

26 May 2019

Pakistan: Police file First Information Report charging Gulalai Ismail under Anti-Terrorism Act

On 22 May 2019, police in Islamabad, Pakistan filed a First Information Report (FIR) against Gulalai Ismail, a human rights defender who has led a campaign against extra-judicial killings in the country. She has been charged with a number of offences, including under the Anti-Terrorism Act. Gulalai Ismail, along with many other human rights defenders and members of the public had recently spoken out against the abduction, rape and murder of a 10-year old girl, whose body was discovered on 21 May. It is believed the human rights defender is being targeted as a result of her advocacy on this case.

Gulalai Ismail is an award-winning Pakistani human rights defender, co-founder and Chairperson of Aware Girls, and Chairperson of the Youth Peace Network. She regularly speaks at home and abroad on peace-building in Pakistan and women's empowerment. Aware Girls aims to challenge the culture of violence and oppression of women in the rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area (north west Pakistan). The Youth Peace Network trains young people in human rights and political leadership, encouraging the participation of women in politics in Pakistan, and encouraging tolerance between religions.

On 15 May 2019 a 10-year old girl went missing near her home in Islamabad. Even though her parents reported her missing that day, it took four days for police to register a FIR on the disappearance and even then a proper search was not launched. Her body was found in a forest on 21 May, leading to public outrage and protest.

Gulalai Ismail has been vocal in her criticism of the police response in this case. The FIR filed against her mentions Sections 500 (punishment for defamation), 153-A (promoting enmity between different groups, etc) and 124-A (sedition) of the Pakistan Penal Code, as well as sections 6/7 of the Anti-terrorism Act, 1997. It is very common for Pashtun activists to be branded as “anti-state” or “seditious” in particular when they are critical of military or government actions constituting human rights violations. The human rights defender has faced similar charges in the past over critiques of the Pakistani military, police and authorities, particularly in relation to extrajudicial killings

On 12 October 2018 Gulalai Ismail was detained for several hours by the Federal Investigative Authority while returning to Pakistan. In February 2019, she was arbitrarily detained and effectively disappeared for approximately 40 hours; after she was released she continued her work and advocacy for other forcibly disappeared persons. Unknown to her, she had been placed on an Exit Control List which restricted her freedom of movement to and from the country. It is believed the FIR on 23 May is a direct reprisal against her vocal criticism of the state response to the rape and murder of the 10 year old girl.

Following the issuing of the FIR at approximately 4 AM on 23 May, Pakistani police raided the family home of Gulalai Ismail, sending at least eight vehicles with armed police officers, according to family members. The police ransacked the home of her parents, but were unable to find the human rights defender, who has gone into hiding out of fear for her safety.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned about the immediate threat to Gulalai Ismail and for her physical safety and it believes she is being targeted solely as a result of her legitimate activities in defence of human rights Front Line Defenders calls on the Pakistani government to:

1. Immediately revoke the FIR and drop all charges against Gulalai Ismail.
2. Guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Gulalai Ismail and her family in Pakistan
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Pakistan are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.