

**India: Release woman human rights defender, Irom Sharmila, unconditionally**

(Bangkok, 31 March 2016) – A Delhi court’s decision on Wednesday to acquit Irom Sharmila of charges of attempt to commit suicide in 2006 is another reminder for the authorities that her struggle is not illegal and it is high time they end the misuse of the law by repeatedly charging her for attempted suicide, said the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) today.

On 30 March, a trial court in Delhi acquitted woman human rights defender, Irom Sharmila, of criminal charges of attempted suicide. Irom Sharmila was arrested on 4 October 2006 in Delhi’s Jantar Mantar area while on a hunger strike demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA), a draconian law that is in force in parts of northeast India and Jammu and Kashmir. She was only formally charged and brought to trial in Delhi in March 2013.

Irom Sharmila started her hunger strike demanding the repeal of the AFSPA in her home state of Manipur in November 2000. She was arrested shortly after and since then has been repeatedly charged under Section 309 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalises attempted suicide. Irom Sharmila maintains she is not trying to commit suicide and that her hunger strike is inspired by Gandhian principles of fighting injustice.

The Delhi court’s acquittal is the fourth time in less than 2 years that various courts have dismissed charges of attempted suicide against Irom Sharmila. The other 3 instances were court cases in Manipur. On 29 February 2016, a Manipur court dismissed similar charges against her, but the state Government of Manipur responded by booking her once more under the same law just days after her release.

Speaking to reporters after her latest acquittal in Delhi, Irom Sharmila said she will continue her struggle until AFSPA is repealed, regardless of whether she is ever released from jail.

*“Irom Sharmila has led a selfless struggle for over 15 years, fighting for justice and human rights. Manipur authorities have tried to muffle her dissent through repeatedly charging her for the same offence,”* says Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA. *“How many more acquittals and legal interventions will it take for the authorities to accept their mistakes and make amends?”*

FORUM-ASIA and its members across Asia reiterate their call to immediately and unconditionally release Irom Sharmila.

**Background:**

Irom Sharmila has been involved in a prolonged campaign demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, (AFSPA). She began her hunger strike after the killing of 10 people in Manipur by the Assam Rifles (a paramilitary force) in Malom, Imphal in November 2000. She also demanded the lifting of the AFSPA from Manipur.

She was arrested shortly after she began her hunger strike and charged with attempting to commit suicide, a criminal offence under Indian law. While she was under arrest, she refused to sign bail bonds maintaining that she had not committed any offence, and instead called for the criminal charges against her to be dropped.

Irom Sharmila has been the recipient of several human rights awards for her outstanding activism in promoting human rights. She was awarded the 2007 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights, which is given to “an outstanding person or group, active in the promotion and advocacy of Peace, Democracy and Human Rights”. In 2009, she was also awarded the first Mayilamma Award of the Mayilamma Foundation for her non-violent struggle in Manipur.

**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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