

India: Stop the crackdown on human rights defenders in India and release them immediately

(Kathmandu/Bangkok, 30 August 2018) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM ASIA) is gravely shocked and concerned over the arbitrary arrests of several high-profile human rights defenders in a series of raids across India this week. They were arrested due to their alleged connection in the Bhima-Koregaon case on 1 January 2018, when Maratha groups objected to a commemorative event by Dalits, leading to violent clashes across Maharashtra.

FORUM-ASIA believes that the allegations against these human rights defenders are fabricated due to their critical stance against the government on the human rights situation in India. FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of India to end targeted harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and release them immediately and unconditionally.

On Tuesday 28 August, the police arrested five prominent rights activists including Sudha Bharadwaj in Faridabad, Gautam Navlakha in Delhi, Vernon Gonsalves and Arun Ferreira in Mumbai, and P. Varavara Rao in Hyderabad.¹ Some other activists across the country including Kranti, Stan Swami and Anand Teltumbde were also arrested. All the arrested activists have been charged under Indian Penal Code and Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act or UAPA, a draconian, vaguely worded law notoriously known for targeting human rights defenders and dissidents. Earlier in June this year, five activists - Surendra Gadling, Sudhir Dhawale, Shoma Sena, Rona Wilson and Mahesh Raut - were also arrested in connection to the same case.

These unverified allegations and arrests appear to be an attempt by the Government of India to obstruct legitimate work of human rights defenders working for rights of the most discriminated and marginalised communities in the country.

Journalists, activists, artists, and intellectuals in India critical of the Indian Government are frequently labeled as anti-nationals, pseudo-seculars, urban Maoist or Naxals, and members of terrorist groups. Discretionary power provided under laws such as the UAPA have been used by the state to defame, intimidate and create an environment of hatred against human rights defenders and their work.

The UAPA denies fair trials and other fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of expression. Series of crackdowns all over the country reflect synchronised and systematic attempts by the Government to harass human rights defenders.

FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of India to immediately and unconditionally release the human rights defenders, guarantee their physical and psychological wellbeing and ensure that they are not harassed or intimidated in the future, whether by state or non-state actors.

¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/raids-in-7-cities-5-activists-arrested-more-could-be-raided-in-coming-days-say-police/articleshow/65585808.cms>

FORUM-ASIA also strongly urges relevant institutions, particularly the National Human Rights Commission of India, to take urgent action in order to protect fundamental rights of the people. The Commission must use its authority to order an immediate, independent and impartial investigation into the arrests of the human rights defenders.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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