

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India

National Coordination Office

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Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders,
Mrs. Margaret Sekaggya
c/o Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights - Palais Wilson
United Nations Office at Geneva
CH 1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland
Email: urgent-action@ohchr.org

Dear Ma'am,

Sub: HRD Alert - India - Urgent Appeal for Action - Chattisgarh: Prisoner of Conscience Kopa Kunjam should be freed immediately and unconditionally - Reg

Greetings from Human Rights Defenders Alert - India!

HRD Alert - India is a Forum of Human Rights Defenders for Human Rights Defenders. It endeavours to initiate actions on behalf of Human Rights Defenders under threat or with security concerns.

We are now writing to express our grave concern regarding the implication of false charges illegal detention and physical abuses of Mr.Kopa Kunjam and other human rights defenders in Chattisgarh.

Incident

Name of the perpetrators: - Group of unidentified men

Place of incident: - Chattisgarh - Dantewada District

Date & time of incident: - 10th December 2009

Kopa Kunjam is an adivasi activist from Dantewada and has been involved in campaigns around local issues such as against alcoholism for a long time. After joining VCA in 1996, he had worked on watershed, public health, and total sanitation programs. He worked to rehabilitate more than 30 villages that

had been abandoned following attacks by Salwa Judum and security forces . This was done after the Government of Chhattisgarh failed to carry out the Supreme Court orders in 2008 to disband the Salwa Judum and rehabilitate the people displaced by its violence.

According to the information received, Mr. Kopa Kunjam is a human rights and development worker with the Vanvasi Chetna Ashram (VCA), a Gandhian organization based in Dantewada. He was arrested on December 10th 2009 and falsely implicated in the kidnapping and murder of Salwa Judum leader Punem Hunga in June, 2009. The prosecution has failed to provide any credible evidence and has been unable to produce witnesses to testify against Mr. Kunjam.

Mr. Kunjam's long record of documenting and exposing grave human rights abuses by the Salwa Judum and the government security forces. He worked in the rehabilitation of the displaced Adivasis (indigenous people) of several villages in the Bastar region.

Kopa had documented and exposed the following cases of human rights abuses by the security forces:

Samsetti rapes- Four women belonging to the Samsetti village in the Dantewada district, along with 2 others, were gang raped by Special Police Officers (SPOs) in 2006. Kopa helped the women file court complaints in 2009.

Matwada massacres- Three adivasi men were killed by Salwa Judum on March 18, 2008, in front of a police station and close to a CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) camp. With VCA, Kopa helped the widows file a petition in the High Court.

Singaram massacres- On January 8, 2009, 19 people were killed in the village of Singaram. Kopa helped the relatives of the victims file a petition in the High Court.

Massacres at Gachanpalli and Gompad Six villagers were killed by security forces on September 17, 2009 in the Gachanpalli village and 11 more were killed in the nearby Gompad village on October 1, 2009. As part of VCA, Kopa was involved in investigating the killings and filing a petition in the

Supreme Court in November, 2009, [Writ petition (Civil) 103, 2009]. On January 6, 2010, 12 petitioners went missing only to be produced in court on Feb15, 2010.

The arrest was a means to silence all those who were questioning the violent ways of the Chhattisgarh State. The government of Chhattisgarh should investigate the atrocities documented and reported by Kopa Kunjam and other activists and bring charges against the perpetrators.

Mr. Kunjam has now been in detention for more than 20 months and is reported to have faced physical abuse inside the prison. His application for bail has been rejected by the trial court and the Chhattisgarh High Court and is now pending before the Supreme Court.

The government of Chhattisgarh must drop these politically motivated charges against Kopa Kunjam immediately and ensure that peaceful activists can work and speak out without fear of imprisonment, torture or harassment. "Mr. Kunjam is only one among many social workers and human rights activists who have helped make human rights abuses in Chattisgarh public only to face imprisonment on false charges.

Appeal

We, therefore, urge you to immediately take necessary steps to ensure that:

- An immediate release of Kopa Kunjam and other human rights defenders
- An independent inquiry into the circumstances leading to the detention of Kopa on false charges and fabricated evidence and that responsible official is held accountable.
- Ensure democratic space for peaceful dissent in the State.
- Immediate intervention of the police administration, necessary legal action be taken and perpetrators be brought to book;
- Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the incident with a view to bring those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;

- Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological security and integrity of Kopa Kunjam and other human rights defenders so that he can carry his livelihood peacefully;
- Ensure protection and security be provided to Human Rights Defender Mr. Kopa Kunjam and other human rights defenders in Chattisgarh.

Looking forward to your immediate action in this regard,

Yours sincerely,

Henri Tiphagne

National Coordinator

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India