

Pakistan: Investigate the disappearances of human rights activists

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 12 January 2017) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned over the sudden disappearances of human rights activists in Pakistan.

Pakistan is one of the most dangerous countries for journalists and human rights activists.¹ In the past two weeks, at least five activists who are known for expressing secular and leftist views on social media have gone missing: Waqas Goraya and Asim Saeed since 4 January; Salman Haider since 6 January; Ahmed Raza Naseer; and Samar Abbas since 7 January. All of these activists regularly wrote against the government and the establishment.

Pakistan is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which stipulates that everyone has the right to liberty and security.² Moreover, the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees the right to life and liberty of its citizens.³ These two legally binding instruments impose both moral and legal obligations on the Government of Pakistan to prevent and take serious actions against the disappearances of its citizens.

"None of these activists have been brought to any court of law or levelled with any charges. Their disappearance is worrying not only for their families, but also for *netizens* and other social media users in the country," says Shahzad Ahmad, Country Director of Bytes for All.

The situation in Pakistan is becoming particularly worrisome. The digital space for people's voice has been deeply shrinking, while dissidents' voices have been criminalised with sedition and blasphemy charges. There is an ongoing social media campaign against the people who are raising their voices for the release of the missing activists. In particular, the people condemning the disappearance of the activists have been labelled as blasphemers, an accusation that can lead to a death sentence or life imprisonment under the blasphemy law of Pakistan.⁴

FORUM-ASIA strongly condemns the forced and sudden disappearance of the human rights activists. It urges the Government of Pakistan to conduct an impartial and transparent investigation into the whereabouts of all the activists gone missing. "It is the duty of the Government of Pakistan to

1 http://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/documents/25_Report_Final_sreads_web.pdf

2 Article 9 of International Convention on Civil and Political Rights

3 Article 5 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

4 FORUM-ASIA and Bytes for All, *Desecrating Expression: An Account of Freedom of Expression and Religion in Asia*, 2016, page 49-50. Available at <https://www.forum-asia.org/uploads/wp/2016/12/Final_FoER_Report.pdf>

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guarantee a safe environment for people to express themselves”, says John Samuel, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA. “It is also the Government’s duty to trace the missing activists, and hold those responsible to account.”

FORUM-ASIA also demands that the Government take quick action against groups and individuals who are inciting violence against those campaigning for the safe release of the disappeared writers and activists. The unchecked incitement to violence on social media is causing unrest and fear among social media users and activists in Pakistan.

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 democratization.

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