



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS' ALERT - INDIA

NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

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July 26, 2021

To,
Mr. Indrajeet Kumar,
Focal Point - Human Rights Defenders & Deputy Registrar,
National Human Rights Commission,
Manav Adhikar Bhawan,
Block-C, GPO Complex, INA,
New Delhi – 110 023
Email: hrd-nhrc@nic.in

Dear Sir,

Sub: HRD Alert - India - Urgent Appeal for Action - Madhya Pradesh: Murder of RTI activist for exposing public corruption and negligence of the MP police in the investigation.

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 writing to express our grave concern regarding the cold-blooded murder of Mr. Ranjeet Soni, an RTI activist, in Vidisha Madhya Pradesh, who was known for exposing public corruption and the subsequent negligent and questionable police investigation by the MP police into his murder.

Source of Information:

- Information from local HRDs
- Information gathered from media
- Information gathered from fact-finding report

Date of Incident:

June 02, 2021

Place of Incident:

Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh

The Perpetrators:

Inspector Yogendra Singh Dangi, Investigating Officer, Dehat police station, Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh

About the Human Rights Defender:

Mr. Ranjeet Soni (46) was an RTI activist, using the Right to Information Act to expose corruption at local level. He had filed as many as 130 RTI applications, many of which were filed with the local Public Works Department (PWD).

Details of the Incident:

On June 2, 2022, Mr. Ranjeet Soni had gone to the PWD office in relation to his RTI matters. Around 5 pm he was shot dead within the premises of the office of the Public Works Department (PWD), Vidisha at point blank range at the back of his head just outside the main entrance to the office and died on spot. There was a CCTV camera installed above the main entrance, barely 5-7 feet from the spot of the crime, however as per the Police, the CCTV was not functional.

On June 2, 2022, the police registered on an FIR (No. 0332/2022) at Vidisha Dehat police station, against an unknown person under sections 302 (murder) and 201 (causing evidence to disappear) of the Indian Penal Code. Since then, the police have arrested 5 people for the murder: Ankit Yadav alias Tunda (the shooter), Jaswant Raghuvanshi, Naresh Sharma, S. Kumar Choube and Shailendra Patel.

On June 3, 2022, the police released a press note detailing the arrests and claimed that the murder was the result of a personal feud between Ranjeet Soni and Jaswant Raghuvanshi, Naresh Sharma, S. Kumar Choube, all contractors who have had history with Mr. Soni. They stated that the three hired shooter Ankit Yadav through Shailendra Patel. The investigation that Followed treated the reason for murder as personal vendetta.

On June 19, 2022, a fact-finding team of activists visited the home of Mr. Soni.¹ The team found that the HRD had filed RTI applications to various authorities including Lokayukta, the PWD and the Chief Minister's Office seeking appropriate action into the allegations of corruption.

The fact-finding team also found that Mr. Soni's work, through his use of the RTI mechanism, went beyond the personal dispute with those arrested by the police. The report provided new insight into the HRD's work at exposing corruption at the local level.

Mr. Soni's wife, Gayatri Soni, showed several RTIs and letters that revealed that he filed RTIs to expose corruption across departments. For instance, an RTI dated February 25, 2022, sought details about the process of appointment of the Deputy General Manager, including the eligibility criteria, in the Pradhan Mantri Grameen Sadak Vikas Pradhikaran implementation unit in Vidisha, and an RTI dated January 5, 2021, filed with the District Hospital in Vidisha, seeking details of stock and supply of ARV injections.

They also found a letter dated April 4, 2022, written by S. Kumar Choube to the Divisional Project Engineer, PWD Vidisha stating that Ranjeet Soni was seeking information about works carried out by him and was then using that information to blackmail him and other officials of the PWD. Mr. Choube stated that if any information is provided to Ranjeet, then he should be informed and even stated that if any untoward incident takes place, then the department will be responsible.

Moreover, the fact-finding team found that the family of Mr. Soni was under severe financial strain and at no point it appears that Mr. Soni was indeed engaged in blackmailing. Therefore, we believe that Mr. Soni's murder was connected to local level corruption that he was trying to expose. And looking at the motive being his work as an RTI activist needs re investigation.

¹The team comprised of members of the working committee of the National Campaign for Peoples Right to Information - Anjali Bhardwaj, Rolly Shivhare and Amrita Johri, Ajay Dubey, a board member of Transparency International, India and Santosh Malviya work with Ajay in Madhya Pradesh.

Protection of HRDs is a key duty of any State as specified in the declaration on human rights defenders, adopted in 1998 by the UN general Assembly. Article 2 of the declarations states that the State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms, *inter alia*, by adopting such steps as may be necessary to create all conditions necessary in the social, economic, political and other fields, as well as the legal guarantees required to ensure that all persons under its jurisdiction, individually and in association with others, are able to enjoy all those rights and freedoms in practice.

Article 6 of the UN's Declaration on Human Right Defenders states categorically states that everyone has a right to know, seek, obtain, receive, and hold information about all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The Right to Information preserves this right and an assault on those who use the RTI mechanism is in direct violation of this Article.


In India no other category of HRDs face more reprisal than RTI users. A recent public hearing in Bihar revealed that several accused in murders of 20 RTI activists, killed in Bihar over the last 10 years, still roaming free. Earlier this year, the brutal assault on RTI user Amraram Godara in Rajasthan was widely documented.

Appeal:

We therefore request the Hon'ble Commission to urgently:

- Direct the Director General of Police of Madhya Pradesh to initiate an immediate, independent, thorough, transparent, effective, and impartial re investigation into the murder of Mr. Ranjeet Soni and submit the report to the NHRC within 4 weeks.
- Direct the Director General of Police of Madhya Pradesh Seek the details of the RTIs filed by Mr. Soni over the past 12 months and submit the information to the NHRC within two weeks.
- Direct the Chief Secretary of Madhya Pradesh to provide compensation of Rs. 5,00,000 to the family of the HRD which is under severe financial constraint.
- Guarantee in all circumstances the physical and psychological integrity of the HRD from any further reprisals from the perpetrators and using all provisions of law to ensure that HRD and his family are not harassed or threatened further by the assailants and give it in writing to the NHRC within two weeks.

Yours sincerely,



Henri Tiphagne
National Working Secretary