

10 March 2021

### **India: Arbitrary arrest of Adivasi woman human rights defender Hidme Markam**

On 9 March 2021, woman human rights defender **Hidme Markam** was arrested by Chhattisgarh police on several charges, including charges under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) anti-terrorism law in relation to her alleged involvement in Maoist activities. The woman human rights defender was arrested during an event in Dantewada in the State of Chhattisharh to mark International Working Women's Day, and to protest the custodial torture and sexual violence by police against Adivasi women in the State. Later that day, following her arrest, Hidme Markam appeared before a Magistrate and was remanded for 14 days in Jagadalapur prison.

[Hidme Markam](#) is an Adivasi woman human rights defender advocating for indigenous rights, against police and state violence, and the impact of mining in the State of Chhattisgarh. She is the convenor of the Jail Bandi Rihai Committee, a platform which advocates for the release of thousands of Adivasi persons, particularly youths, criminalized and branded as Naxals and held in pre-trial detention. Hidme Markam is an anti-mining campaigner, focusing on projects led by large corporations such as Adani Pvt Ltd., which threaten to destroy a sacred Adivasi hill, considered a local deity by the community. She also campaigns against the detrimental ecological impact of mining for the local area, resulting in the degradation of land and large bodies of water, and the destruction of forests in the region. The woman human rights defender has also criticised the expanding presence of military, police and para-military in the State. In 2019, she participated in a public campaign against the establishment of a police camp in Potali by the Special Task Force and District Reserve Guards. Advocating for the promotion of women's rights and against physical and sexual violence against women by police and military officers is central to Hidme Markam's work. Women in the State, especially from Adivasi communities, have been disproportionately affected by violence and discrimination by officials.

On 9 March, Hidme Markam participated in an event at Sameli, Dantewada to mark International Working Women's Day and to commemorate the death of two young women, one of whom was confirmed to have died whilst in police custody, in Chhattisgarh. The two women were reportedly subjected to torture and sexual violence by officials whilst detained. Police officers arrested the woman human rights defender at the event where approximately 300 villagers, community leaders and other women human rights defenders from the Jail Bandi Rihai Committee and Chhattisgarh Mahila Adhikar Manch were present. The Sub-Divisional Magistrate also witnessed the arrest, having arrived at the event to engage with those attending. Fellow human rights defenders and community members who attempted to oppose the woman human rights defenders arrest were violently pushed aside by the police officers. Multiple cases have been filed against Hidme Markam on charges under the regressive Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and others, a law that is routinely used against human rights defenders in India response to their legitimate human rights activities. The exact charges against Hidme Markam are not yet known, and she remains in Jagadalapur prison, and has been allowed access to her lawyer since her arrest.

The woman human rights defender has engaged directly with high ranking state officials including the Chief Minister, Governor and Superintendent of Police of Chhattisgarh to seek redress, realise basic fundamental rights and protection from harm for local communities affected by the mining activities in the region. She has worked peacefully with local authorities to address violations against these vulnerable and oppressed communities, and represent the voices of members of the communities. Her arrest is in direct reprisal for her work, challenging powerful forces within the State, such as police, military and corporate interests. As a result of this work, the woman human rights defender has faced threats and harassment in the past, culminating in her arrest on 9 March.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arrest of woman human rights defender Hidme Markam as it believes she is being targeted as a result of her human rights work, advocating for the protection of the rights of Adivasi communities, especially Adivasi women in Chhattisgarh. Not only her arrest, but also the decision to carry out the arrest during an event marking the custodial torture of and sexual violence against two young Adivasi women, is particularly concerning. Front Line Defenders reiterates its concern regarding the use of the UAPA against Hidme Markam and other human rights defenders in India, aimed at silencing them and their efforts to promote and protect human rights in the country.

**Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in India to:**

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Hidme Markam and drop all charges against her, as Front Line Defenders believes she is being targeted solely as a result of her legitimate and peaceful human rights work;
2. Guarantee that the woman human rights defender continues to have access to her lawyer, family members, and ensure her safety at all times;
3. Cease the police, military and judicial harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders in Chhattisgarh;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in India are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals, and free of all restrictions including police and judicial harassment.

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