

# **Pakistan/Okara: Military henchmen kill three farmers and injure 27 others**

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## **ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION - URGENT APPEALS PROGRAMME**

Urgent Appeal Case: AHRC-UAC-039-2009

8 April 2009

Dear friends,

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has received information that three farmers have been murdered and 27 others injured by a military-sponsored gang, after a violent land dispute in the Kulyana villages, Okara district, Punjab. The peasants were chasing a group of armed men who had abducted a field worker and were threatening to grab 50 acres of agricultural land, when three of them were shot dead. The main perpetrator is reportedly being protected by the Pakistan army in a military hospital.

### **CASE DETAILS:**

According to the Labour Education Foundation, Lahore, a local land owner Mr. Roshan Shah, along with more than 20 others armed with pistols, sticks and clubs, abducted Mr. Manzoor, a farmer, on the morning of April 5, 2009 while he was watering his crops. The land had once been let by a military official, the now-retired Brigadier Afsar Khan, and the peasants were told that the Brigadier wanted to continue to earn money by leasing out the land, despite having had no claim to it for two years. The land is at Chak 28/2-R, Kulyana military estate, Okara district, Punjab province.

Encouraged by other cases in which peasants have successfully challenged military land grabbers, those working at Chak 28/2-R told the police and then chased the men. When they arrived in the village where Manzoor was being held, Shah and the other assailants shot at them. Tenant Abdul Rahim and his son Muhammad Abbas were killed instantly, while Amir Ali died later at Jinnah Hospital, Lahore. Of the rest, 27 had bullet wounds, including three women. Those injured, which include Suleman, Amin, Tanvir, Ashraf, Muhammad Ali, Bahsir, Iqbal, Anwar, Ashraf, Javed, Habib, Munawar Bibi, Naziran and Kulsoom Bibi, were admitted to the Okara district head quarter (DHQ) Hospital.

At the hospital the injured were joined by other tenants of the Kulyana villages. After collecting the bodies, they took them to the Okara Bypass on the GT Road in a procession, where they blocked it for two hours and burned tires, demanding the arrest of the culprits. When the local administration and local MPs assured them that arrests would be made, the protesters ended their blockade.

The demonstration pressured police into filing a first information report (FIR) against Roshan Shah—a notorious land grabber in the area—his son and nephew among others, and a number of arrests have been made, but according to the Labour Education Foundation, Shah is being protected by highly placed military officials. These include General Mohammad Ali, who oversees military farms in the province and Major Naimat, who is head of the board of management of the military

farms at Okara. Under special treatment, Roshan Shah has been admitted to Central Military Hospital (CMH) Okara, Punjab province, where he reportedly remains at liberty.

The peasants have continued to demonstrate on the streets of different cities, and are planning a wheel jam (vehicle) strike in Lahore on April 17. There was around a 10 thousand-strong turn out for the funeral prayers of the three dead men.

#### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:**

Farms were built across Punjab by the British in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century for the use of the colonial army—mainly to cultivate fodder and rear domestic animals. The leases of these farms started to run out in 1985, with most back under the provincial government by 2000 and being worked by farmers. However in recent decades military officers have been profiting by illegally sub leasing the land to contractors; they have been reluctant to give up the extra income, even when their leases have expired.

The military authorities have been pressing the Punjab Board of Revenue to transfer the ownership of these lands from the peasants to the military, often in the name of national security (whether the land is in border areas or not). Where this fails land is often grabbed from famers by force, before the workers are placed under contracts with the army.

Currently about 68, 000 acres in Punjab are managed illegally in the name of Okara Remote Military Farms, operated by an army general Mohammad Ali. However in the villages of the Kulyana the farmers have been working under the contract system, and are therefore cleared from the land when an officer wishes to profit from its sub-let.

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\* <http://www.humanrights.asia/news/urgent-appeals/AHRC-UAC-039-2009>