

26 January 2017

India – Threats against human rights defender Bela Bhatia

On 23 January 2017 around 30 people went to the house of human rights defender Ms. **Bela Bhatia** in Pandripani village, Bastar district, Chhattisgarh, central India. They accused her of being a “Maoist sympathiser” and threatened to burn the house down if she did not leave immediately.

[Bela Bhatia](#) is a human rights defender, independent researcher, writer and currently Honorary Professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. In January 2016 and November 2015, Bela Bhatia brought to light two instances of gang rape and sexual assault by security forces conducting anti-Maoist operations, and provided assistance to the victims in filing complaints with the police in Bijapur. The human rights defender has participated in the preparation of many fact-finding reports and served on a Planning Commission-appointed panel to examine challenges to governance in areas of the Maoist rebellion. Prior to that she had engaged in extensive study of the Naxalite movement in Indian states such as Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh.

On 23 January 2017 a group of around 30 local villagers went to the house of Bela Bhatia in Pandripani village, Bastar district, Chhattisgarh, central India. They protested outside and accused her of being a “Maoist sympathiser”. She was threatened that her house would be set on fire if she failed to vacate it immediately. Her landlady was also threatened and was warned to force Bela Bhatia to leave. Fellow human rights defenders contacted the Inspector General of Police and other senior police officers of Bastar district to report the incident and request police assistance in ensuring Bela Bhatia’s safety. Although a police officer initially responded by saying, “Very soon Maoists and their dogs will be thrown out of Bastar”, a number of officers were sent to her house to provide the human rights defender with protection. The mob of villagers eventually left her house when Bela Bhatia assured them that she would vacate it by 24 January.

On 7 January 2017, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) [issued](#) a press note indicting Chhattisgarh police of raping and sexually assaulting at least 16 women in Bijapur. Bela Bhatia had been working closely with the NHRC on the investigation. On 19 and 20 January 2017, Bela Bhatia together with the NHRC team went on a mission to record some statements of women who had filed cases of rape and sexual assault against the security forces in the villages of Peddagelur and Bellamnendra in Bijapur district.

This is not the first case of harassment against Bela Bhatia. On [26 March 2016](#), death threats were made against her during a demonstration close to her home in Jagdalpur. Participants in the demonstration demanded that the human rights defender be put to death, accused her of being a Naxal terrorist and questioned her landlady and neighbours.

The harassment of Bela Bhatia is part of a larger wave of repression of human rights defenders, including lawyers, researchers and journalists, standing up against police in the Bastar district. Previously, investigations into human rights violations in the area had been rare due to significant restrictions of people's freedoms as a result of the long drawn-out military confrontation between government forces and Maoist rebels in the region. The Chhattisgarh police has previously used the

same intimidating and threatening tactics against several other women human rights defenders in the Bastar region, including tribal activist Ms [Soni Sori](#), lawyers Ms [Shalini Gera](#) and Ms [Isha Khandelwal](#), and journalist Ms [Malini Subramaniam](#). More recently, on 25 December 2016, seven human rights defenders of the [Telangana Democratic Front \(TDF\)](#) were arrested by the Chhattisgarh police and charged on 26 December 2016 under the Chhattisgarh Special Public Security Act for allegedly possessing banned currency notes and Maoist literature.

Front Line Defenders expresses grave concern at the threats against human rights defender Bela Bhatia, which it believes are solely motivated by her peaceful and legitimate work in human rights in Chhattisgarh state.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in India to:

1. Immediately cease all further harassment of Bela Bhatia, as Front Line believes that the human rights defender has been targeted solely as a result of her legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Bela Bhatia as well as of the members of her family;
3. 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.