

21 December 2020

### **India: Woman human rights defender Annapoorna detained in Andhra Pradesh**

On 15 December 2020, police personnel arrested woman human rights defender **Annapoorna** from her house in Vishakapatnam. While it was not informed at the time of the arrest, her family was later told, upon repeated inquiring, that she was taken into custody in relation to a First Information Report (FIR) filed against her and several others, on 23 and 24 November, alleging their links to Maoist factions. Annapoorna is currently being detained at the Vishakapatnam Central Jail.

Annapoorna is a labour rights defender, an advocate and an executive member of the Pragatisheela Karmika Samakhya, a workers union in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Over the past several years, the woman human rights defender has been at the forefront of the human rights movement in India, advocating for Dalit, women's and worker's rights.

On 15 December 2020, a team of ten plain clothed individuals entered the residence of labour rights defender Annapoorna and forcibly removed her. The defender was feeding her three year old child when the incident occurred. The individuals did not disclose their identity, nor did they give a valid reason for taking her away. During the raid, they also took three mobile phones that were in the house. It was only later, when Annapoorna's brother went to file a complaint at the local police station, he was informed that she had been taken by Special Enforcement officials and therefore no complaint would be registered. Later the same day, two individuals entered the woman human rights defender's house for a second time, took the signature of Annapoorna's mother and then proceeded to search the entire place. When prompted and asked to identify themselves, they failed to respond and left hastily. The defender's lawyer and family have been denied physical access to her since her arrest. Furthermore, the labour rights defender is a diabetic and suffers from thyroid related problems and is in need of regular medication. Her three year old had recently recovered from COVID-19 and is still healing from the severity of it's effects.

On 23 and 24 November 2020, two FIRs, naming over eighty persons, were filed at Munchangiputtu and Piduguralla in Andhra Pradesh. The FIRs allegedly report that those it names have links to Maoist factions in the country. Annapoorna is the fifth human rights defender to be arrested since the lodging of these FIRs. Several of those mentioned in the FIRs are members of human rights organisations, including women's rights organisations, workers unions and organisations working against caste discrimination. The charges in the FIRs include the stringent and draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), Andhra Pradesh Public Security Act, Arms Act and sedition charges.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arrest of woman human rights defender Annapoorna, as it believes she is being targeted as a result of her human rights work and exercising her right to freedom of expression. It particularly condemns the use of the UAPA against human rights defenders, with the aim of terrorising them and silencing their work.

#### **Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in India to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Annapoorna, and drop all charges against her, as Front Line Defenders believes she is being targeted solely as a result of her legitimate and peaceful human rights work;

2. Grant the woman human rights defender access to her lawyer and family members;
3. Cease the judicial harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders in Andhra Pradesh;
4. 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 including police and judicial harassment.