

India: FORUM-ASIA condemns the arrest of Medha Patkar and the arbitrary detention of nine other activists

(Kathmandu/Bangkok, 10 August 2017) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) strongly condemns the arrest of Indian woman human rights defender Medha Patkar, who has been sent to jail yesterday evening after being discharged from the Bombay Hospital, and the current illegal detention of nine other activists at the Dhar District Hospital.

Medha Patkar and her supporters have been on an indefinite hunger strike since 27 July 2017, demanding the rehabilitation and resettlement of families affected by the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) dam on the Narmada River.

On 7 August 2017, she and other protesters were forcefully taken away from the protest site of Chikalda, in Dhar District of Madhya Pradesh. Nearly 2,000 police personnel were mobilised to forcefully disband the on-going peaceful protest. The police used force to break the pandals,¹ as well as the stage, chairs and rope fencing at the protest site. When women protesters tried resisting the arrest of Medha Patkar, they were beaten and manhandled by male policemen, causing physical injury. After the raid of the police, she and nine other activists were brought to different hospitals, where all of them were *de facto* detained and left incommunicado.

On 9 August 2017, after being discharged from the hospital, Medha Patkar tried to return to the protest site of Chikalda to meet with the people affected by the SSP Dam. While on her way, she was stopped by the police and placed under arrest, as she refused to produce a surety bond.

‘The right to freedom of assembly and peaceful protest is a human right and not a privilege. This right should be exercised without arbitrary interference from the State’, says John Samuel, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA, ‘Excessive use of force by the police, as well as arbitrary detention, violate fundamental human rights and must be investigated to assure the accountability of the police personnel and all authorities in charge’.

Medha Patkar is the leader of the social movement Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), which through its 31 years of struggle, has managed to get the land that was promised through the land rehabilitation for approximately 14,000 tribal and Dalit farmers and their families – especially those from Gujarat and Maharashtra. However, the status of rehabilitation has been slow, as the submergence started in 1995 and in 2016, more than 40,000 families are still awaiting their rightful rehabilitation.

¹ A pandal is a large open-sided temporary pavilion often used for large gatherings.

FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of India to immediately release Medha Patkar from jail and ensure the full release of all other activists illegally kept at the Dhar District Hospital. Furthermore, FORUM-ASIA calls for an immediate, thorough, transparent, and impartial investigation into the excessive use of force by the police and the violation of Medha Patkar and other activists' fundamental freedoms.

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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