

India gives Amnesty a rough time

by Ramtanu Maitra

After much hesitation and debate, New Delhi has allowed a four-member team of Amnesty International, headed by former director general Ian Martin, to come to India to discuss human rights issues. This is the first visit of Amnesty personnel since 1978, and Union Home Minister S.B. Chavan has told newsmen categorically that Amnesty will not be allowed to tour the country.

By allowing Martin and company to visit Delhi, the government has made it clear that the mission is for discussion alone and that Amnesty's demand to visit Punjab, Kashmir, and the Northeast—parts of India where some secessionist activities are continuing—has been turned down. According to sources, the government's decision to allow Amnesty to come to Delhi came about following reports that Amnesty is now willing to investigate the violation of human rights by various terrorist groups.

As it turned out, Martin's visit was far from smooth. A day before he arrived on Nov. 15, the *Pioneer*, a daily founded by Rudyard Kipling in the 19th century and now published from Delhi and other cities, put out an item based on intelligence reports that several top-notch Sikh terrorists, based in the United Kingdom, have become active members in Amnesty International and are now championing human rights around the world.

According to *Pioneer*, the Home Ministry has identified active members belonging to the Babbar Khalsa International (BKI), the Dal Khalsa, the four factions of the International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF), and the Council of Khalistan, working now on behalf of Amnesty. While the BKI has 20 active members in Amnesty; Dal Khalsa has 9; the Pargat Singh faction of the ISYF, 50; the Tarsem group of the ISYF, 7; the Damdami Taksal faction of the ISYF, 50; and the Azad faction of the ISYF, 15. Council of Khalistan leader Ajit Singh Khera and the council's sub-group, Sikh Human Rights International, led by Iqbal Singh, nephew of one of the first proponents of Khalistan, Jagjit Singh Chauhan, are also now firmly ensconced under the protective wings of Amnesty.

While Martin and his cohorts may argue that Amnesty International is a private organization and hence anyone can be its member, the presence of so many Sikh terrorists among

its active cadre renders such arguments ineffective. Moreover, New Delhi remembers the statement of the Sri Lankan President, Ranasinghe Premadasa, who had labeled Amnesty a "terrorist organization" back in 1991 for its alleged promotion of terrorist causes in Sri Lanka.

Report discredited

If the *Pioneer* revelations gave Martin and his gang heartburn, it was only the beginning. Earlier, Amnesty's report, titled "India—Torture, Rape, and Death in Custody," came under heavy attack through some excellent efforts of the Indian High Commissioner in Britain, L.M. Singhvi. High Commissioner Singhvi had followed up the report's allegations by providing the U.K.-based organization with fact sheets pertaining to 114 alleged deaths in custody and 11 cases of rape and torture. New Delhi showed that in 46 of those cases, the allegations are baseless. In 37 others, it was contended on the *prima facie* evidence that some abuses had occurred and that criminal proceedings had been initiated in court against police officials. In 10 other cases, police officials were subjected to departmental actions.

In the rest of the cases, New Delhi showed that Amnesty had either made up fictitious names as victims or it was fed gross misinformation by its paid informers based in India. High Commissioner Singhvi, however, did not stop at that, but carried the battle further when he sent copies of these fact sheets to all those British Members of Parliament who champion human rights and are closet backers of Amnesty. Smarting from Singhvi's offensive, unprecedented as it is, Amnesty has launched a broadside against India and has organized exhibitions in several European cities, including Amsterdam and Prague, depicting the Indian torture victims.

Anti-terrorist extradition treaty

Amnesty received another major setback in recent months. In September, the British government signed an extradition treaty and an agreement on the confiscation of terrorist finances. The treaty, which could hurt some of Amnesty's illustrious clients, went rough despite some hectic lobbying undertaken by Amnesty with the help of its friends and sympathizers in the British House of Commons. The extradition treaty with India is the only one of its kind that Her Majesty's government has signed with any non-European nation, and the agreement on the confiscation of terrorist finances is the first such agreement that Britain has signed with any other country.

At the same time, New Delhi has apparently become aware of the clout human rights groups wield and their ability to interfere in sovereign nation-states' affairs. Home Minister Chavan has indicated that the Indian government will set up a human rights commission of its own, and will abide by its findings.