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India: Arrest of witness points to continuing police harassment

A key eyewitness to the "disappearance" of a human rights activist has been arrested in Amritsar, India. Rajiv Singh Randhawa was attempting to hand a petition to UK Home Secretary Jack Straw in front of the Golden Temple when the arrest took place on 5 September. Amnesty International today expressed serious concern for his safety while in police custody.

The petition called on the UK government to intervene with the Indian government on the matter of human rights violations in Punjab.

Rajiv Singh Randhawa has since been charged with robbery and murder as well as offences under the Arms Act in connection with a robbery at a bank in Amritsar in which two people were killed. The magistrate remanded him to police custody until 8 September. Amnesty International has appealed to the authorities in Punjab for assurances that he will not be subjected to torture or ill-treatment while in police custody.

"This case highlights the continuing lawlessness of sections of the police in Punjab. Amnesty International is seriously concerned that these charges against Rajiv Singh Randhawa, like other charges brought in the past, are merely a means of harassing and intimidating him," the organization said.

Rajiv Singh Randhawa is a key eyewitness in the case of the "disappearance" of human rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra. Yesterday, 6 September, was the fifth anniversary of the "disappearance" of Khalra who unearthed evidence that hundreds of bodies of individuals who had "disappeared" after arrest in the 1980s and early 1990s had been illegally cremated by Punjab police. Amnesty International has learnt that a hearing in the case was scheduled for 21 September at which evidence, including that of Rajiv Singh, was due to be recorded.

This is the third time that Rajiv Singh Randhawa has been arrested by Punjab police and charged with serious offences. On the last occasion, he was accused of setting up an organization to fight for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan, the Tigers of Sikh Land. In July this year the Punjab Human Rights Commission ruled that those charges against Rajiv Singh were "concocted" by police as a means of dissuading him from giving evidence against police in the Khalra case. The Commission recommended that criminal cases be registered against the police officers and further investigations carried out. Rajiv Singh was awarded compensation for his illegal detention.

Amnesty International believes that the failure by the state to systematically investigate a pattern of grave human rights violations in Punjab during the 1980s and early 1990s has led to a climate of impunity within the police force and continuing illegal actions of police in the state. Attempts by human rights organizations in the state to seek justice for victims of human rights violations have been met with harassment, intimidation and official obstruction to redress.

"The silencing of Rajiv Singh Randhawa in front of a foreign dignitary shows how desperate sections of the Punjab police are to suppress evidence in this case. We call on the international community to intervene in this case," Amnesty International said.

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