

29 July 2019

India: Threats and harassment against woman human rights defender Sobita Mangsatabam

On 24 July 2019, an off duty police officer brandishing a firearm, visited the office of Women's Action for Development (WAD), a women's rights organisation based in Imphal City, Manipur, and inquired about the whereabouts of its secretary, **Sobita Mangsatabam**. The same police officer had visited the WAD office on 21 July at around 8.30 pm, but failed to gain entry to the compound. It is believed that the threats against Sobita Mangsatabam and WAD are linked to their intervention in a domestic violence complaint filed against the said police officer by his wife in June 2019.

[Sobita Mangstabam](#) is a human rights defender in Manipur who has been working for the rights of women and girls in Manipur for over two decades. Her organisation, **Women's Action for Development** aims to promote and protect the rights of women and girls, especially survivors of violence, including sexual violence. Sobita Mangsatabam is also the Convenor of the District Women Committee (DWC) of United NGOs Mission Manipur (UNMM). Sobita [Mangstabam](#) is a strong advocate for accountability and justice for crimes of violence against women and girls. She provides support and protection for survivors and their families and has been vocal in her call for criminal justice reform to end impunity for violence against women.

On 24 July 2019, the police officer entered the compound in civilian clothes. He pulled out his firearm, held it close to his waist and questioned the caretaker about Sobita Mangsatabam's whereabouts. The office was closed that day due to a 'bandh' or shut down in the city, and Sobita Mangsatabam and her staff had not reported to work. The officer remained in the area for around 15 minutes after he spoke to the caretaker. The same officer had tried and failed to enter the compound on the night of 21 July 2019. The officer has been subsequently identified as Laimayum Bishwanath Sharma, a serving officer of the Manipur Police, who has been assigned as security to the local Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (**RSS**). The RSS is a right wing nationalist organisation with strong links to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Sobita Mangsatabam has since been informed by the police that officer Sharma has been arrested and suspended from service with immediate effect in connection to the threats her. The officer was produced before the Court of the Chief Judicial Magistrate Imphal East and released on bail.

The threatening incident on 24 July 2019 is believed to be linked to the support provided by Sobita Mangsatabam and WAD to the victim of a domestic violence. The wife of the police officer had filed a complaint against him in June 2019 detailing threats and domestic violence including death threats against her and their children. Since June, Sobita Mangsatabam and her staff had been in contact with the police officer and his family in an attempt to resolve the matter. However, as the threats escalated, on 15 July 2019, Sobita Mangsatabam and WAD supported the wife and children to leave the house and move to a temporary shelter.

The incident on 24 July is the second threat on Sobita Mangsatabam and her family this month. On 4 July 2019, a group of unidentified men traveling in a four-wheel drive fired shots at her daughter, Urikhimbam Thoibi. The men had trailed Urikhimbam Thoibi for some distance, and shot at her and two other relatives including a minor child, as they ran into her residence. Front Line Defenders has previously issued an [urgent appeal](#) expressing its concern against the incident and calling for an immediate and credible inquiry by the Manipur police.

Sobita Mangsatabam and her organisation have been targeted previously due to her human rights work. In April 2017, following the gang rape of two minor girls, she filed a complaint regarding the

incident under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012. Together with several other women's human rights defenders and organisations, she monitored the case and advocated for an effective inquiry and prosecution. Following the charge sheet being filed against the accused in this case, five armed men visited the WAD office and asked about her whereabouts. A group of men claiming to be from the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) also visited the UNMM office and inquired about Sobita Mangsatbam. Although Sobita Mangsatbam and her staff were unharmed in that instance, there was grave concern for her safety against reprisals and also due to the failure of the police to ensure support and protection to the WHRD.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned about the continuing harassment against Sobita Mangsatbam and her family by armed men and believes this to be linked to her peaceful human rights work.

Front Line Defenders calls on the Indian government to:

1. Strongly condemn the threats against Sobita Mangsatbam, which appear to be linked to her legitimate human rights work;
2. Ensure that the officer involved in the incident on 24 July is being held accountable and carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the attack on Sobita Mangsatbam's daughter on 4 July with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Sobita Mangsatbam and her family in consultation with them;
4. Guarantee all human rights defenders in Manipur and India a safe and enabling environment in which to carry out their peaceful work.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw your attention to Article 12 (2): *"The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration."*

Please inform us of any actions that may be taken with regard to the above case.

Yours sincerely,



Andrew Anderson

Executive Director