

NGO workers held for Mahato links

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KOLKATA, 5 OCT [2009]: Two activists of a city-based non-governmental organisation were arrested this evening by a team of officers of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) for alleged links with Police Santras Birodhi Public Committee leader, Mr Chhatradhar Mahato. The state government, a few hours before, had approved the proposal of West Midnapore police to frame charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, UAPA, against Mr Mahato. Mr Ajoy Ranade, DIG CID (Operations), confirmed that the two men ~ Mr Raja Sarkhel and Mr Prasun Chatterjee ~ had been arrested from Jadavpur this evening. The two are also being charged under the provisions of the UAPA, he added.

Both Mr Sarkhel and Mr Chatterjee are members of the Lalgarh Sanhati Mancha ~ a city-based group of intellectuals that supported the tribal movement in Lalgarh. The arrest comes days after the chief secretary, Mr Ashok M Chakrabarti, hinted that action will be taken against those who had links with banned organisations.

CID officers said Mr Sarkhel and Mr Chatterjee had met Mr Mahato several times, both in Lalgarh and in the city, and had funded the PSBPC on several occasions. Earlier today, state home secretary Mr Ardhendu Sen, told reporters at Writers' Buildings that police have collected enough evidence to establish charges under the UAPA against Mahato. "This is the reason why approval has been given to frame charges under the Act," Mr Sen said. The home secretary played safe on the question of interrogating some of the intellectuals who had supported the PSBPC movement in JUNGLEMahal. "We did not mention the name of any of the intellectuals. Investigation is still on so I won't be able to say anything in this regard right now," said Mr Sen.

In another development, a group of intellectuals led by writer Mahasweta Devi has lodged a complaint with the state Human Rights Commission against senior CID officers, alleging that the CID had violated the Supreme Court's mandatory guidelines while arresting Mr Mahato.

Mr Sujat Bhadra, a spokesperson of the group, alleged that the CID officers involved had committed a penal offense by arresting Chhatradhar in the guise of journalists. He said prolonged interrogation of Mr Mahato and his aide had resulted in sleep deprivation, which is also a violation of anti-torture conventions, apart from which Mr Mahato's lawyer and doctor are not being allowed to meet him.

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