

India: Put an End to the Killing of Right to Information Activists

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 28 March 2018) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned about the systemic killings in India of people working against corruption through the Right to Information (RTI) Act,¹ popularly called RTI activists. The RTI Act came into effect in 2005. While it has been instrumental in exposing corruption and bringing greater transparency in the governance system, 68 RTI activists have been killed since 2005 and 365 more have been assaulted, harassed or threatened.² FORUM-ASIA is indignant that the Government of India has yet to take any adequate measures to safeguard RTI activists.

Just earlier this month, two RTI activists, Poipynhun Majaw and Nanjibhai Sondarva were killed in the States of Meghalaya and Gujarat, creating fear among the RTI activists in the entire country. Poipynhun Majaw was found dead in Rymbai road of East Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya on 20 March 2018 with several wounds to his head. Majaw, a 38-years old activist, was known for exposing corruption and the misuse of public funds.³ He was instrumental in exposing illegal mining in Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya, a region famous for coal mining. Several companies carried out mining activities without proper licenses from local governance body, the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC). Through a RTI enquiry, he exposed the misappropriation of public funds by JHADC, which led to the arrest of top officials.

Nanjibhai Sondarva, a 35-years old a resident of Manekwada village in Kotada Sangani Taluka of the Rajkot district of Gujarat, was found murdered on 9 March 2018. He and other members of his family were reportedly assaulted one and a half years ago by the village Sarpanch, who was targeting him for exposing financial irregularities in developmental works undertaken in the village.⁴

These killings are the most recent instances of attacks on RTI activists, they are an indication of a broader trend of shrinking democratic space, rising intolerance and derogation of rule of law in India. A culture of impunity is becoming normalised, which makes RTI activists even more vulnerable to threats, intimidation, harassment and murder. There is little access to justice since the Government has failed to impose serious measures to protect the life and liberty of these activists.

India has ratified the UN Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC), and therefore has an obligation under Article 7 and 12 to take pro-active measures to enhance accountability of the Public and Private Sector.⁵

FORUM-ASIA strongly condemns the killing of Poipynhun Majaw, Nanjibhai Sondarva and all other RTI activists killed, who were exercising their fundamental rights and fighting corruption. FORUM_ASIA urges the Government of India to take immediate steps, such as conducting an independent and impartial investigation in these killings and ensuring the prosecution of the perpetrators. Finally, FORUM-ASIA calls

¹ https://powermin.nic.in/sites/default/files/uploads/rti_slides.pdf

² <http://attacksonrtiusers.org/>

³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/social-and-rti-activist-murdered-in-meghalaya/story-SQYCZZgMADUAEUxomjGTrM.html>

⁴ <https://www.counterview.net/2018/03/eleventh-rti-activist-hacked-to-death.html>

⁵ https://www.unodc.org/documents/brussels/UN_Convention_Against_Corruption.pdf

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on the Government of India to take pro-active measures to protect RTI activists from violent physical and psychosocial attacks by establishing appropriate policies and creating a safe environment for human rights work.

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 democratisation.

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