

Human Rights Defenders Alert - India

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Shri A. K. Parashar

Focal Point - Human Rights Defenders

National Human Rights Commission

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New Delhi-110001

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Dear Sir,

Sub: HRD Alert - India - Urgent Appeal for Action -India/Bihar-Nawada district-Ten French citizens deported by the Indian government on false allegations / HRD organization falsely labelled 'Maoist' -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 false allegations leveled against the ten French citizens as supporters of Maoist rebels as a means to suppress the cause of Mr. P.V. Rajagopal - founder of Ekta Parishad who is leading a movement to restore land rights to the local people.

Incident

Name of the Perpetrators: Police officials and the Indian government

Place of incident: Nawada district, Bihar

Date of incident: 21st April 2012

According to the information received, the government of India has ordered the deportation of the 10 French citizens on 23rd April 2012 (Monday) who were accused by police that they illegally worked with an Indian advocacy group supporting Maoist rebels.

It is the second time in a matter of months that India has deported foreign citizens volunteering for / visiting local non-governmental organizations. In February, police expelled a German tourist for helping to raise funds for anti-nuclear activists in southern India.

Case Narrative:

The French citizens were farm activists in their own country who came to India to meet with the leader of Ekta Parishad (or Unity Forum) organisation, P.V. Rajagopal, who is leading a movement to restore land rights to the people. The 10 persons including four men and six women were detained on April 21, 2012 (Saturday) in a densely forested area of Bihar where Ekta Parishad had organized a meeting of local farmers. The police Deputy Inspector General Paras Nath alleged that the French nationals violated their tourist visas by working for Ekta Parishad.

Ekta Parishad has been organising rural trips for foreigners for a long time. Recently Ekta Parishad began a year long tour called Jansatyagraha-Jan Samwaad Yatra to visit struggles for land and livelihood resources throughout the country.

Mr. Rajagopal has invited the foreign friends to visit Jamui, Nawada and Gaya regions because it is the Karmabhoomi of Jayaprakash Narayan and Vinoba Bhave. In Jamui, they took them to Dharendra's Shrambharti Ashram and then to Jayaprakash's Shekhodeora Ashram in Nawada where they were detained by the police.

During the course of the yatra, many people come to Mr. Rajagopal with their complaints as his organisation works for realization of land and water rights. The French nationals did not take part in any socio-political activities during their visit. They were taken to those places to visit the Gandhi ashrams and to understand the problems of land and how it can be resolved through non-

violent means. Even when the police asked Rajagopal to remove them (the French people) from the stage, he happily accepted and asked them to leave. Police alleged that Ekta Parishad supports the cause of Maoist rebels and the local cops were not informed about their stay in Nawada and Jamui. However, Ekta Parishad had provided the police with a copy of their passports and visas as soon as the French reached the place.

Only visa violation has been mentioned in the police statement as a reason for deportation. No Maoist link has been mentioned. It is a tale spun by the police to defend themselves and save their face. The French have written just below the police statement that they haven't violated any visa rule but are ready to go back. They have also said that they have not made speeches or provoked anyone, and said they were just traveling with Rajagopal.

Mr. Rajagopal has been on a fast from the day of arrest of the people to address this issue. He stated that his NGO works to protect the land and water rights of the poor and it has never supported the cause of Maoist rebels. He further alleged that it is a conspiracy to frame the organisation members and people as Naxal supporters so that issues of water, forests, land, poverty and migration can be ignored. It is a ploy to destroy all the voices that oppose the current way of development.

He said "Both the Centre and the state government are involved in it as water, forests and land has become commodities for trade. No one wants the poor to have it and we are the people who are fighting for their rights."

The false allegations made against the French people show that the government tries to suppress the non-violent people's movement organised by Ekta Parishad for the cause of land and water rights for the poor.

Background information on the HRD:

Rajagopal P. V., a Gandhian activist, is Vice Chairman of the Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, and the president and founding member of Ekta Parishad, a grassroots right-based organization. In the early 70s Rajagopal worked in the violence-ridden area of Chambal in Madhya Pradesh to help rehabilitate dacoits.

In the years that followed, Rajagopal travelled to several tribal areas and developed an understanding of plight and needs of India's tribal people. Their cause became part of his lifetime mission. After setting up a number of training organizations across Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa, the subsequent mobilization led to the consolidation of a people's organization, namely, Ekta Parishad (or Unity Forum) in 1991. The organization is focused on people's control over livelihood resources in an environment where land is being grabbed, and where forest rights are not being implemented. This is making the Gandhian vision of the advancement of self-reliant communities and local governance, more challenging.

In the context of the continuing growth of Naxalism in Central rural India, Rajagopal's organization of Ekta Parishad with its mobilization of tribal peoples, women and youth as well as its advocacy of Land Reform is one of the most successful nonviolent alternatives. While identifying the ongoing structural violence involved in industrial and government supported land grabs, Rajagopal has stood firmly by nonviolent action as the instrument of social change. By advocating social change through mass mobilization, he continues to make use of and enhance the democratic space of India. He trained a lot of young people and sent them to Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Ekta Parishad has organized the massive non-violent landless march called 'Janadesh 2007' The campaign was launched in 2005 and culminated in October 2007, in the form of a 350 km foot march involving 25,000 people, the majority of them were landless Adivasi and Dalit.

Ekta Parishad began a year long tour called Jansatyagraha-Jan Samwaad Yatra to visit struggles for land and livelihood resources throughout the country. The Jan Satyagraha 2012 March campaign is a large non-violent walk that will be carried out in India and in many other countries across the globe which will cover 80,000 km.

For several times, the Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh governments made accusations against Ekta Parishad of being a Maoist front organisation and for which Rajagopal had written to them telling them to provide evidence so that

we could correct or dismantle the organisation. He made many suggestions to various governments, including the Government of India, the President of India and the home minister, saying that it is a non-violent organisation working on Gandhian lines and would be happy to work with the government to contain violence in conflict areas. In the beginning, the states used to accuse with these false allegations just because the RSS used to work in the same areas, and Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand are ruled by the BJP government. Therefore, they were able to level allegations that we are supporting the Naxals.

Appeal

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

1. Guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of the French activists who were falsely accused as supporters of Maoist rebels by the police;
2. Ensure an immediate intervention into the false allegations made by the police against the French people and a Gandhian like Mr. P.V. Rajagopal of Ekta Parishad;
3. Ensure that an apology is tendered to Mr. P. V. Rajagopal for calling him a Maoist
3. Ensure in all circumstances respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with international human rights standards and international instruments ratified by India.

Looking forward to your immediate action in this regard,

Yours sincerely,

Henri Tiphagne
Hon. National Working Secretary,
Human Rights Defenders Alert - India