

Relatives of victims request withdrawal of Forces Act

- By Vishwa Mohan

New Delhi, Feb. 19: Thokchom Doren, alias Naba, 26, was arrested by a team of 33 Assam Rifles without an arrest memo on June 9, 2004. The next day, his bullet-ridden corpse was found at Tejpur Lamkhai in Manipur.

The personnel of 19 Assam Rifles took away Khundrakpam Tejkumar Singh, 24, in their vehicle at a Yaosang sports meet in Imphal on March 9, 2004. The next day, his body was handed over to the Lamlai police station. The inquest report shows mark of severe torture.

Thangjam Binoy Singh, 20, along with a minor boy, was taken by 28 Assam Rifles from his house at Thoubal Charangpat Road on March 6 last year. The local people complained to the police and later to the state chief minister who subsequently inquired into the matter and found that the boy was already dead. The next day, there was an FIR lodged saying that the AR man was ambushed by militants and in the process three people, including Thangjam, were shot dead in the encounter. However, the superintendent of police found that the deceased had no criminal antecedent and concluded that it was an extra-judicial killing.

These are examples of a number of incidents in which the people of Manipur had become victims allegedly in the hands of security forces. Relatives of these victims on Saturday narrated these episodes before the People's Tribunal and blamed the existing Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, for the excesses committed by security forces in the state.

They also highlighted the provisions of the act, saying it vaguely defined special powers to armed forces to arrest and use force on the basis of mere suspicion. The participants later appealed to the government to withdraw the act, saying it had given "blanket powers" to the security forces to "commit excesses".

The tribunal was organised to record the depositions of victims who have suffered under the act and to investigate the impact of the legislation on human rights and civil liberties.

Participating organisations in the tribunal included the Human Rights Law Network, People's Union for Civil Liberty, Asian Centre for Human Rights, All-India Students Association and Manipuri Students Union. About 10 victims and relatives deposed before the tribunal of Justice Rajinder Sacher (Retd), Justice Vinod Shanker Dave (Retd), Prof. Kamal Mitra Chenoy of the Jawaharlal Nehru University and Prof. N. Sanajaoba of the Guwahati University.

After hearing the episodes narrated by the victims and their relatives, Justice Sacher said, "There is no justification in continuing with the ugly act. We will not accept any amendment to it. The act has fostered a climate in which the law enforcing agencies use excessive force and set a pattern of apparently unlawful killings of 'suspected' civilians."

He said the AFSPA review committee should not "tinker" with the law by recommending amendments since a recommendation would not serve the state. "Tinkering with the law will not help the situation in Manipur," Justice Sacher said.

All these victims had earlier also deposed before a five-member committee which was constituted by the government in November last year to review the provisions of the controversial Act. The committee, headed by Justice Jeevan Reddy (Retd), had heard the victims when it recently visited Imphal.