



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS' ALERT - INDIA

NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

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March 31, 2021

To,

Mr CS Mawri,
Focal Point - Human Rights Defenders & Assistant 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 – Urgent Appeal for Action – Manipur: Restricting an independent woman journalist from covering the proceedings of the state assembly.

Greetings from Human Rights Defenders Alert!

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 concern at the restrictions imposed on an independent tribal journalist, Ms. Grace Jajo, restricting her from entering and covering the proceedings of the Manipur Legislative Assembly, despite her having a valid pass as a journalist. The journalist was restricted from entering the Legislative Assembly for posting a link on her Facebook.

Source of Information:

- Information from HRD
- Information from HRDA North East regional consultant
- Information from HRDs in the region

Date of Incident:

February 22, 2021

Place of Incident:

Imphal, Manipur

Perpetrators:

- Raju Yanglem, PRO, Manipur Legislative Assembly
- Secretary, Manipur Legislative Assembly

- Mr. E Tomba, other staff and police personnel at the Manipur Legislative Assembly involved in the incident

About the Human Rights Defender:

Ms. Grace Jajo is an independent tribal journalist based out of Nagaram, Imphal. She regularly contributes to Aja Daily, which is published in Tangkhul and English. The media house had made the formal application to the Secretariat to issue a pass to Ms. Jajo to cover the Budget Assembly Session of 2021.

Background of the incident:

On February 20, 2021, Ms. Jajo had shared an article by The Frontier Manipur on her Facebook page published with the headline '*The Frontier Manipur offers explanation of breach of privilege and contempt of House notice*'. (link: <https://thefrontiermanipur.com/the-frontier-manipur-offers-explanation-on-breach-of-privilege-and-contempt-of-house-notice/>). Posting the link of this article, Ms. Jajo had written '*Drama from the assembly*'.

The article explained that The Frontier Manipur had been charged with a breach of privilege and contempt for reproducing statements made by the Chief Minister N. Biren Singh on the floor of the house, as reported by a press release issued by the state government's directorate of information and public relations.

Details of the Incident:

On February 22, 2021, Ms. Jajo went to the Assembly around 11:35 am to cover the ongoing assembly session. She was entering from Gate No. 3.

When she entered the room for women, the security personnel asked her to show her ID card. Accordingly, she produced her entry pass to cover the session and her press card of the Aja Daily. Ms. Jajo had a valid ID card, issued by the Secretariat of the State Assembly for the explicit purpose of covering the proceedings of Assembly session from February 03, 2021 to February 22, 2021.

Upon showing her ID Card, the head of security Mr. E Tomba took away her government issued entry pass forcibly and informed Ms. Jajo that an order had been issued to not let her enter, and asked her to leave.

When Ms. Jajo demanded that he produce the order, he called the chief security officer over the phone. He told Ms. Jajo to take the order from Mr. Raju (joint-secretary). Mr. Raju was called but didn't respond. Then she was asked to leave by the security present at Gate No. 3.

Ms. Jajo co-operated and left the room 12.20 p.m. and waited outside for the order to arrive. Barely two minutes had passed, when two women security staff approached her and told her that a senior officer wanted her to wait outside the gate. As the security staff were telling her that she couldn't wait within the premises, a police team led by a woman sub-inspector drove up to the gate and started shouting from outside telling Ms. Jajo to exit the premises. Despite repeatedly identifying as a journalist, Ms. Jajo says that she was pushed out of the premises. The woman sub-inspector also grabbed her, despite Ms. Jajo asking her not to touch her.

On February 23, 2021, a letter signed by Mr. Raju Yanglem, PRO Manipur Legislative Assembly to the Editor of Aja Daily stated that a Privilege Motion had been initiated against her for her Facebook post following which she had been barred from entering the assembly complex on February 22, 2021. The letter stated that the Editor had been informed over phone by the Press Advisory Committee, Manipur Legislative Assembly. However, Ms. Jajo was not informed of the fact that such a privilege motion had been initiated against her or the decision to bar her from entering the assembly complex. The letter doesn't state the date or time of the privilege motion that had been initiated against Ms. Jajo.

We would like to express our grave concern on the restriction of reporting by a journalist for posting a critical post regarding the government on her social media. The case is yet again an example of how journalists who are human rights defenders are hounded and victimised for their work. Governments and other powerful actors, seeking to escape scrutiny and stifle dissent, often respond to critical reporting or activism with attempts to silence them. Threats, surveillance, attacks, arbitrary arrest and detention, and, in the most grave cases, enforced disappearance or killings, are too often the cost of reporting the truth.

The fact that a breach of privilege motion has been initiated against a journalist for a Facebook post in itself is an act that runs contrary to the freedoms granted under Article 19(a) by the Indian Constitution.

There has been an increasing pattern of such hounding of journalists by the Manipur government to stifle their voice. The Frontier Manipur in Manipur was earlier charged with a breach of privilege and contempt. The article held to be offensive had the headline "State has no say regarding AFSPA, it is under the purview of union govt, says CM Biren." Another Manipur based journalist, Mr. Kishorechandra Wangkhem, was arrested in September 2020, on charges of sedition and promoting enmity between different groups through a social media post.

The protection of journalists and human rights defenders, and ending impunity for attacks against them, is a global priority for safeguarding freedom of expression. States are under an obligation to prevent, protect against, and prosecute attacks against journalists and human rights defenders.

Creating a safe and enabling environment for their work necessitates legal reform, the creation of special protection mechanisms, and protocols to guide effective investigations and prosecutions where attacks occur. A free press and active civil society are essential to ensure the public's right to know, so that governments and institutions can be held accountable.

The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders of 1998, also seeks to protect the monitoring and advocacy functions of defenders by recognizing their right to obtain and disseminate information relevant to rights of humans. The actions taken against Ms. Jajo are also against Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which has been ratified by India, which mandates freedom of expression.

Appeal:

In light of the humiliating treatment meted out against Ms. Jajo, we urge the Hon'ble Commission should immediately:

- Direct the Chief Secretary of Manipur to take immediate and appropriate action against those officials who are responsible for the violation of the right to liberty and free movement of journalist Ms. Grace Jajo.
- Direct the Assembly Secretariat to furnish details of when the breach of privilege motion was issued, when the committee of privileges and contempt of the house convene to deliberate on the matter and took the decision to bar Ms. Grace Jajo and the date and time of when this decision was communicated to her.
- Direct the Chief Secretary of Manipur to ensure provision of reparation, compensation, apology to Ms. Grace Jajo for the psychological suffering she has undergone because of denial of her right to liberty of movement and give this assurance to the NHRC of India in writing immediately and urgently.
- Direct the Chief Secretary of Manipur to create an environment conducive to journalists and HRDs in Manipur so that they can carry out their duties as per the Constitution.

Yours Sincerely,



Henri Tiphagne

National Working Secretary