

AI INDEX: ASA 20/42/96

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 HRS GMT 6 SEPTEMBER 1996**

**INDIA: FORTHCOMING ELECTIONS IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR AROUSE FURTHER FEAR OF ABUSES**

Human rights abuses in Jammu and Kashmir could reach a new peak during assembly elections which begin tomorrow, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

“Prominent citizens, human rights defenders, journalists and political leaders were at risk of atrocities by government security forces, by militias under government control and by armed opposition groups before and during Lok Sabha elections in May -- the signs are similar now,” the human rights organization said.

Armed opposition groups have again threatened those participating in polls with death, and security forces who in May reportedly threatened residents who did not participate in the polls are again massed in the state.

“The state citizen’s basic rights are at stake again -- the presence of international election observers, which could inhibit potential perpetrators from carrying out abuses, has been explicitly ruled out by government authorities,” Amnesty International said

The victims who died in the run-up to the elections in May included 23 members of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front who were reportedly killed deliberately by state police in March. In the same month, the body of lawyer and human rights defender Jalil Andrabi was found in the Jhelum three weeks after his reported arrest by the paramilitary Rashtriya Rifles; while Ghulam Hassan Pinglana, a former parliamentarian in his seventies, was shot dead in his village home in Pulwama district -- allegedly by members of an armed opposition group in April.

The homes of several members of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) were on numerous occasions bombed, apparently by members of militant groups who had surrendered to the government.

Many residents complained that during the last elections they were caught between militant groups threatening to punish people who dared to vote, and the army together with the so-called renegades threatening to punish those who did not. The government denied that elections were held at gunpoint, claiming that people had asked for army protection during polls.

As preparations for assembly elections in September gather momentum in Jammu and Kashmir, several armed opposition groups have warned politicians not to contest elections. The newly formed United Jihad Council comprising five pro-Pakistan opposition groups called for a 38-day strike beginning on 24 August and warned that anyone found violating the strike call would be treated as a traitor.

Human rights abuses continue to be reported on a high level. Between five and 10 politically motivated killings are reported every day from Jammu and Kashmir. On 19 August Mohammad Shafi Khan, a candidate of the Janata Dal, a component of India’s coalition United

Front government, was deliberately killed by members of an unidentified armed opposition group who stormed his home in Anantnag and shot him at point blank range.

Three senior members of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference which comprises some 30 political groups and opposes elections, were seized on 30 August at gunpoint by a renegade group but released unharmed after several hours. Indiscriminate bomb attacks on civilian areas are frequently reported.

Amnesty International urges the government to take adequate measures to ensure that human rights defenders, including journalists, can carry out their activities without fear for their lives and safety, and to ensure that no one is compelled by violent means or the threat of violence to cast their votes. The organization also calls on all armed opposition groups to desist from the practices of hostage-taking, torture or threat of torture and deliberate and arbitrary killings of civilians which are prohibited under humanitarian law.

Amnesty International also once again urges that United Nations human rights mechanisms as well as international human rights organizations like Amnesty International be permitted to visit Jammu and Kashmir to monitor the human rights situation there.

## **BACKGROUND**

The forthcoming assembly elections are the first in nine years; in 1990, the state assembly was dissolved and Jammu and Kashmir was placed under President's Rule, that is direct rule from New Delhi. Elections will be held in four phases on 7, 16, 21 and 30 September to permit the deployment of troops. An additional 70,000 troops have been moved to the state. Several groups, including the APHC, and parties set up by renegades have announced that they would boycott elections.

The Amnesty International report details human rights abuses committed in Jammu and Kashmir before mid-June. A copy of the report was submitted by an Amnesty International delegation to officials at the Ministry of Home Affairs in New Delhi for comment. By the time this report was sent out Amnesty International had received no response. However a response was received from the Indian High Commission in London which will be analysed and reflected in future publications. Copies of the Indian Government's response may be obtained upon request from Amnesty International.

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For further information please refer to Amnesty International document:  
*India: Human rights abuses in the election period in Jammu and Kashmir*  
 (AI Index: ASA N20/39/96, September 1996)