

Rights groups rally around Pakistan lawyer under threat
By Stephanie Nebehay
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Major human rights groups called on Pakistan on Wednesday to protect a prominent lawyer and investigate allegations that Pakistani military and intelligence agencies have plotted to kill her. Asma Jahangir, who has pursued human rights cases at home and abroad for more than 30 years, told Pakistani television on Monday that she had learned from a credible source about a planned assassination attempt by the highest levels of the security establishment. There was no immediate comment from Pakistani security officials.

"Pakistani authorities should urgently and thoroughly investigate the alleged plot against Asma Jahangir and hold all those responsible to account, regardless of position or rank," Ali Dayan Hasan, Pakistan director at the New York-based group Human Rights Watch, said in a statement. Navi Pillay, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, on an official visit to Pakistan, visited Jahangir in her home in Lahore on Wednesday "to discuss this alarming development and show her support", her office said.

"We have just now discussed it with the Prime Minister," Pillay's spokesman Rupert Colville told Reuters by email on Wednesday following Pillay's talks with Yusuf Raza Gilani in Islamabad. "The federal government is also providing her with extra security," Colville said. Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) said Jahangir has been a critic of the military's policies in the insurgency-hit province of Baluchistan and its alleged violations there including killings, enforced disappearances and torture. "Asma Jahangir has fought tirelessly as a member of the legal profession to protect human rights in Pakistan and around the world, at considerable peril to herself," Wilder Tayler, ICJ's Secretary General, said in a statement.

"So when she speaks publicly of a credible threat, the government of Pakistan should take it very seriously and ensure that she is protected," he said. Jahangir, a founder of Pakistan's independent Human Rights Commission and the first woman to lead the Supreme Court Bar Association, received repeated threats for raising the issue of corruption in the legal arena, Human Rights Watch said. She served as U.N. special investigator on extrajudicial executions and later as U.N. special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief during the period of 1998 to 2010, reporting on violations worldwide to the U.N. Human Rights Council.

In recent months, Jahangir has "been at odds with the Pakistani military in a series of high profile stand-offs," Human Rights Watch said. She has defended Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States Husain Haqqani, accused of drafting a memo that accused the army of plotting a coup. He has denied the charge. "As defence lawyer in the 'Memogate' affair, Jahangir raised serious reservations about lack of due process in legal proceedings against Haqqani and threats to his life from the military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)," Human Rights Watch said.

Jahangir, the frequent target of harassment and threats during her career, was placed under house arrest by former military president Pervez Musharraf in 2007. She has survived "multiple assassination attempts", most recently in 2006, according to the Geneva-based ICJ.