

AI Index: PRE 01/340/2011
07 July 2011

India urged to implement court ban of anti-Maoist militias

Authorities in India's Chhattisgarh state must immediately comply with a decision by the country's Supreme Court to disband and disarm anti-Maoist state-sponsored civil militias, Amnesty International said today.

Since 2005, civil militias known as Koya commandos are alleged to have committed serious human rights violations with the support of government security forces in Chattisgarh.

More than 3,000 people, including civilians, Maoist insurgents and members of civil militias have been killed during the last six years of insurgency in the state. All the armed forces operating in the area, including the government as well as the Maoists, have committed serious human rights violations.

"The Supreme Court's decision to ban the civil militias is a landmark step in protecting indigenous people – adivasi – and other local communities from ongoing human rights violations," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Director for Asia and the Pacific.

"This judgment is a strong signal to other states in India that they should reconsider their decision to set up civilian militias to fight insurgents," Zarifi said.

At least 35,000 people continue to remain internally displaced after six years of insurgency in Chhattisgarh state.

The Supreme Court ordered the immediate disarming of the Koya commandos, but also called on the Indian authorities to ensure that former Koya militia members, previously known as Salwa Judum, are protected from reprisals.

"Of course people have a right to protect themselves, but as we've seen around the world, when governments set up civilian militias, especially without adequate training and discipline, it only increases the danger to civilians, including people who may have been former militia members," said Sam Zarifi.

India's Supreme Court has also ordered an investigation into the latest round of serious human rights violations committed by the security forces and the Koya commandos in March this year.

Security forces and Koya commandos face credible allegations of killing three adivasis and injuring more than 20 others during a week of violence. Three women were sexually assaulted and almost 300 homes were burnt down and looted.

"An investigation into these horrific attacks on local communities is a very welcome, if overdue step. However, the Indian authorities must immediately launch an investigation into allegations of other human rights violations committed by the Koya commandos," said Sam Zarifi.

The 6,500-strong civil militia in Chhattisgarh is currently financed under a security plan by the Indian state. The government recently approved a plan for recruitment of 12,000 Special Police Officers (SPOs) in five other states affected by the Maoist insurgency. SPOs receive small salaries from the government and are armed by the authorities.