

CITIZENS FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE IN CHHATTISGARH
&
WOMEN AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND STATE REPRESSION

12 January 2017

PRESS RELEASE

EMERGENCY IN BASTAR

Human rights defenders under attack, democracy in peril

“Democracy is being choked to death in Chhattisgarh” warned Advocate K. Savithri, a member of the Telengana Democratic Forum and wife of Advocate Balla Ravindranath, one of the seven members of a fact-finding team on their way to Bastar who were picked up on Christmas Day by the Chhattisgarh police. Ravindranath, the secretary of the Telengana chapter of the Committee for Release of Political Prisoners, and his colleagues have been charged under the infamous Chhattisgarh Public Security Act and are being held without bail in Sukma jail.

Speaking at a press conference organised by Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS) and Citizens for Peace and Justice in Chhattisgarh, Adv Savithri gave a chilling account of the condition of her husband and his colleagues in the jail, where they have been beaten, threatened with torture and forced to sign “confessions” admitting to carrying demonetised currency for the Maoists. She described the farcical proceedings in the special Naxal Court in Dantewada, where Telugu literary magazines and textbooks seized from the arrested men were presented as “Maoist literature” and where the judge denied bail on the grounds that the team had entered Chhattisgarh without permission. She spoke of busloads of women and children being presented in court and sent straight into jail without a hearing or any legal representation. Prisoners are brought into court not just handcuffed but chained hand and foot.



Adv Savithri charged Bastar IG SRP Kalluri with justifying the cold-blooded killing of ordinary citizens by branding them as Naxals. “The definition of Naxalite is simply anyone who questions the state” she said.

Others on the panel - Prof Nandini Sundar, Advocate Shalini Gera, researcher and journalist Vineet Tewari, WSS member Rinchin and human rights lawyer Adv Vrinda Grover – condemned the reign of terror prevailing in Bastar, with police unleashing a campaign of threats and intimidation against local activists, media persons, human rights lawyers and others. **All those who are investigating and exposing the systematic violations of human rights, particularly sexual violence against Adivasi women by police and auxiliary forces engaged in anti-Maoist operations, are being targeted by the police.**

In response to complaints from Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS) and wide coverage in national newspapers, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) took cognisance of the issue and fielded an investigation team in March 2016. On 7th January, the NHRC issued an order confirming that 16 Adivasi women are *prima facie* victims of rape, sexual assault and physical assault perpetrated by the State police, and holding the Government of Chhattisgarh “vicariously liable” for gross violations of human rights in the state.

The NHRC order is an explicit affirmation of the WSS contention that sexual violence is being used as a weapon of war by the Chhattisgarh police. However, all the speakers emphasised out that much stronger and decisive action is required to stem the tide of fake encounters, coerced surrenders, mass rapes and sexual assaults that continue to be the norm in Bastar.

Prof Nandini Sundar, the lead petitioner in the Salwa Judum case, described the attacks against activists as reprisals for their temerity in challenging the police version of atrocities such as the Tadmetla case where the police unleashed a spree of rape and violence on unarmed villagers while burning down the entire village. **She said that the Government of Chhattisgarh had repeatedly violated the orders of the Supreme Court and the NHRC, and was providing a cover of impunity to IG Kalluri for his illegal and unconstitutional actions.**

While IG Kalluri was proudly claiming to have killed 134 Naxalites during his “Mission 2016”, many of these encounters have been shown up as cold-blooded killings. Adv Shalini Gera spoke of one case where a nine year old child was shot and then described as a “dreaded Naxalite”. She described how she and her colleagues who were in Bastar to follow up an a court order for exhumation and a second post-mortem for a young boy killed in a false encounter were threatened by the SDM. Like the Telegana team, Adv Shalini has also been charged with exchanging demonetised notes for the Maoists.

Vineet Tewari described the poverty and destitution he has seen in Bastar villages, and the situation of Adivasis who are terrorised by the police. He said that everyone in Bastar is living in fear of police bullets. Rinchin gave a moving account of the courage and determination of Adivasi women

survivors of sexual violence who have come forward to lodge FIRs, walking for hours to reach the police station, being turned away but coming back again and again until their testimonies were recorded. She said that despite being hindered and hounded at every step, the complainants are determined to fight until they get justice and the offenders are punished. **She called on the NHRC to ensure criminal prosecution for the violators, and for the principle of command responsibility to be applied by the courts.**

IG Kalluri has now announced 'Mission 2017' - a war against "safedposh Naxali" (white-collar Naxals) whom he has described as more dangerous than Naxals themselves. Summing up the situation on the ground, human right lawyer and activist Vrinda Grover described the actions of IG Kalluri and his violent vigilante gangs as an open violations of democratic rights guaranteed by the Constitution including the right to free movement, the right to legal representation and equal treatment before the law, the right to dissent and above all, the right to life. "Why should anyone need permission to enter Chhattisgarh - has Chhattisgarh seceded from the Union of India?" was her question. **She said that although the NHRC has ordered the recording of statements of other rape survivors, it is not clear how this will happen in the prevailing atmosphere in the state where even statutory authorities and those who assist them can be threatened and intimidated. How will affected villagers speak out, file complaints, or get legal representation?**

Speakers urged the media persons present to break their silence on the situation in Bastar, and join activists in calling for the restoration of democracy and the rule of law in Bastar.

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