

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ON 19 JANUARY 1996
AI INDEX : ASA 20/02/96

INDIA: ARRESTS APPEAR TO RUN COUNTER TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Recent arrests of hundreds of Bhutanese people in northeast India who walked from refugee camps in eastern Nepal may run counter to the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, according to Amnesty International.

The human rights organization is appealing for information from the Indian government about the reasons for their arrest, and is urging that those Bhutanese people still in custody be immediately and unconditionally released unless charged with recognizable criminal offences.

Most recently, on 17 January, Indian police arrested 150 people who had set off by foot on 14 January from the refugee camps at the border at Panitanki, West Bengal, India. They were arrested together with 16 members of an India-based refugee support group. They are currently detained at Siliguri jail.

The march was organized by the Appeal Movement Coordinating Committee, an organization based in Nepal. The stated aim of the march was to walk to the capital of Bhutan, Thimphu, and present a petition to the King "requesting restoration of fundamental rights in Bhutan and early repatriation of the Bhutanese refugees". The marchers reportedly all wore white T-shirts with "Peaceful marcher - 14 January 1996" printed on them.

Earlier, between 3 and 7 January, approximately 240 Bhutanese people from the refugee camps in Nepal had been taken into custody while on their way to a rally in West Bengal, India. Those arrested were cyclists and students heading for Jaigoan, via Siliguri, to attend a rally scheduled to be held on 11 January. They were released on 13 and 15 January.

That rally was organized by the Bhutan Coalition Development Movement, a coalition of Bhutanese human rights groups and political parties in exile and was intended to publicize the plight of the people from Bhutan currently living in the refugee camps in Jhapa District, eastern Nepal, and the apparent lack of progress in negotiations between the governments of Bhutan and Nepal on the possible return of some of them to Bhutan.

On 12 January, Amnesty International had sought information from the government of India about the reasons for the arrest of the 200 Bhutanese people and urged that they be immediately and unconditionally released unless they were to be charged with recognizable criminal offences. The organization also urged that those detained be treated well. Amnesty International was pleased to learn that those arrested between 3 and 7 January were subsequently released.

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