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India: Harassment and intimidation of Shila Bewa

On 25 January 2019, human rights defender **Shila Bewa** was harassed and intimidated by Border Security Force (BSF) officers while putting up posters around the river bank areas of Toltoli village in Ghospara Gram Panchayet, West Bengal, India.

Shila Bewa is a human rights defender who campaigns against grave violations of human rights by the state, including extrajudicial killings. She is also an active member of Banglar Manabadhikar Suraksha Mancha (MASUM), a human rights NGO based in West Bengal that documents and investigates alleged grave violations by authorities committed in and around the Indo-Bangladesh bordering districts of West Bengal. Shila Bewa started her campaigning after her husband, Imajuddin Mondal, was killed by a Border Security Force (BSF) personnel on 17 April 2015. She continues to be steadfast in her struggle to seek justice for her husband's murder notwithstanding the repeated threats she has received from the police and the severe economic hardship she has faced since her husband's death.

Around noon on 25 January 2019, Shila Bewa was verbally abused by an officer of Battalion number 43 under Farajipara Border Out Post of the BSF while distributing posters printed by an organisation called Amra Simantabasi (We the Bordering People). The posters were being distributed as part of a campaign protesting against the aggressive behaviour and conduct of the BSF, which has been disrupting the livelihood and safety of the local communities. Shila Bewa's assailant also took away all her posters by force during the encounter and tore down some of the others she had already pasted up despite her objections and insistence that her activity was in accordance with the law.

The posters contained statements written in Bangla that called for the BSF to leave the villages, to stop obstructing the cultivation of the land by villagers, to stop committing torture, trafficking, murder, and enforced disappearance, as well as to be punished for torture and corruption.

Shila Bewa proceeded to submit a written complaint of the incident at the Jalangi Police Station around 3.30 p.m. on the same day and requested the police to treat her statement as a first information report (FIR). However, the officer on duty not only dismissed her request but also blamed her for getting herself into trouble. The officer subsequently took Shila Bewa's written complaint but she has yet to receive a receipt for it despite being promised one by the following day, 26 January 2019. When Shila Bewa returned to the police station on 26 January to request for her receipt, she was once again blamed by the the Officer-in-Charge who also harassed and threatened her about the complaints she had filed against BSF regarding her husband's murder as well as her involvement with MASUM. After failing to officially lodge her complaint at the police station, Shila Bewa enlisted the help of a neighbour to submit her complaint to the district superintendent of police through Whatsapp.

Front Line Defenders recognises this harassment and intimidation of Shila Bewa as the latest incident in a series of targeted attacks and abuses against MASUM and its associates which it believes are solely motivated by their peaceful and legitimate work for human rights in West Bengal. These incidents have been ongoing since 2008 and have increased in frequency in the last few years.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities of India to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the threats made against human rights defender Shila Bewa, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the behaviour and conduct of the police officers at Jalangi Police Station, and ensure Shila Bewa's complaint is registered;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the murder of Imajuddin Mondal, and hold the perpetrators accountable;
4. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Shila Bewa and all members of MASUM carrying out work in the border region of West Bengal;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in India are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.