

## India: Chhattisgarh should act against repeated incidents of intimidation and harassment of journalists

(Bangkok, 16 February 2016) - Authorities in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh should take immediate steps to stop the repeated incidents of intimidation and harassment of journalists who are working in very trying circumstances in a region torn by armed conflict, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) said today.

Since July 2015, at least 3 journalists have either been arrested or physically intimidated by state and non-state actors on accusations of supporting armed Maoist insurgents who are active in the state. Journalists and human rights defenders working with Adivasi, or indigenous communities, and other marginalised groups in Chhattisgarh have been targeted by both state forces and the outlawed Maoist insurgents.

In the latest incident, journalist Malini Subramaniam's house was attacked with stones on 8 February 2016 by unknown assailants. A day before, on 7 February, a local anti-Maoist group, which is known to work closely with state agencies, gathered outside her house and shouted slogans accusing her of being an agent of the Maoist insurgents. On 8 February a local anti-Maoist group issued a statement accusing her of: portraying Bastar<sup>1</sup> in a poor light in her reportage; and of advocating Maoist ideology. When Malini Subramaniam went to register a police complaint on 8 February 2016, police officers refused to do so, claiming they needed the approval of a senior officer who was travelling. This was in direct contravention of the law, and a violation of the journalist's rights, as no special permission is needed to file a First Information Report (FIR). A case was finally registered on 9 February 2016 after severe criticism in the national media.

This incident comes on the heels of two journalists being arrested last year for allegedly colluding with Maoist armed groups. On 16 July 2015, Somaru Nag was arrested on charges of: being a 'Maoist sympathiser'; and allegedly collaborating with a group of villagers to vandalise equipment used to build roads. Somaru Nag, an Adivasi journalist, who reported on rural issues such as access to water and electricity, is still in prison. There is a lack of clarity on the exact charges levelled against him.

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<sup>1</sup> The southern part of Chhattisgarh state comprising 3 districts – Bastar, Dantewada and Bijapur.

Then on 29 September 2015, Chhattisgarh Police arrested freelance journalist Santosh Yadav, who has reported extensively on human rights violations perpetrated by state authorities against Adivasi and communities. He was booked under the draconian Chhattisgarh Special

Public Security Act, as well as under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, both of which violate international human rights standards. A court denied him bail on 7 January 2016. Santosh Yadav alleges he has been harassed by police on several occasions including in June 2015 when he was detained and beaten.

A South Asian media watchdog group *The Hoot* has alleged that both these journalists have been tortured in detention.<sup>2</sup>

In December 2015 local journalist groups accused the Chhattisgarh Police of mischief and endangering their lives by circulating cartoons on social media and mobile messaging platforms linking local journalists to Maoist insurgents. To Protest against the repeated harassment and intimidation, journalist groups met state Chief Minister Raman Singh in December 2015 to demand immediate action.

However, despite the Chief Minister's assurances Malini Subramaniam's case demonstrates that Chhattisgarh authorities lack any serious intent to protect journalists or to facilitate their very important work.

FORUM-ASIA condemns the harassment and intimidation of journalists in Chhattisgarh regardless of who is committing these human rights abuses. In a state facing serious human rights challenges, it is imperative that the state protect those who bring important information to the public arena.

#### **About FORUM-ASIA:**

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

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.thehoot.org/free-speech/media-freedom/arrested-tortured-jailed-in-south-bastar-8956>