

Press release

Pakistan: Freedom of expression and information must be guaranteed

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International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

Paris, 3 January 2008 - The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) strongly condemns the arbitrary detention and assault in Pakistan on a group of persons including the two daughters of Ms. Asma Jahangir, Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP), human rights lawyer and United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief.

On January 2, 2008, armed men from the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q) held the two sisters Ms. Muneeza and Ms. Sulema Jahangir and a group of their friends at gun point. The men, claiming to be police officers, ordered the group to follow them and when the group resisted they were beaten in public and dragged to the PML-Q main election office of the province. Once there, they were beaten again.

The incident happened when Ms. Jahangir's two daughters, together with a group of friends, were making a video clip for a television channel, the Geo TV, for which Ms. Muneeza Jahangir works. They were filming ripped posters and banners of political parties in Lahore city, Punjab province, following the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007.

When Ms. Asma Jahangir heard about the incident she rushed to the party office but was threatened with guns and refused entry. She managed to enter the party office and saw a group including her oldest daughter detained by armed men while the younger sister was being dragged into a separate room. Ms. Jahangir immediately informed the police who reached the scene after some time. The police however took the side of the PML-Q and pressurized the parents of the friends to give them the videotape, which they did. The police furthermore threatened the parents not to report the incident.

The incident took place in a context where President Musharraf is trying to control the agitation following the assassination of the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. The parliamentary elections scheduled for January 8, 2008, have been postponed until February 18. In that perspective, FIDH recalls that freedom of expression and information are crucial elements in any pre-electoral period.

FIDH urges the Pakistani authorities to guarantee, under all circumstances, the physical and psychological integrity of the civilian population, and the right of the Pakistani citizens to freedom of expression, freedom of information and peaceful assembly in accordance with international human rights standards.