

Asian Human Rights Commission

Asian Human Rights Commission, 19/F,

Go-Up Commercial Building, 998 Canton Road, Kowloon, Hongkong S.A.R.

Tel: +(852) - 2698-6339 Fax: +(852) - 2698-6367

PRESS RELEASE

AS-204-2007, August 29, 2007

INDIA: Media restrictions in Manipur is a step backward in resolving the armed conflict

The state government of Manipur has imposed a series of restrictions regarding the "publication of objectionable materials", by the media in the state through its notifications dated August 2 and 14, 2007. The restrictions were published as orders issued by the State Home Department.

These orders is a response by the state in the excuse of protecting the media from being forced to publish materials related to the armed resistance groups in the state. The language used in these orders is of such nature that it is possible to be interpreted in different forms leaving a large margin for misuse.

Manipur is a state in the Northeast of India from where human rights abuses like rape, torture, killing and disappearances are being reported in alarming numbers. The paramilitary and the military stationed in Manipur are alleged to be responsible for the majority of the cases of rights abuses reported from the state. The Asian Human Rights Commission is also aware that a considerable number of cases of human rights abuses are committed also by different factions of armed resistance groups operating in the state.

The media restrictions imposed in the state, in unqualified terms, states that the local media must not report any information related to the activities of the armed resistance groups functioning in Manipur. The first order that was issued on August 2, 2007 prohibits publication of any information which is "directly attributed" to & "unlawful organisations, organized gangs, organisations, terrorist and terrorist related organizations". The order however is silent regarding which organization is to be considered unlawful and which is not.

The use of the word "organizations" in the above quoted clause from the order, can in theory, cover every organization in the state. In addition to the order issued on August 2 yet another order was issued on August 14, "partially modifying" the earlier order.

The language used in this order is equally confusing and loose ended. For example, the order issued on August 14 prohibits publication of "seditious or subversive literature affecting the integrity of the nation". Prohibition also applies for "publication" of "threats of any sort" by any organizations or even "a person" or a particular class of persons". The order is silent regarding what is to be considered as "seditious or subversive literature". Any media house breaching the orders could face actions, including search, confiscation and destruction of materials.

Freedom of speech and expression, a fundamental right in India, is not construed as an absolute right, without any restrictions, though in ideal circumstances it must be so. The Press Council of India has formulated its own regulations regarding acceptable standards for publishing and broadcasting materials by the media in India. A complete ban, when imposed upon the media, curbs media freedom and is often counterproductive.

The media in India and abroad has protested against the orders. Several other civil society organisations have also joined the protest. However, the state government has not backed off from its position and has in fact threatened that it will take actions against those media who would dare to comment against the government order.

The media has a role to play in conflict situations. The fact that there is a armed conflict in Manipur could not be denied. The presence of an independent media, free to report about the facts and circumstances in a conflict situation, is an equally important factor in any process to bring an end to an armed conflict. In a conflict situation, even when baseless rumours could breach a possible peace process, a free and fair media could be the eye and ears of the people.

Through the prohibition what has been made clear is that the state administration has decided to shut off these eyes and ears of the people. In such circumstances one could only assume that the state government has issues to cover-up in the darkness created by a media black-out. Such an attempt will not go down as an honest attempt to resolve the conflict in Manipur, but is in fact a step backward.

About AHRC: The Asian Human Rights Commission is a regional non-governmental organization monitoring and lobbying human rights issues in Asia. The Hong Kong-based group was founded in 1984.

Asian Human Rights Commission

Asian Human Rights Commission, 19/F, Go-Up Commercial Building, 998 Canton Road, Kowloon, Hongkong S.A.R.

Tel: +(852) - 2698-6339 Fax: +(852) - 2698-6367