

## India: Police intimidation forces human rights lawyers and journalist to leave Bastar, Chhattisgarh

(Bangkok, 20 February 2016) - In [another setback](#) to human rights in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, intimidation and manipulation of the police has forced a journalist and prominent legal aid group to leave the conflict-affected Bastar region. The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns the pressure tactics being used to target human rights defenders (HRDs) and journalists in Chhattisgarh.

After being hounded by police and local groups with known links to state authorities, members of the Jagdalpur Legal Aid Group (JagLAG) and journalist Malini Subramaniam [have been finally forced to move](#) after the owners of their rented accommodation were allegedly threatened and intimidated by the police. While Malini Subramaniam has left Bastar already, members of JagLAG will have to leave in the next few days.

Lawyers Isha Khandelwal and Shalini Gera set up JagLAG in July 2013 to work with the most vulnerable groups in the Bastar region. Adivasis or indigenous people, have been bearing the brunt of human rights abuses by state forces and outlawed Maoist party. JagLAG worked extensively with the Adivasi community and provided free legal aid in a region where the justice system has not worked for the defenseless.

Journalist Malini Subramaniam has lived in Bastar for 5 years and previously worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Bastar. When the ICRC was asked to shut down its health projects in Bastar in 2013, Malini Subramaniam stayed back and continued her work with local groups. She has been reporting from Bastar for news website *Scroll.in* and has highlighted serious issues of violence against civilians in Bastar.

Adding to the problems of human rights abuse by state and Maoist groups has been the work of the state-sponsored vigilante groups such the now disbanded *Salwa Judum* and *Samajik Ekta Manch* who have targeted anyone who they feel does not support their narrative.

While JagLAG and Malini Subramaniam have endured pressure for a long time what finally forced them to move was when the owners of their rented accommodations were harassed by the police. The repeated harassment led the home owners to demand they vacate their houses in less than 2 days.

*“The underhanded manner in which women human rights defenders (WHRDs) Isha Khandelwal, Shalini Gera, and journalist Malini Subramaniam have been forced to temporarily abandon their human rights work in Bastar region of Chhattisgarh is another grim reminder of the dereliction*

*of the state's duty to protect and promote human rights,"* says Henri Tiphagne, National Working Secretary of Human Rights Defenders Alert - India.

Close on the heels of forcing the WHRDs out of Bastar, the police also tried to harass Adivasi WHRD Soni Sori demanding proof of her house in Geedam area of Dantewada district and alleging it was illegally built. Soni Sori was arrested in October 2011 and severely tortured. 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 to work to highlight important human rights and political issues.

*"This is another sad day for human rights in Chhattisgarh and India. This is not the first time that human rights activists and journalists have been forced out of Bastar and considering the way things are going it does not look like this policy will stop,"* says Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM ASIA.

FORUM-ASIA calls upon the state Government of Chhattisgarh and Union Government authorities in Delhi to abide by their constitutional responsibilities to protect its citizens from such intimidation and harassment. Only a human rights friendly and transparent system can help build sustainable peace in Chhattisgarh.

### **Background**

JagLAG is the only NGO that provides legal aid to Adivasi groups in Bastar region. Their human rights work has also often invited the ire of influential groups. They have been accused of providing legal aid to 'Naxalites', or Maoists on numerous occasions. The lawyers feel this is the state's attempt to challenge their legitimacy even though they work with a large number of Adivasi communities. The Chhattisgarh Police have sometimes tried to investigate bogus claims of them being "fraudulent lawyers". When all this did not work, the local Bar council under duress from the police adopted a resolution that they will not allow them to practice in local courts as they were "outsiders". However, JagLAG challenged this resolution in the state Bar Council and got an interim order allowing them to practice.

### **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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