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## RIGHTS-INDIA: State-Sponsored Repression, Say Human Rights Activists

By Keya Acharya



**BANGALORE, Jun 3 (IPS) - The People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), a 32-year-old Indian human- rights group, has decried India's judiciary for refusing bail to 'jungle doctor' and human rights activist Binayak Sen. Sen is widely-respected for his 30 years of healthcare work among tribals in the central Indian State of Chhattisgarh, and has criticised the State for the mass- eviction of thousands of tribal villagers.**

Sen, who received the 2008 Global Health Council's Jonathan Mann award for his work in health and human rights, was jailed one year ago on charges of "hatching a conspiracy" and abetting terrorism. Sen denies the government's allegations, and was refused bail in a high-profile case that has reached the Supreme Court.

Human rights activists say the government's charges -- filed under the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act 2005 and the Indian government's Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (1967) -- are not just weak, but trumped up.

Twenty-two Nobel laureates' appeals to the Indian government to allow Sen to receive the Jonathan Mann award in person on 29 May 2008 went unheeded.

"It is a sad reflection on the courts, reflective of their own mindset of the phantom of national security that Sen cannot be granted bail," said prominent rights activist-academician K. Balagopal of Human Rights Forum.

Sen's arrest and bail-refusal are enmeshed within the larger issue of an armed guerrilla conflict called 'naxalism' that is rampant in the southern forested belt of Chhattisgarh where Sen lived and worked. Naxalism is flourishing in jungle areas of India's eastern belt: in Bihar, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Socioeconomic inequality and alienation and displacement of tribals have given rise to this armed and violent, Maoist-style protest against the State.

The government arrested Sen on charges of abetting this Naxalism.

Hundreds have been killed in naxalite-related attacks, especially policemen. In 2007 the numbers of those killed was around 354 and property worth millions destroyed in the violence.

But now a related anti-naxalite vigilante movement started in 2005 is in turn being widely criticised for being even more brutal than the naxalites.

The movement, called Salwa Judum is charged by PUCL as using rape, arson, intimidation and other brutalities in forcefully evicting all tribal settlements in the district, with the backing of the Chhattisgarh government.

Sen -- as PUCL co-ordinator -- had been vociferous in denouncing the State and its hand in Salwa Judum.

Lawyers with the Bangalore-based Alternative Law Forum say Sen's criticisms irked the police and State government.

There are no fixed statistics on the numbers of tribals forcefully displaced by Salwa Judum, though there have been reports of 60,000 tribals now in 'sad and cramped' relief camps along the main roads.

Balagopal says that at least 50,000 tribals have run away from the Salwa Judum's violence into the neighbouring State of Andhra Pradesh.

Dantewada and its neighbouring Bijapur and Narayanpur districts are now almost cleared of all habitation, save five or six hamlets, he says.

"These are not Maoists, but victims of a situation, of Salwa Judum", says Balagopal, stressing that these tribal populations are now subject to "tremendous exploitation."

These populations are without lands, proper shelter and government 'food cards' that allow them subsidized staples.

A recently enacted act grants three acres of forestland to tribals even in a State other than their home.

"The officers at the State government level agree that these displaced tribal villagers are eligible for the land under this Act, but it does not get implemented at field level," complains Balagopal.

"India has no law for internally displaced people," says Balagopal.

There are also no known estimates on the acreage of land cleared of tribal habitation by Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh, but civil groups see an unhealthy coincidence between the seizure of mineral-rich tribal lands and the entry of multinational mining industries.

"In the recent past, the pressures of 'development' have seen to it that these resources [grazing lands, water, forest resources, biodiversity] have become increasingly sequestered in private and corporate hands," said Illina Sen in her acceptance speech of the Jonathan Mann award on her husband's behalf, in Washington DC last week.

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Professor Hasan Mansoor of PUCL-Bangalore thinks that "some small lights" are emanating from the Indian government's Planning Commission which recommends that tribals, even naxalites, have rights and should be given a stake in the mineral-rich lands they occupy, to help bring them back to mainstream society.

The report also recommends the abolition of Salwa Judum.

In Chhattisgarh meanwhile, Illina Sen and a country-wide caucus of human rights activists are getting ready to go on a 10-day fast from 16 Jun. 2008 to free Sen and to protest India's "black laws."

(END/2008)

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