

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 33/008/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 129
16 May 2005

Pakistan: Peaceful rally of human rights defenders stopped by police, participants arrested

Amnesty International is concerned about the denial of the right to freedom of association and freedom of expression of people attempting to hold a rally in Pakistan and the arbitrary detention of some 40 human rights defenders. Police reportedly used force, beating men and women intending to participate in a mixed gender marathon organized by the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the Joint Action Committee for People's Rights to halt the rally and disperse participants. There are reports of police pulling women demonstrators by their hair, hitting and tearing their clothes. Participants and journalists covering the event were also verbally abused by police. By evening all the arrested demonstrators were released without charge. By evening all the arrested demonstrators were released without charge.

Background

Some 50 women's rights activists attempted to demonstrate on 14 May in Lahore against the lack of state protection for women wishing to participate in public sports events in the face of interference by Islamist groups in such events. Last month, Islamists attacked participants in a mixed marathon held in Gujranwala claiming that women's participation in public sports was repugnant to Islam.

Amongst those arrested were prominent activists including women's rights lawyers Asma Jahangir and Hina Jilani, former law minister Iqbal Haider, Gulnar Tabassum, working for an NGO providing shelter to homeless women and Joseph Francis, a minorities' rights activist. Amongst the arrested people was also the locally based researcher of Human Rights Watch, Ali Hasan who said he was beaten by police in custody.

Police explained that the action had been taken as processions had been banned in the city, apparently under pressure from Islamic parties who currently are in the governing coalition. Police also claimed they had intended to protect the demonstrators against Islamist attack.

