

Pakistan: Protect freedom of expression through art

(Kathmandu/Bangkok, 31 October 2019) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned over the forceful shut down of an art installation depicting alleged extrajudicial killings by Karachi Police on 27 October. The shutdown of the exhibition is an attack on free expression.

Curated by artist and professor Adeela Suleman, the exhibition ‘Killing Fields of Karachi’ comprised 444 stone pillars, each representing a victim of alleged extrajudicial killings, and a short documentary featuring the father of Naqeebullah Mehsud, who was killed in an allegedly police encounter.¹ The exhibition was part of the Karachi’s biennale art show.

The shutdown of the art installation is an attempt to veil the longstanding human rights issue of extrajudicial killings in Pakistan. FORUM-ASIA member Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) documented a total of 3,345 cases from 2013 to 2018 where police encounters in Pakistan resulted in death.²

When Adeela Suleman and other prominent human rights defenders tried to hold a press conference to condemn the shutdown on the same day, a city official who introduced himself as the Director General of Parks, Karachi, disrupted the event and removed the microphones of various media outlets.

The incident is yet another instance of the curtailment of freedom of expression and the suppression of dissenting voices in Pakistan. The shutdown of the art installation violates the right to freedom of expression and inhibits public awareness of key human rights issues. Freedom of expression, including commentary on public affairs and artistic expression, is essential in a democratic society and is recognised as a fundamental human right in international human rights law.³

FORUM-ASIA exhorts the recognition and protection of art as a form of expression used by human rights defenders to pursue justice. The Government of Pakistan should respect the freedom of expression; cease imposing restrictions on dissenting voices; and create an environment where artists, victims of human rights abuses and human rights defenders can freely express their opinion without the fear of intimidation or arrest.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 81 member organisations in 21 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas

¹ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2088264/1-move-kill-karachis-killing-fields-stirs-controversy/>

² <http://hrcpmonitor.org/search/?id=32>

³ https://en.unesco.org/creativity/sites/creativity/files/artistic_freedom_pdf_web.pdf

of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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