

Anti-GE International Activists in Indonesia Freed Unconditionally

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PAN Asia and the Pacific

11 April 2008 : Three harrowing days after they were hijacked by the police, and with their passports confiscated, the 15 international activists attending the WORA events in Jakarta, Indonesia to highlight the threats of genetically engineered (GE) rice, were today freed unconditionally.

Speaking over the phone, Sarojeni Rengam (PAN AP, Malaysia) who was one of the detainees, said that "the unconditional release was possible due to the tremendous support from the People's Food Sovereignty Coalition (KRKP), Women's Solidarity (Solidaritas Perempuan), Alliance of Agrarian Reform Movement (AGRA), the Indonesian Human Rights Commission for Social Justice, Gita Pertiwi and other Indonesian NGOs. We wish to thank them for their whole-hearted support throughout, and particularly the members of the Human Rights Commission and a Member of Parliament for their unstinted support and understanding."

Sharing details of this turn of events, Sarojeni also explained how upon witnessing and being encouraged by the fairly swift response and support from the officials of the Philippine Embassy in Jakarta towards the Filipino delegates, the Malaysian delegates also called on the Malaysian Embassy for assistance. However, the Malaysians were not provided any help and informed that they would have to sort out the situation themselves. The official she spoke to stated that he would only read the report on the incident once it was released. Ironically, the Malaysian Embassy is located in close proximity to the Indonesian Immigration office.

It may be recalled that the 15 detained foreign delegates from Malaysia, Philippines, Korea, Thailand, India and Pakistan were in Indonesia to celebrate the annual Week of Rice Action (WORA) 2008 which brought together farmers, rural communities and activists. This year, WORA 2008 carried the theme "No to GE Rice in Asia" to inform people of the threats to Asia's most vital staple food crop, rice.

Attending a rally outside the palace and then in front of the Ministry of Agriculture, to protest the promotion of GE rice and call for conserving the diverse local rice varieties to ensure people's food security and sovereignty, the delegates were just about to leave for a meeting with ASEAN officials, when the Jakarta Police effectively hijacked their bus to the police station.

The delegates were subjected to intense interrogation for about 14 hours, first at the police station and then at the Immigration Office. They were then allowed to return to their hotel rooms at 3 a.m., but without their passports which were confiscated by the Immigration Office. A day later they were told that they would receive their passports at the airport before their departure, but in a turn of events, these were returned to them last evening, with no comment, query or penalty.

The detention had caused widespread concern among the local organizers of the anti-GE rally and other NGOs, and it was their solidarity which stayed the hand of the Immigration Office which had threatened the foreign delegates with imprisonment or a hefty fine along with deportation.

The freed foreign activists are expected to return to their countries today.

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