during police raids of their homes. Again on 27 June, APHC leaders Mohammad Yasin Malik, Abdul Gani Lone, Maulvi Abbas Ansari, Abdul Ghani Butt and Javed Ahmed Mir were arrested when they led peaceful processions to the United Nations (UN) office in Srinagar. Mirwaiz Omar Farooq was placed under house arrest. All were released after several hours in custody.

On 27 June 1997, about 20 journalists had gathered in front of the UN Observer Group office in Srinagar to cover a APHC demonstration protesting against the authorities' refusal to allow the demonstrators to congregate in Iqbal Park in Srinagar. As the protesters gathered, police targeted three women demonstrators and began beating them.

When Surinder Oberoi, the senior *Agence France Presse* correspondent in Srinagar directed his photographer Tauseef Mustafa to take pictures of the police beating and kicking the women who had been pushed to the ground, he was questioned by the Srinagar Superintendent of Police. Oberoi replied that he was performing his professional duties. Several identified police officers then beat Oberoi with sticks on his head and shoulders till other journalists intervened.

Around 50 local journalists protesting against the incident on the afternoon of the same day were teargassed and some 20 were injured in police beatings. Several reportedly had their cameras smashed. Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah reportedly ordered an inquiry into the “*unfortunate incident*” but also warned journalists to “*in future ... behave properly*”. The Kashmir Union of Journalists subsequently boycotted all government functions and statements in protest that three identified police officers had not been suspended days after the incident

Statements by the new police chief of Jammu and Kashmir, Gurbachan Jagat, that police will “eliminate” militant groups engaged in the armed conflict in Jammu and Kashmir further exacerbates a climate of repression and fear. He said that specially trained units placed in the countryside where militants move about freely, are to “*make contact and eliminate the militants. ... rather than waiting for them to attack us, we go after them*”.

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