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INDIA: @AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR END TO
"RAMPANT" ABUSES BY SECURITY FORCES IN PUNJAB

Amnesty International today urged all parties running in India's coming national elections to commit themselves to end the rampant human rights abuses that have gone unchecked in the northern state of Punjab for at least seven years.

The organization is sending its latest report documenting widespread arbitrary arrests, torture and killings in Punjab directly to the leaders of all major parties in the elections. The report, which includes detailed recommendations on ways to stop the abuses, was sent earlier to the government.

"The already critical human rights situation is going to get worse unless the new government orders its forces to stop the abuses," Amnesty International said. "Those police and security force officers which secretly arrest, torture or extrajudicially execute people must be brought to justice and the special powers that have led to such abuses must be curbed."

The organization said the serious human rights violations in Punjab have persisted under three governments which have set the stage for the widespread abuses by passing the grossly unfair 1987 Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act and letting extreme violations like torture and killings go unpunished.

The government recently even changed the criminal code effectively granting all police and security forces immunity from prosecution for any action they take on official duty in Punjab and other states which are under the president's rule.

Despite recent official orders to release an unstated number of Sikhs detained in Punjab on minor charges, well over 10,000 Sikhs are being held in the state without any chance of even getting a trial under sweeping anti-terrorist laws - laws which members of the UN Human Rights Committee recently called "disturbing" and "completely unacceptable".

Amnesty International said people are often picked up by police, tortured or "disappeared" on the slightest suspicion that they have ties with armed Sikh secessionist groups.

Suspected government opponents are routinely tortured in police stations and detention centres. Hundreds of them are being held in secret detention, and the legal steps relatives and others can take to find them have been totally ineffective in locating many victims. Police and security forces have often flouted orders that they bring detainees before a court.

Relatives of suspected opponents, including women, have also been targeted for arrest and torture - some have been arrested 30 or 40 times.

A 17-year-old girl whose father and brother were already in jail was reportedly beaten and raped by police. Women have been detained by police and tortured for giving food and shelter to Sikh militants.

Hundreds of Sikhs have been killed in fake shoot-outs staged by the police, called "encounters". In one case, the authorities also incited the killing of some 50 "terrorists" by offering a reward for their deaths. Such extrajudicial killings are part of the around 4,000

political killings by government forces and armed opposition groups last year alone.

Amnesty International's report details the growing number of killings by armed Sikh opposition groups since 1987. In that time they have killed thousands of people, including civilians, journalists, police officers and politicians, and have tortured others. These armed groups have also issued directives on public policy and social behaviour, and killed people who did not follow them, acts the report calls "particularly reprehensible".

"Torturing and murdering prisoners can never be justified, by governments or opposition groups," Amnesty International said.

In its report, the organization says that the many thousands of people detained under the 1987 anti-terrorist act are held for months or years without going to court.

Increasingly, people are kept in secret detention and others just "disappear" after their arrest. A 15-year-old boy, for example, taken from his home by police back in 1988 has not been seen since.

"Sometimes police say that someone has "escaped" to cover up the fact they are hidden in a jail or have been killed," Amnesty International said.

Under the anti-terrorist law, people can be detained for up to a year without charge for investigation into loosely defined charges, and face a minimum of five years in prison if convicted of broadly defined "terrorist" or "disruptive" activities at in camera trials where the burden is on them to prove their innocence.

Victims and human rights groups say that people are hung from ceilings and beaten, heavy iron bars are rolled on their legs, their genitals are beaten and chili powder is forced into the rectum.

Officials have admitted in the media that torture takes place and two official inquiries have found the evidence to back that up, but nothing has been done to stop the torture or to bring the torturers to justice. A 1986 inquiry named 21 police officers who tortured detainees, yet five years later none of them have been disciplined. In fact, no police or security force personnel at all are known to have been convicted of human rights offences in the past five years.

Most "encounter" killings are never investigated, despite criticism of these killings by both the Supreme Court and the governor of the state.

Amnesty International said that while 41 police officers have died in reported "encounters" in the past two years, more than 644 alleged insurgents were killed. "If both sides in these 'encounters' were armed one would expect more police officers to have died as well," the organization said.

In its report, Amnesty International recommends action to stop arbitrary arrest, torture, and extrajudicial killings, including by establishing an independent body to act upon substantive reports of such abuses; prohibiting detention in secret centres and keeping records of everyone arrested. It says all allegations of torture and killings in "encounters" or "escapes" should be investigated and those responsible for human rights violations should be brought to justice. The government should thoroughly review the anti-terrorist laws and make them comply with international human rights standards.

Amnesty International, which has been denied access to Punjab by three successive Indian governments, once again called on the authorities to allow it to visit Punjab and other areas of India to investigate human rights violations.

