



WORLD MOVEMENT *for* DEMOCRACY

Confronting the Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century

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13 August , 2007

Her Excellency Shrimati Pratibha Patil
President of the Republic of India
Rashtrapati Bhavan
New Delhi 110 001
India

Your Excellency President Patil –

On behalf of the Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy, a global network of democracy activists, practitioners, scholars and policy makers, we write to condemn the recent brutal murders of Ms. Dhoolla Ratnam, a Panchayat member of Srungavruksham village of East Godavari district in the State of Andhra Pradesh, and her eight-year old grandson, Veerababu. On 15 July, one year following Ms. Ratnam's election to the Panchayat, her house was set on fire while she, her grandson and her visitor, Ms. Taupati Achyamma, were asleep in bed. Ms. Ratnam and her grandson died in the fire; Ms. Achyamma escaped with her life, but remains bed-ridden due to the severity of her injuries.

We are informed by our Steering Committee colleague from India, Dr. George Mathew, Director of the Institute of Social Sciences (New Delhi), who visited Srungavruksham village, that Ms. Ratnam's immolation was the culmination of over a year of constant harassment and serious threats by those who oppose women's participation in formal democratic bodies, an issue with which we understand you are personally concerned. When Ms. Ratnam, a member of the Yadava caste, first filed her nomination to the Panchayat she was met with opposition from the landlord class, and one of their spokesmen offered her money to withdraw her nomination, which she rightfully declined. Once elected a member of the Panchayat, she challenged the corrupt practices she witnessed several times. As a result, on one occasion her two *Kuppas* were set on fire, and on other occasions her life was verbally threatened; soon after, she lost it, along with her grandson.

Dr. Mathew further reports that since these reprehensible murders have taken place, the State Government has provided no relief to the surviving members of Ms. Ratnam's family, nor has it offered any help to Ms. Achyamma. Moreover, there has been no special Panchayat meeting to note Ms. Ratnam's passing as an elected official or to offer condolences to her family. We therefore respectfully ask you and the Government of India to ensure that:

- Ms. Achyamma's life be saved at all cost and that she be given protection;
- adequate government assistance be provided to both Ms. Ratnam's family and Ms. Achyamma and her family, to which they are entitled;
- a formal condolences meeting be held to take note of the unfortunate tragedy in a manner befitting her position;
- this incident be investigated and exposed comprehensively; and that
- opposition to women's participation in the democratic process be institutionally addressed at all levels of government and society.

Thank you very much for your kind consideration of our concerns.

Sincerely,

Ayo Obe
Member (Nigeria) and Chair
Steering Committee

Mahnaz Afkhami
Member (Iran), Steering Committee
President, Women's Learning Partnership for
Rights, Development and Peace