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India: Chhattisgarh authorities must immediately release witness to extrajudicial executions

Amnesty International urges authorities in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh to immediately free Sodi Sambo, an *adivasi* woman and eyewitness to the extrajudicial executions of nine *adivasis* in Gompad village on 1 October 2009. She is a petitioner in the ongoing case at the Supreme Court seeking an impartial investigation into the killings.

Journalists in the nearby town of Jagdalpur informed Amnesty International that they saw Sodi at a government-run hospital there in the custody of non-uniformed women constables who prevented them from talking to her. Sodi, who had sustained bullet injuries in her leg during the police shootings at Gompad, had been receiving medical treatment at the Vanvasi Chetna Ashram (VCA), a Gandhian organization, at Dantewada. VCA activists told Amnesty International that they feared the Dantewada police were exerting pressure on her to influence her testimony about the extrajudicial executions.

On the afternoon of 3 January, Dantewada police arrested Sodi at Kanker town when she and VCA activist Himanshu Kumar were travelling from Dantewada to Raipur, the state capital. She was then taken to the Kanker and Dantewada police stations where the police said they would record her testimony about the 1 October 2009 shootings.

Sodi and Himanshu Kumar were planning to travel onwards to Delhi where they were scheduled to meet India's Home Minister P. Chidambaram and ensure further medical treatment for Sodi. The previous night, she and two other VCA activists had to cancel their bus journey to Raipur and return to Dantewada when the police attempted to arrest them en route.

Amnesty International has also received reports that a VCA-organized public hearing on human rights violations suffered by the *adivasi* communities today could not go ahead following protests by the supporters of Salwa Judum, a militia widely believed to be supported by the state government in its campaign against the armed opposition group, the Communist Party of India (Maoist).

Amnesty International reiterates its call to the Chhattisgarh authorities to stop the harassment of VCA peace activists.¹ The authorities must also refrain from intimidating, threatening, or otherwise harming Sodi Sambo and all other human rights defenders. She should be released immediately and unconditionally.

Background

The VCA has been campaigning for the last four years against human rights abuses of *adivasi* communities in the ongoing conflict in Chhattisgarh. The VCA also works for the return and resettlement of some 10,000 *adivasis* internally displaced by the conflict between the security forces and the *Salwa Judum*, on the one hand, and the CPI (Maoist), on the other.

¹ Amnesty International, *India: Chhattisgarh authorities must stop torture and arbitrary arrests of peace activists and human rights defenders*, AI Index: ASA 20/023/2009, 23 December 2009.