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INDIA: HOSTAGES MUST BE RELEASED AS ARMED GROUP'S DEADLINE  
APPROACHES

Amnesty International is calling on the armed group Al-Faran to release five people whom they abducted in Jammu and Kashmir last week and have been holding as hostages and reportedly threatened to kill.

The group apparently abducted British tourists Paul Wells and Keith Mangan and American Fred Hutchings on 4 July . They subsequently abducted German Dirk Hasert and Norwegian student Hans Christian Ostro on 8 July. On 12 July, the armed group has reportedly issued a statement in which it threatened to kill their hostages if the Indian government failed to meet the deadline of 15 July for the release of at least twenty members of armed opposition groups currently held in custody.

Amnesty International has previously raised its concern about the many Indian civilians who are regularly held captive by armed groups in the state. In the last few weeks only, there have been several reports of abductions by armed groups. A villager from Massari Gandhetar was abducted and killed on 2 July.

Among other hostages abducted by armed groups were a Kashmir University official abducted on June 29 and subsequently set free on 2 July, six officials of the State Forest Corporation who were abducted on 2 July and four Kashmiri journalists, including the editors of two newspapers from Srinagar, who were abducted on 6 July, two of whom were set free on 7 July. Amnesty International has no information about the fate of the six forest officials and two remaining journalists.

Amnesty International opposes hostage-taking by armed political opposition groups and is appealing to those responsible for holding the five men and any other hostages in Jammu and Kashmir to release them immediately.

Hostage-taking is prohibited absolutely under international humanitarian law standards, including under Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions.

Amnesty International has for many years been concerned about the human rights situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It has persistently condemned widespread reports of human rights violations perpetrated by Indian security forces as well as by armed opposition groups.

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