

PRESS RELEASE

Press conference at IWPC on 21.2.2016, 11.00 AM

CONTINUED HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS OF ADIVASIS IN BASTAR –

Human Rights Defender Soni Sori and her family facing persecution

Lingaram Kodopi, nephew of human rights defender and Aam Aadmi Party member Soni Sori from Bastar, Chhattisgarh, along with Vrinda Grovre (Supreme Court Lawyer) Prof Uma Charavarty (Women Rights Activist), Kalyani Menon Sen (Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression) addressed a press meet on the deteriorating human rights situation in Bastar and the persecution of Soni's family members, in Delhi today. Ever since the chemical attack on Soni Sori, the local police has been intimidating her nephew Lingaram, her sister and brother-in-law, and is trying to implicate them in the attack on Soni.

It maybe recalled that on the night of 20th, February Soni Sori was stopped by some masked men, when she was returning to Geedam from Jagdalpur, a black chemical was smeared on her face and she was told by the men to "stop complaining against the IG, stop raising the issue of Mardum, and if you don't behave yourself, we will do this to your daughter as well." An FIR was registered by the state government and a SIT comprising of ASP Sukma Mr Santosh Singh, CSP Jagdalpur Ms Deepmala Kashyap, and ASP Bijapur IK Elesela, was set up to investigate this attack.

Lingaram Kodopi detailed how on the pretext of conducting an inquiry into this attack, this team under IG (Bastar) SRP Kalluri, has been harassing and intimidating Soni's relatives. He himself was picked up thrice for questioning by the SIT team, and asked multiple times to .

On 11th March Soni's sister, Dhani Markam, was picked up by Bastar police from the hostel of a nursing training school, and taken to an undisclosed location. Soni's brother-in-law and Dhani's husband, Ajay Markam, was taken in for questioning on March 1st, 2016, and extensively interrogated by ASP Santosh Singh, in the presence of other SIT officials at PS Geedam, Dantewada. During this questioning, he was repeatedly told by the interrogating team that the police would arrest him for orchestrating the attack on Ms. Sori. He was again detained on 9th, and on 10th he was kept in police custody for a day and a half, with no intimation to his family about his whereabouts and the reasons for his detention. This was in clear violation of his fundamental rights guaranteed under Article 22(2) of the Constitution, and Section 57 of the CrPC. On 11th March Soni's father, an ex-sarpanch and a victim of Naxalite violence, and Markam's mother and sister met the IG Bastar Range, Mr. SRP Kalluri, to seek information about his detention. Mr. Kalluri spoke to them in vulgar, abusive language and openly threatened them, saying that Soni's family would be made to suffer for her indiscretions in questioning Mr. Kalluri, that she would be killed and that his grandson, Lingaram Kodopi would also be jailed.

Lingaram, Ajay Markam and another person were being asked by the SIT to confess to the chemical attack on Soni Sori, and were being pressured into naming Linga as an accomplice/mastermind. They were let go with the threat that they would be picked up again if they told anyone about what happened to them during these their detention. Lingaram says he was being continuously being hounded with threats, was being branded as a Maoist sympathizer, his phone was constantly on surveillance, and he was being tracked and followed everywhere;he had lost the freedom to live and to earn.

According to Lingaram the reason for such persecution and targeting by the police was because he and Soni Sori have been raising the issue of fake surrenders, and fake encounter killings in Bastar as well as several incidents of atrocities and sexual violence in the villages there, during combing and search operations by combined security forces. They were also helping the villagers so affected to register complaints of the looting of their villages, of the encounter killings and of the rape of women. Villagers have been "disappearing" from villages, only to show up in the list of "surrendered" or "arrested" Naxalites several days later as press clippings and testimonies recount.Under the guise of anti-Naxal operations, the security forces have been indulging in rape and plunder. Teams of women activists have documented three cases of mass sexual violence, one in October 2015 and two in January this year, where security forces have entered villages in Sukma and Bijapur- stripping women, indulged in gang-rapes, looting their food supplies, and destroying their homes and granaries.

One such false encounter was that of 40 year old Hidma Kashyap, father of seven children,in the Mardum thana in Bastar District on February 3. While the police claim that Hidma was a high-ranking Naxalite ("1 lakh ka inami naxali") killed after a fierce encounter in the jungles, the villagers claim that Hidma was an ordinary villager, picked up by the police at night from his house. According to his wife, he was asked by a police team to show them the way inside the jungle; he did not return after that; the wife recalls the name of the police officer who had come to the house.Hidma's wife showed documents such as AADHAR card, Kisan card and bank pass-books to show that he was not a Naxalite. Soni had organised a press conference in Raipur with the family and other villagers and was trying to file a FIR regarding the case, when she was attacked.(<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/raipur/Bastar-encounter-killing-sparks-row/articleshow/51012521.cms>).

Journalists writing about these grave violations have been threatened; while two male journalists have been jailed, Malini Subramanian had to leave Jagdalpur.Lawyers of the Jagdalpur Legal Aid Group and other human rights defenders who have been helping the affected tribal people to access justice, have also been intimidated since January 2016 by civil vigilante groups and were forced to leave Jagdalpur in February 2016.

Brinda Karat, ex-MP Rajya Sabha spoke of

According to Annie Raja, President National Federation of Indian Women,

AAP member Ashutosh

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