



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MN Organization Sounds Alarm with India's President about Persecution of Human Rights Defenders *Testimonies of murders, torture, & disappearance reported by UN Special Rapporteur*

Minneapolis-St. Paul (07.01.14) --- Deeply troubled by reports of false charges lodged against human rights defender Teesta Setalvad in India, The Advocates for Human Rights joins India's Citizens for Justice and Peace to request that India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) take over the investigation and conduct an independent review of criminal charges brought against Setalvad.

Setalvad and her colleagues have been targeted because they advocate for justice for the victims of the mass killings of Muslims that took place during the communal violence in 2002 in Gujarat, India. India's newly-elected prime minister Narendra Modi was Gujarat's chief minister at the time and has been accused of facilitating and condoning the violence.

"The Advocates hopes that India's new leadership and the NHRC will take prompt, effective action to ensure that all people recognized as human rights defenders in India are protected from harassment and intimidation," said Robin Phillips, The Advocates' executive director. "We urge the new administration and the NHRC to uphold constitutional protections for free speech and freedom of association, and to ensure that India is an inclusive society respectful of freedom of religion for all."

Setalvad's work is a critical component of ending impunity and ensuring that the perpetrators of the Gujarat violence are held accountable, according to Phillips. "The criminal charges brought against Ms. Setalvad and others must not be used to harass and intimidate her and other human rights defenders."

The Advocates is concerned about the risks that human rights defenders face in India, according to Phillips. "At the conclusion of the 2011 visit to India by UN Special Rapporteur Margaret Sekaggya, Sekaggya reported that she had 'heard numerous testimonies about male and female human rights defenders, and their families, who have been killed, tortured, ill-treated, disappeared, threatened, arbitrarily arrested and detained, falsely charged, under surveillance, forcibly displaced, or their offices raided and files stolen, because of their legitimate work in upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms.' We share her concern with the plight of the human rights defenders who face particular risks and ostracism because of their work for the rights of marginalized people, including religious minorities."

Human rights defenders working on behalf of other religious minorities face similar risks, according to The Advocates. As an example, Phillips points to the testimony before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in 2000 of John Dayal, Secretary General of the All India Christian Council. "When Dayal returned to India, he faced charges of treason for his testimony. The charges were ultimately dropped, but his experiences demonstrate how criminal charges can be used to harass and intimidate human rights defenders advocating on behalf of religious minorities in India.

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About The Advocates for Human Rights

For more than 30 years, The Advocates for Human Rights has promoted and protected human rights here at home and around the world. The non-profit organization, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, documents human rights abuses, advocates on behalf of individual victims, provides free legal representation to people seeking asylum, works to prevent violence against women and girls, spearheads public policy and legal change, educates about human rights issues, and provides training and technical assistance to address and prevent human rights violations.