

Pakistan International Airline employees mobilize against privatization - Four trade union leaders disappeared following arrest by Rangers

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A Statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission

PAKISTAN: Four trade union leaders disappeared following arrest by Rangers

On February 2, the Pakistan Rangers, who have been given unbridled powers by the Federal government, have taken into custody four trade union leaders. These leaders were picked up from different locations in Karachi. Since then their whereabouts are unknown. The Sindh police deny having the men in their custody; the Rangers are yet to deny the same.

Protesting Pakistan International Airline (PIA) employees fear that the disappeared men will undergo custodial torture and that they will be forced to accept responsibility for the killing of three PIA officers during the protests. As their arrests have not been recorded, the PIA employees fear that if the trade union leaders refuse to confess, they will be extrajudicially killed in a fake encounter, and that Rangers will also falsely claim to have recovered arms and ammunition following the extrajudicial murder.

Since January, PIA Employees have been protesting against the privatization of the national airlines. From February 1, flight operations of the PIA have stopped. The government has threatened that the employment of the 15,000 striking workers will be terminated and that they will be treated severely.

The government has also suddenly implemented the Essential Services Act, which denies employees their labour rights, including the right to strike. On February 2, the government, with the help of the Rangers, shot dead three PIA officers and injured 30 persons, including seven journalists and two women.

In the early hours of February 3, Pakistan Rangers, Sindh Region, took into custody Mr. Hidayat Ullah, President, Peoples Unity of PIA Employees, Mr. Zameer Chandio, Vice President of the same organization, and two union leaders, Mr. Mansoor Dhillio and Mr. Saifullah Larak, from the PIA Township, the residential colony of PIA employees, and from Clifton, Karachi.

The residents of PIA Township informed the media that late in the night numerous Ranger personnel arrived in many trucks and stayed outside the compound walls. Then persons dressed in civilian clothes raided the houses and broke open doors to the union leaders in custody and put them into the trucks.

The Deputy Commissioner has since denied that Karachi police have arrested the leaders; the police have also refused to lodge an FIR against Rangers; later on, the police have agreed to register a case of killing of three officers of PIA. The action of the Rangers fits with prior history. In the past, Secretary General of the Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (PFF), Mr. Saeed Baloch, was arrested and detained incommunicado in similar fashion. He was arrested from the office of the Rangers and kept 10 days incommunicado; later on when civil society and international human rights organizations agitated against his disappearance, the Rangers produced him before the Anti-Terrorist Court.

(See earlier Statement and Urgent Appeal for more information.)

Privatization of national assets, including the PIA and steel mills, has been viewed with suspicion since the idea was floated. PIA's 15,000 employees are at risk of being laid-off from their jobs should the Airline be privatized.

The Federal government has allegedly made an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to privatize the PIA; for this reason, the government is dealing with PIA employees in this fashion and looking to sell all the national airlines assets at through away prices.

It is becoming clear that the beneficiaries of the privatization drive will be two ministers and a group of companies from the Prime Minister's family.

Through the Pakistan Protection Ordinance, 2014, the law enforcement agencies, particularly the Rangers, have been given extra-constitutional powers to arrest and shoot at sight in the name of a drive against terrorists. However, the true situation is otherwise. The Rangers are arresting trade unionists and activists, including journalists. They are arresting all, except the terrorists, who are undertaking the same suicide attacks and attacks on schools that they were undertaking prior to promulgation of the Ordinance.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) urges the Sindh government to recover the missing persons arrested by the Rangers; if there are cases registered against them, these persons must be brought before the court of law.

The Federal government must resolve the demands of PIA employees through dialogue and desist from using violent tactics against the employees. All the arrested employees must be released immediately; the State must follow the rule of law.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)
