

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India

National Coordination Office

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December 10, 2011

Shri A. K. Parashar

Focal Point - Human Rights Defenders

National Human Rights Commission

Faridkot House

Copernicus Marg

New Delhi-110001

Email: hrd-nhrc@nic.in

Dear Sir,

***Sub: HRD Alert - India - Urgent Appeal for Action – India/Bihar,
Lakhisarai: Activist and anti-corruption campaigner Ram Vilas Singh shot
dead - 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 killing of RTI activist and anti-corruption crusader Mr. Ram Vilas Singh in Bihar.

Incident

Name of the Perpetrators: Unidentified armed gang of criminals

Place of incident: Bhavangama village under Amhara panchayat, Lakhisarai District, Bihar

Date and time of incident: December 8, 2011 Morning at 9.00 am

About the activist:

Shri Ram Vilas Singh, (56) is considered a guru (teacher) on right to information issues, of Babhangama under Town police - Amhara panchayat Samiti member. He had filed dozens of RTI applications on hoarding, black marketing, appointment of panchayat teachers and anganwadi workers and status of development schemes in villages.

Singh is also known for uncovering black market practices relating to commodities. He had also helped uncover corruption in the construction of check dams and the appointment of Anganwadi (health care) workers, who provide outreach services to poor families.

Some of these cases are pending before the State Lokayukta, institutions providing redress into citizens' grievances by investigating into administrative actions).

According to the information received Ram Vilas Singh was shot dead on December 8, 2011 (Thursday) morning at a shop by some armed gang of criminals in his native village, barely five km from the district town.

CASE NARRATIVE:

Ram Vilas Singh was actively engaged in Right to information activities on various fronts in Lakhisarai area and had exposed officials, politicians and vested interest of the area for their lapses and corrupt practices. It is suspected that he has been killed because of political rivalry with a person whose wife he had defeated in panchayat elections early this year. A murder case against unknown persons has been filed at Lakhisarai Town police station.

The murder took place at Ramvilas's paternal Bhavangama village under Amhara panchayat. Unidentified assailants hiding in nearby bushes fired at Singh. Two bullets hit him in chest and he died while being taken to the hospital.

According to police sources, Ram Vilas Singh was sitting with some villagers when miscreants came and opened fire on him and shot him dead. Family sources said that Ram Vilas Singh had complained to the police about threatening by many vested interests of the area and asked the police to take security measures to save his life. The villagers and family members alleged that the police did not heed to his request and he was killed. It is believed that Singh had sought protection from the authorities before his murder. Law enforcement agencies have completely failed to provide any protection to him.

A first information report has been lodged by members of his family and his body has been taken for a post-mortem examination.

Lakhisarai sub-divisional officer Vinay Kumar Roy said the police strongly suspected the involvement of his political rival from the same village, Rajesh Singh alias Bambam. However, they were looking for evidence to file a case against him.

Singh's death joins the growing list of RTI activists in India who have been murdered for seeking information to promote transparency and accountability in the working of public authority. They include environmental activists Amit Jethava and Sheila Masood killed in July and August 2011 respectively, whose killings resulted in demands - within the Parliament - for the protection of RTI activists.

ARTICLE 19 condemns the murder of Right to Information activist and whistleblower, Shri Ram Vilas Singh. ARTICLE 19 also joins other civil society organizations in calling for the protection provisions of the Whistle Blower's Act, currently pending before the Indian Parliament, to include RTI activists. ARTICLE 19 also recommends that existing mechanisms for the protection of human rights defenders and others be immediately applied to RTI activists.

Appeal

We, therefore, urge you to immediately take necessary steps to

1. Conduct a prompt, thorough and independent investigation into the killing of Mr. Ram Vilas Singh, the result of which must be made public, with a view to identify and bring those responsible to justice in accordance with national and international standards;
2. Take action against the law enforcement agencies and authorities who failed to provide protection when sought by Mr. Ram Vilas Singh;
3. Ensure that the possible connection between the activist's murder and his activities related to sort information in exposing officials, politicians and vested interest of the area for their lapses and corrupt practices in Lakhisarai district to be investigated along with other suspicions by a high level probe team;
4. Put an end to acts of harassment and threats faced by all RTI activists and human rights defenders in India;
5. Conform to the provisions of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 9, 1998, especially:
 - its Article 1, which states that "everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the

protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels”;

- and its Article 12.2, which provides that “the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration”.

6. Create an enabling environment and guarantee in all circumstances that RTI activists in India are able to carry out their legitimate activities without fear of reprisals, and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment;

Looking forward to your immediate action in this regard,

Yours sincerely,

Henri Tiphagne

Hon. National Working Secretary,

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India