

India: Chhattisgarh authorities must promptly investigate attack on woman human rights defender

(Bangkok, 22 February 2016) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns the attack on woman human rights defender (WHRD) Soni Sori on 20 February in Bastar region of Chhattisgarh state, central India. FORUM-ASIA calls on the authorities in Chhattisgarh: to ensure the security of Soni Sori and her family; to promptly initiate an investigation; and to prosecute the perpetrators.

On 20 February, Soni Sori, an Adivasi¹ rights activist, was returning home when unidentified men stopped her and threw a black substance on her face. The incident took place near Jawbanga village in Dantewada district at around 10:40 pm. Soni Sori complained of an intense burning sensation and was rushed to the hospital for treatment. Since then she has been moved to a hospital in New Delhi for better treatment. Her situation is said to be stable, however, she is unable to open her eyes.

The attack on Soni Sori comes days after journalist Malini Subramaniam's house was [attacked by unidentified men](#) and members of the legal aid group JagLAG, were [forced to leave Bastar](#) due to alleged pressure by local police officials. Police has visited Soni Sori's house in Geedam this past week and alleged that her house was built illegally, ostensibly to intimidate her.

Soni Sori has been working tirelessly to highlight the human rights abuses committed against Adivasi and other marginalized communities in a region torn by armed conflict between state forces and outlawed Maoist insurgents. She has been trying to file a complaint against a high ranking Bastar police official for the alleged extrajudicial execution of an Adivasi man, Hidma in Mardum of Bastar. Local police have refused to file this complaint. This same official had openly called for the 'social exclusion' of Soni Sori and her nephew Lingarom Kodopi.

Soni Sori informed her colleagues that the attackers on 20 February warned her to stop pursuing the above cases or her daughter would face a similar fate. The police have filed a case.

"Soni Sori is an inspiring example of an Adivasi woman committed to human rights and accountability for her community despite the pain and challenges to her life. The attack against her is deplorable and Chhattisgarh authorities must conform to their constitutional duty of protecting life and liberty of its people by bringing the perpetrators to justice," says Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA, "Chhattisgarh is facing a human rights crisis. Human rights defenders are facing high risks and a hostile environment."

¹ Indigenous people in India are known as Adivasi.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Chhattisgarh Government to ensure the people who attacked Soni Sori and other human rights defenders are brought to justice. Chhattisgarh authorities also have the responsibility to protect Soni Sori's family in light of the threats to her children.

Background

Soni Sori was arrested in October 2011 on politically motivated charges. She alleges she was severely tortured while in detention including sexual assaults. Her claims were independently verified through a medical examination ordered by India's Supreme Court.

She had been arrested on trumped up charges of working for the Maoist, and slapped with 7 cases. After being acquitted in all cases she returned to Bastar in 2013 to highlight important human rights and political issues facing the Adivasi communities.

Soni Sori took family members of Hidma and some villagers to a press conference in Chhattisgarh's capital, Raipur on 15 February to highlight how the police was refusing to file a formal complaint in the extrajudicial execution case. Soni Sori had also previously attempted to file a complaint against the high ranking police officer for instigating villagers to boycott and physically harm her.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a Bangkok-based regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. 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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