

To:

Mr. Sarbananda Sonowal  
Honourable Chief Minister of Assam,  
Government of Assam

13 April 2020

Respected Sir,

**RE: Politically motivated charges against Indigenous and peasant leaders in Assam**

The ICCA Consortium is extremely concerned about the arbitrary arrest of Indigenous peoples' rights and peasants' rights activists Pranab Doley and Soneshwar Narah (of farmers' rights organisation Jeepal Krishak Shramik Sangha, JKSS) on 7 April 2020 in the Golaghat district of Assam, India. These arrests appear to be politically motivated with the intention of intimidating and silencing two community leaders who have dedicated their lives to social justice and supporting Indigenous peoples, forest dwellers and peasant communities in Assam.

We understand that on 6 April 2020, Pranab and Soneshwar filed an official letter of complaint on behalf of JKSS with your good offices and registered a First Information Report (FIR) in the Bokakhat Police Station regarding the alleged siphoning by authorities of approximately 800 kg of rice from the Public Distribution System intended for marginalised communities in need during the COVID-19 pandemic, including those living around Kaziranga National Park. On 7 April, Pranab and Soneshwar were summoned to the Bokakhat Police Station on the pretext of inquiring into their complaint. Instead, they were arrested based on an FIR filed in June 2018, on which no action had been taken until then. This selective application of the law in the context of alleged criminal corruption raises serious concerns about their rights to due process and protection against judicial harassment and criminalisation of human rights defenders. Pranab and Soneshwar are currently in Golaghat jail under judicial custody, and awaiting a second bail hearing (planned for 18 April) after the first bail application was denied – a decision that also appears to be politically motivated.

The arrest and continued detention of these peaceful Indigenous and human rights defenders is especially alarming in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, both because of the vital importance of emergency food delivery to vulnerable communities in a time of grave need, and because of the danger to the persons detained, given the elevated risk of infection in crowded and confined spaces. This goes against national measures and global best practices of decongesting jails and prisons to reduce outbreaks of this highly contagious virus. We are concerned about the health and safety of Pranab and Soneshwar and call for their immediate release without conditions. Releasing them immediately will also help reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19 to Indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities living on the fringes of Kaziranga National Park.

The ICCA Consortium is a grassroots, member-based association that advocates for appropriate recognition and support for territories and areas conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities (in short, ICCAs—territories of life). These territories and areas are crucial strongholds of biological and cultural diversity and sources of health, wellbeing and pride for the communities who take care of them. Pranab Doley was recently nominated to be an Honorary member of the ICCA Consortium for his commitment and continuous efforts to support Indigenous and local

communities and peasants in Assam. He will soon become part of a vibrant membership of around 150 organisational Members and 375 individual Honorary members in 80 countries around the world.

The ICCA Consortium joins a growing chorus of organisations and individuals expressing support for Pranab and Soneshwar and condemning their politically motivated arrests and judicial harassment. We urge your good offices and other relevant authorities in India to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Pranab Doley and Soneshwar Narah, cease all acts of intimidation and judicial harassment against them and their organisation, and withdraw the FIR of June 2018.
2. Guarantee in all circumstances the ability of Indigenous and human rights defenders such as Pranab and Soneshwar to carry out their peaceful work in support of marginalised communities and territories of life without the threat or fear of reprisals, harassment, criminalisation or other restrictions.
3. Ensure Indigenous peoples and communities in India have safe, healthy and equitable access to all basic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, including reliable and up-to-date information in local languages, clean water and sanitation, safe production and local exchange of healthy food, and protection against excesses of power such as police violence and intimidation.
4. Appropriately recognise and support territories of life and the Indigenous peoples and communities who take care of them, including their conservation practices and efforts to secure food, water and energy sovereignty for long-term self-sufficiency and wellbeing.

Pranab Doley and Soneshwar Narah are respected local leaders. Their honourable intentions and peaceful and compassionate work are needed now more than ever during the COVID-19 pandemic. We remain attentive to news of their immediate release so they can continue supporting their communities in this unprecedented time.

Sincerely,



Teodoro B. Baguilat, Jr.  
President, ICCA Consortium



Holly Jonas, LL.M.  
Global Coordinator, ICCA Consortium

CC:

Mr. Bibhash Chandra Modi, IAS, Deputy Commissioner, Golaghat District, Assam  
Mr. Pushpraj Singh, IPS, Superintendent of Police, Golaghat District, Assam  
Justice Surendra Nath Bhargava, Chairman, State Human Rights Commission of Assam  
Justice (retd.) HL Dattu, Chairperson, National Human Rights Commission of India  
Mr. Michel Forst, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders  
Ms. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples