

LETTERS

NIYAMAT MURDER-I

We condemn in the strongest possible terms the recent murder of National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) activist Niyamat Ansari in Kope gram panchayat, Jharkhand, and a similar attempt on the same day, March 2 on the life of his associate Bhukhan Singh.

The murder was the culmination of a series of acts of harassment, including at least one earlier attempt on their lives. Ansari and Singh fearlessly continued to fight for the rights of NREGA workers and stood up against the nexus of corruption and crime in the area. Ansari was killed just a few days after he and others exposed a flagrant NREGA scam in Rankikalan gram panchayat.

We are dismayed by the insidious allegations that have been made about Ansari in sections of the mainstream media, attempting to project him as a 'criminal' to divert attention from the real issues and culprits. These reports were factually incorrect and the concerned publication carried an apology the following day.

We are disturbed to learn from reliable sources that the murder was executed by a local Maoist squad. In fact, the South Latehar sub-zonal committee of the CPI (Maoist) itself claimed responsibility for it and attempted to justify the murder by making absurd allegations such as Ansari and Singh being police informers. Are we to understand from this incident that there is truth in the rumour of a nexus between the local Maoist squad of that area and corrupt contractors involved in the loot of NREGA funds?

We demand the immediate arrest of the prime suspects (named in the FIR), compensation for Ansari's family, protection for Singh, and a CBI inquiry into Ansari's murder. We also demand an apology and explanation from the central committee of the CPI (Maoist) and a guarantee of safety for Bhukhan Singh who is still 'wanted' by the sub-zonal committee. No explanation, however, can justify the brutal murder of a defenceless person, let alone someone who was bravely fighting for people's rights. This is a wholly reprehensible act and all those responsible for it must be punished.

Jean Dreze, Aruna Roy and Arundhati Roy

NIYAMAT MURDER-II

Condemning the brutal murder of social activist Niyamat Ansari, members of different people's organizations and senior social and human rights activists have demanded judicial probe in the case. To protest the murder which took place on 2nd March, dozens of activists gathered at Albert Ekka Chowk, Randhi, in the evening of March 3 and staged a protest march.

According to Gurjit Singh, Niyamat was picked up from his house and beaten mercilessly. He succumbed to injuries before his relatives could take him to the nearest hospital in Latehar.

Niyamat Ansari, a resident of Kope Gram Panchayat (Manika Block), has been working for the rights of NREGA workers in this area during the last few years. Together with other local activists, he fearlessly exposed many cases of fraud in NREGA. On 20 February 2011, Niyamat and his friends exposed a case of brazen embezzlement of NREGA funds in Rankikala Gram Panchayat. In response to this report, an FIR was lodged against the main culprit, Kailash Sahu, former BDO of Manika. More than two lakhs of rupees were also

recovered from him and his accomplice, the Panchayat Sevak of Rankikala. While the BDO and Panchayat Sevak were caught because their names are on the fudged records, Shankar Dubey, a notoriously corrupt local contractor is still free.

A Reader, Ranchi

VADDITANDRA FIRING

The inevitable has happened, police opened fire on the peacefully protesting villagers in Vadditandra village and killed three villagers and critically injured at least 25 people on February 25 afternoon in Srikakulam District, Andhra Pradesh. Contrary to the media reports the villages around the Kakrapalli area have been threatened and terrorised for past one week. The situation has been tense due to heavy presence of the police, who had stopped the entry of people from outside, even local media was not allowed and didn't allow the weekly bazaar to be held and forcing other shops to remain shut. When members of Paryavaran Suraksha Samiti, Sompeta–NAPM tried to visit the villages with medicines and food they were not allowed to enter and threatened. Srikakulam police used the same tactics of terrorising and threatening as they did last year in Sompeta in mid-July.

The police also fired tear gas shells causing fire to nearly 100 huts of fisherfolks in the Vadditandra village inciting people's anger. Police provoked the villagers and then opened fire with live munitions killing and injuring in the process. It is also alleged that police set fire to their own vehicles in order to justify their action and implicate villagers in burning of the vehicles.

In spite of NAPM's complaint to the Chairperson of AP State Human Rights Commission and Director General of Police, the situation was allowed to reach this stage. Even attempts at dialogue failed and the district administration seemed to be hell bent on terrorising and breaking the resistance against the Thermal Power Plant. Earlier Swami Agnivesh also spoke to the Chief Minister after the firing on 25th February but nothing seems to have worked. The opposition to the thermal power plants in the area is an indication of the people's resistance to the 'development' (destruction) being thrust upon them from above. Two incidents of firing and sacrifice of life by people for protecting their land, water and their livelihood should be an indication enough for the government that people don't want this destruction. They would rather prefer to live in darkness than pay for electricity by their blood and livelihood. Unless and until Gram Sabha is involved in the planning of any infrastructure project scenes like this will continue to be repeated and the conflict will keep growing.

Medha Patkar, Thomas Kocherry, Sandeep Pandey, Maj Gen S G Vombatkere (Retd), Prafulla Samantara, Ulka Mahajan, Roma, P Chennaiah, Ramakrishna Raju, Ajay Kumar, Saraswati Kavula, Suniti S R, Faisal Khan, Vimal Bhai, Anand Mazgaonkar, Pervin Jehangir, Madhuresh Kumar