

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India

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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 Sir,

Sub: HRD Alert - India - Urgent Appeal for Action-India/Chhattisgarh: Sukma district - Abduction of IAS officer Mr. Alex Paul Menon by the Maoists - fear for his safety – 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 over the alleged abduction of the IAS (Indian Administrative Service) Officer Mr. Alex Paul Menon by Maoists rebels in Chhattisgarh.

Incident

Name of the Perpetrators: Maoist rebels

Place of incident: Manjipara village, near Kerpa, Sukma district, Chhattisgarh

Date and time of incident: 31st January, 2012 around 11.00 am

Mr. Alex Paul Menon (32) is a 2006-batch Tamil Nadu cadre IAS officer, from Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli, who has been posted as the first district Collector of the newly formed Sukma district in Chhattisgarh.

Mr. Menon is reportedly an active Collector, who was known to be pro-active in undertaking developmental work in the backward region.

He was abducted on 21st April 2012 from Manjipara village, near Kerpa where he was holding a government outreach programme “Special Gram Suraj Abhiyan” aimed at weaning away the locals from the path of Naxalism.

According to the security agencies, the collector, who had built up considerable support in the district because of his efforts to reach out to the masses, was not moving around with adequate protection. Some 500-600 Maoists were apparently active in that the area and the state intelligence had apparently warned him in writing against venturing out without adequate security. But he had not paid heed.

Menon's family said he was aware of the threat of possible kidnap of officials in the region but that never deterred him from responding to the call of duty.

A special police team has been constituted for the rescue efforts.

Case Narrative:

According to the information IAS officer Mr. Alex Paul Menon had gone by motorcycle on 21st April 2012 (Saturday), to Manjipara village near Kerpa, which is about 12 kilometers from Sukma district, from where he was abducted while attending Kisan Sabha (farmers meet) as a part of the Raman Singh government's outreach programme called Special Gram Suraj Abhiyan.

The 'Gram Suraj' campaign has been launched by the Raman Singh government as part of its efforts to check the influence of the Maoists who hold sway in several districts of the state including neighbouring Dantewada. Ministers, MLAs and government officers visit the villages during the programme in order to establish better communication with the locals to address their problems effectively). The rebels had also gunned down two of his bodyguards who tried to resist the abduction move.

There was a CRPF camp just eight kilometers from where he was abducted.

According to officials who were present at the programme at Manjipara village, some 50-odd ultras including women had come to the venue and taken away the IAS officer after shooting two of his guards. Around 20 of them were armed. They first shot at guard Kishun Kujur. In the meanwhile another guard named Amjad Khan, returned the fire, in which one of the Naxals was reportedly killed, while Khan too died in the exchange of fire.

It is reported that in exchange of the hostage, the Maoists have demanded stopping of "operation green hunt", the anti-Naxalite operation in Bastar, release of all "innocent tribals" languishing in the jails of Jagdalpur and Dantewada and release of eight Maoists who are in Raipur central prison.

Local journalists in South Bastar have received telephone calls from a person, who identified himself as Vijay, secretary of the South Bastar regional committee of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), who claimed that his cadres have "arrested" the district collector. The Maoists also sent in a pre-recorded statement to journalists saying "We have arrested the district collector. We are demanding withdrawal of cases slapped against the people in connection with the case relating to attack on a Congress leader in Konta. We are also demanding release of Markam Gopanna alias Satyam Reddy, Nirmala Akka alias Vijay Lakshmi, Devpal Chandrasekhar Reddy, Shantipriya Reddy, Meena Choudhary, Korsa Sunny, Markam Sunny and Amit Kumar Sen".

A tape sent to BBC's news channel on 22nd April 2012 (Sunday) contained the Maoists' wish list. Besides the two demands, they have also asked the government to dismantle facilities set up by the Army in the region. The Army runs a training facility in the area. Anti-Naxal operations mounted by the security agencies had made some headway in the recent past. For example, CRPF had made inroads in the Abujmadh forests, an exclusive domain of the Maoists.

Maoists have set April 25 as deadline for acceptance of their demands in exchange of the safe release of Menon, saying that the IAS officer would be produced before a "Jan Adalat" (a Peoples' court) which would take a decision.

The Chhattisgarh government has scaled down all 'pro-active' security operations in the jungles of Bastar area in order to avoid provoking the rebels in any manner and to ensure safety of the abducted officer.

Meanwhile, the two security guards who were shot dead by the Naxals before Menon's abduction were accorded a guard of honour at Sukma district headquarters on 22nd April.

Present status:

Additional Director General of Police Ram Nivas (anti-Naxal operations) said police have received some vital clues and added that Menon is safe.

The Centre said that it was in constant touch with the Chhattisgarh government on the abduction of the Sukma Collector and providing all necessary help to resolve the crisis.

Menon's abduction sparked off popular outrage in the area with local people in Sukma town took out a 'peace march' in the tribal district to appeal to the Maoists to release the district collector on humanitarian grounds.

Former MLA and Bastar Adivasi Mahasabha president Manish Kunjam, who hails from Sukma town, stated that the Sabha had already issued an appeal to the rebels not to cause any bodily harm to the young IAS officer and that the local tribals are willing to go into the forests to meet the rebels.

Meanwhile Menon's wife Asha has appealed to Naxals to release her husband on humanitarian grounds, saying that they were married only a few months ago and he had always worked for the people and has done a lot for the new district's development. She said that "He is an asthmatic patient and I request the government and the Naxals to understand that he is just left with two doses of medication," adding that he would not be able to cope up with, in case of an emergency.

Civil rights activist Swami Agnivesh offered to mediate for Menon's release, and said he was waiting for the government or Maoists to approach him. He also cautioned the state government against unleashing force. Agnivesh said that last year he had managed to secure the release of five policemen abducted by Maoists. He had, at that time, urged Chief Minister Raman Singh to free innocent tribals languishing in jails.

Additional Information:

The Naxalites had on Friday (April 20, 2012) triggered a powerful landmine blast targeting the convoy of Bijapur BJP MLA Mahesh Gagda in which two BJP workers and the driver of the vehicle carrying them were killed when he was on one such campaign.

Also Naxals had last year kidnapped the Collector of adjoining Malkangiri district of Odisha, R Veenel Krishan, along with a junior engineer and released them after the state government agreed to fulfil all 14 demands of the rebels including withdrawal of cases against top CPI (Maoist) leaders Prasadam, Padma and Eswari, to facilitate their release from jails.

In Odisha two Italians were abducted by Maoists who freed them after a month in captivity after the state government acceded to their demand to release some of the jailed left wing extremists.

Appeal

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

1. Take steps to guarantee in all circumstances the safety and security to the IAS officer Mr. Alex Paul Menon;
2. Render justice to the two bodyguards who were shot dead during the incident and provide adequate compensation to their families;
3. Ensure that for any cause kidnapping should not be used as a tool to threaten the people as well as government officials to fulfil the demands.

Looking forward to your immediate action in this regard,

Yours sincerely,

Henri Tiphagne

Hon. National Working Secretary,

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India