

The people take on police reform: Peoples' campaign for better policing begins with national roundtable

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Seventy activists, police and government representatives from across India will come together today at a national workshop in Delhi to kick off a people's campaign for better policing. The workshop, which is being convened by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, comes at a critical time for police reform, as state governments scramble to pass new laws and make reform a reality, in line with directions given by the Supreme Court late last year.

Reform of the police is long overdue. Police laws date back to 1861 and support a repressive, brutal and inefficient system of policing that is at odds with India's modern democracy, the expectations of the community and the needs of the officers who tread beats. After 25 years of bureaucratic debate, community pain and endless rounds of government committees and commissions, the reform process got a shot in the arm in September last year, when the Supreme Court brought down a decision in a long running public interest case, requiring the state governments to make reform a reality. At the same time, a union-level Police Act Drafting Committee, chaired by Dr Soli Sorabjee, presented a proposed model law to the central government that set out a new vision of policing in India.

Earlier this month, each state government was required to tell the Supreme Court what it had done to make police reform a reality. Government action has been patchy – in some states, broad scale reform is ushering in a new era of accountable, people centred policing, while other states continue to look backwards and resist change. A chart comparing the response of each state to the Supreme Court directives – and analysing whether they have complied with the Supreme Court directives or not – is available on the CHRI website (www.humanrightsinitiative.org).

It is absolutely critical that as police reform shifts into high gear that community consultation and public participation are an integral part of the process. This means that governments must actively engage with their constituencies, and individuals and groups must actively engage with their politicians and law-makers.

The national workshop is an important first step to ensuring public participation in reform.

Today, delegates will consider the challenges facing policing, how the Supreme Court directives address these and the varied responses of state governments. Tomorrow will take the debate further, with an in depth analysis and debate around the different approaches to reform. Delegates will look to good and bad examples of new law, including the Model Police Act 2006, the Bihar Police Act 2007, the Kerala Police (Amendment) Ordinance 2007 and the Tripura Police Bill, 2007. The analysis will include a discussion of how police discipline themselves, how they deal with complaints from the public, how politics is kept out of policing and how tangible, positive change can be made at an everyday, street policing level. Afternoon sessions will focus on small group discussions around catalysing and sustaining a peoples' campaign for better policing.

Police reform is now a reality in India – but the nature of that reform is still uncertain. Governments have begun to articulate their positions and initiate their processes. Public discussion, involvement and engagement is the next critical ingredient for successful reform. This weekend's workshop is key to ensuring that public involvement in reform becomes as real as the reform process itself.

For more information on the Supreme Court directives and the Model Police Act, visit the CHRI website (www.humanrightsinitiative.org). For more information on the Peoples' Campaign for Better Policing National Workshop, contact Shobha Sharma at CHRI (shobha@humanrightsinitiative.org).

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, international NGO working for the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth.