

India: Release activists from police custody and investigate the use of force against protesters by police forces in Assam

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 5 May 2017) The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) strongly condemns the arrest of human rights defenders Soneswar Narah and Pranab Doley of Jeepal Krishak Shramik Sangha (JKSS), a loose organisation of local farmers and community members. FORUM-ASIA deplores the brutal attack carried out by the police force of Assam on JKSS protesters demanding the release of their leaders.

On 24 April 2017, Pranab Doley visited Bokakhat police station to inquire about an incident involving the arrest of five boys. After a minor argument with the police for not allowing the family members to meet their children, the police arrested him. When Soneswar Narah went to inquire about Pranab Doley, he was also arrested. They were falsely charged with disruption of the functioning of a Government agency under sections 147, 447, 353 and 506 of the Indian Penal Code. Their request for bail was rejected, and they continue to remain in Golaghat Jail.

On 27 April 2017, around 200 protesters from the JKSS, Takam Mising Porin Kebang (TMPK), a local student organisation, and Mising Mimang Kebang (MMK), a founding organisation advocating for the rights of the Mising tribe, staged a protest in front of the Bokakhat police station demanding the immediate release of Pranab Doley and Soneswar Narah. The protesters gathered at the police station around 10.30 AM and were ordered by the police to vacate the premises within five minutes. On refusal, the police snatched their banners. Then traffic inspector Govind Kakoti and other police officers started beating the protesters. Female protesters were beaten by male police personnel. Govind Kakoti was caught grabbing one female protester and tearing up her blouse. Three members of the JKSS were arrested. They were later released.

FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of India to respect the right to peaceful demonstration, and to take all measures necessary to protect human rights defenders from harassment by police officials and other authorities. 'The Government of India should take a strong stance against the suppression of fundamental rights accorded by the constitution of India. A democratic state cannot tamper with the rights of its people,' comments John Samuel, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA. 'The Government is obliged to ensure the protection of human rights defenders under the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which cannot be evaded on any pretext.'

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of India and the State Government of Assam to undertake a thorough, transparent and impartial investigation into the incident and take immediate action against the police personnel for the illegal and arbitrary arrest of Soneswar Narah and Pranab Doley, and the brutal use of force against the peaceful protesters.

FORUM-ASIA also urges the Government of India to engage thoroughly with the Universal Periodic Review process and be receptive to civil society's evaluation of the recent clamp down on dissenting voices and freedom of expression in India. The Government should create an enabling environment for everyone to articulate themselves freely in keeping with the values of democracy and human rights.

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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