

**DUBLIN**

Front Line Defenders – Head Office
First Floor, Avoca Court
Temple Road, Blackrock
Co. Dublin, A94 R7W3, Ireland

info@frontlinedefenders.org
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +353 1 212 3750
fax +353 1 212 1001

BRUSSELS

Front Line Defenders – EU Office
Square Marie-Louise 72
1000 Brussels
Belgium

euoffice@frontlinedefenders.org
www.frontlinedefenders.org

phone +32 2 230 9383
fax +32 2 230 0028

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India: Human rights defender and Kashmiri Journalist Irfan Mehraj arrested by the National Investigation Agency under India's anti-terror legislation

On 22 March 2023, the Patiala House Court in New Delhi remanded human rights defender and journalist **Irfan Mehraj** in NIA custody. Irfan Mehraj was arrested by India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) under several charges including the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) on 20 March 2023. In the evening of 20 March 2023, he received a 'routine telephone call' from the NIA and was asked to report to their office in Srinagar. Subsequently, he was arrested under a case registered by the NIA in October 2020, alleging non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of serious offences including criminal conspiracy, raising funds for, and supporting terrorist organisations. Irfan Mehraj's arrest is part of the ongoing consolidated attacks on journalists in Kashmir and on one of the most prominent NGOs, the Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS).

[Irfan Mehraj](#) is a journalist based in Srinagar, Kashmir. He is the founding editor of the online *Wande Magazine* and also contributes towards editorial work of the media outlet TwoCircles.net. He wrote extensively about issues of human rights violations in Kashmir including fake encounter killings, attacks on Kashmiri Pandits, and the situation in Kashmir after abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. He also contributed to prominent national and international media houses such as The Indian Express, Al Jazeera, Himal Southasian, and Deutsche Welle. In 2016 Irfan Mehraj previously worked with JKCCS as a researcher.

On 22 March 2023, Irfan Mehraj was brought before a special NIA judge at the Patiala House court in New Delhi and remanded in custody for 10 days until 1 April 2023. The NIA had sought 12 days of custody for the human rights defender. On 20 March 2023, after Irfan Mehraj was called to the NIA office in Srinagar for an informal conversation, he was arrested in First Information Report (FIR) No RC-37/2020, registered in October 2020, under Sections 120-B (criminal conspiracy) and 124-A (inciting disaffection towards government through words, signs, etc.) of the Indian Penal Code and UAPA sections 17 (fund raising for terror activities), 18 (conspiracy to commit terror act), 22A & 22C (relating to offences committed by registered companies), 38 (offence relating to membership of a terrorist organisation), 39 (supporting a terrorist organisation) and 40 (raising funds for a terrorist organisation). On 21 March 2023, the local magistrate approved the transit remand for Irfan Mehraj to be taken to New Delhi and subsequently he was transferred to New Delhi by an evening flight.

Irfan Mehraj has previously been interrogated by the NIA on multiple occasions in Srinagar and New Delhi with respect to the same case. In October 2020, under the same case in which the human rights defender is now arrested, the NIA had raided the offices of JKCCS and homes of prominent Kashmiri human rights defenders, including Khurram Parvez. The NIA also seized documents and electronic devices, including those of Irfan Mehraj. A press release by the NIA on 21 March 2023 stated that Irfan Mehraj's arrest was the first in their investigation in this case. According to this NIA press release, he was a close associate of human rights defender [Khurram Parvez](#) who is arbitrarily detained in another similar case under UAPA by the NIA since 22 November 2021.

Front Line Defenders was reliably informed that the NIA interrogated Khurram Parvez for two consecutive days in the Rohini High Security Prison in New Delhi during the last week. They had

threatened him with arrest in relation to this case from October 2020, and with arrests of his other colleagues and associates. Khurram Parvez has now also been arrested under the case filed against Irfan Mehraj, after being produced before a court in New Delhi. Khurram Parvez's arbitrary arrest and detention in November 2021 has been widely condemned by UN experts and human rights organisations. He was recently awarded the prestigious Martin Ennals Award in February 2023.

Irfan Mehraj's arrest is the latest in the attempt to silence and intimidate human rights defenders and journalists in Kashmir. Besides human rights defender Khurram Parvez, journalists Fahad Shah, Sajad Gul and Asif Sultan remain imprisoned and face reprisals for their legitimate human rights work and investigative reporting.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the arrest of journalist Irfan Mehraj and believes it to be a part of a larger attempt to target the human rights defenders associated with JKCCS. Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the increasing harassment of activists and journalists in Kashmir and calls on the authorities in India to immediately and unconditionally release Irfan Mehraj and quash the fabricated charges against him.

Front Line Defenders calls upon the Indian authorities to:

1. Immediately drop all charges against Irfan Mehraj as it is believed that they are solely motivated by his legitimate and peaceful work in defence of human rights;
2. Immediately and unconditionally release Irfan Mehraj, as Front Line Defenders believes that he is being held solely as a result of his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights;
3. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the arrest of Irfan Mehraj, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards.

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