

12 December 2019

India: Arbitrary detention/ Judicial harassment of members of the All Manipur Students' Union

On 9 and 10 December 2019, Indian police in the State of Manipur have arrested several members of the **All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU)** including five office bearers. Yumkhaibam Bijando, Sagolsem Ranjit and Sinam Bode were arrested on 9 December 2019. The following day (10 December 2019), five office bearers of AMSU, Yumrembam Sanjit, W Deemocha, Th Thanil, M Bishal and Ng Toni were arrested and booked for offences under the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Three others, Pebam Bruce, Khumbongmayum Chaorel and Moirangthem Dikson were also arrested the same day. The arrests were carried out without a warrant and without stating a reason for arrest. It is believed that the arrests are part of a broader crackdown by the Indian State against those protesting against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Bill, which was passed by parliament on 10 December. At the time of writing, all those arrested remain in detention.

The All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU) has since its inception worked to protect human rights, especially the rights of landless indigenous people who have been forcibly evicted from their lands to make way for mining projects and the right to education and basic needs for the local community. AMSU has advocated against systemic human rights violations by the Indian state and led campaigns against extra judicial killings, arbitrary detention, torture and sexual violence committed by Indian security forces in the State. It has consistently called for the repeal of the regressive Armed Forces Special Powers Act which applies to the North Eastern States.

On 9 December 2019 at around 7:30 pm, police arrested student leaders, Yumkhaibam Bijando, Sagolsem Ranjit and Sinam Bode inside the AMSU office located at the DM College Campus in Thangmeibamd. No warrant was produced and no reasons were given for the arrest. On 10 December 2019 at around 4:30pm, five AMSU office bearers Yumrembam Sanjit, W Deemocha, Th Thanil, M Bishal and Ng Toni were arrested from near Nupilal Complex, Jiribam by the Jiribam Police and booked under Section 143/145 & 506 IPC which deal with unlawful assembly and criminal intimidation respectively.

Later the same day, three more arrests were made. At around 9:00 pm, Pebam Bruce was arrested from near his residence in Kwakeithel Takhel Leikai, Imphal West by a team of plain clothed police. Around the same time, police officials from the Lamlai Police Station of Imphal East arrested Khumbongmayum Chaorel and Moirangthem Dikson were produced before Chief Judicial Magistrate Imphal East on 11 December and have been remanded in police custody for three days.

The arrests are linked to a strong crackdown by the Indian state especially in the North Eastern States in response to widespread protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act passed on 10 December. The Act has been widely condemned by rights groups for targeting the Muslim minority. It has also raised concerns, especially in the North Eastern States, of being a deliberate attempt to change the demography of the region and further undermine the rights of indigenous people. The State has responded by a disproportionate use of force by police and armed forces against protesters, and by targeting and criminalizing student leaders and human rights defenders for their involvement in a peaceful campaign against what they believe is a regressive law. There is currently an internet shutdown in at least two states, Assam and Tripura, with reports of further detentions, threats and harassment. The attack on AMSU and its leaders is linked to a total shut down or 'bandh' on 10 December called for by the North East Students' Organisation (NESO) to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act. The AMSU as a member organization of NESO, supported the call for a total shutdown in protest against the new law.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arbitrary detention of Yumkhaibam Bijando, Sagolsem Ranjit, Sinam Bode, Bruce Pebam, Yurembam Sanjit, W Deemocha, Th Thanil, M Bishal and Toni Ng and calls for their immediate release. We are also concerned for their safety in custody, conditions of detention and for the safety of human rights defenders currently working in this hostile environment. The response of the Indian State to those protesting an inherently discriminatory and regressive state, by curtailing fundamental rights and freedoms including the freedom of assembly and association and freedom of expression, is a matter of grave concern. These rights embody the core of a human rights defenders work, without which they are unable to effectively carry out their peaceful work. Front Line Defenders calls on the Indian authorities to respect peaceful demonstrations and to recognise the right to people's freedom of expression, values enshrined in the Constitution of India and in its international commitments.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in India to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Yumkhaibam Bijando, Sagolsem Ranjit, Sinam Bode, Bruce Pebam, Yurembam Sanjit, W Deemocha, Th Thanil, M Bishal, Toni Ng, Khumbongmayum Chaorel and Moirangthem Dikson as Front Line Defenders believes that they are being held solely as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
2. Ensure the safety of all those detained and grant them immediate and unfettered access to their families and lawyers and medical treatment;
3. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in India and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment;
4. Ease restrictions on communication and the use of internet in the North Eastern States