

## **Two leading Pakistani lawyers to receive 3rd Asian Human Rights Defender Award**

### *Asian Human Rights Commission*

*Statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission: AHRC-STM-022-2008*

Today, 23 January 2008, the Board of Directors of the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) is pleased to announce that it has decided to grant its 3rd Asian Human Rights Defender Award jointly to Munir Malik, former President of the Pakistan Supreme Court Bar Association, together with his successor, Choudhry Aitezaz Ahsan.

The award is in recognition of the historic leadership role that the lawyers of Pakistan have had in fighting against military dictatorship there during the past year, spearheading the protests against General Pervez Musharraf's unconstitutional removal and illegal confinement of Chief Justice Iftikhar M Chaudhary on 9 March 2007.

The lawyers' movement has attracted interest and immense support of people from all walks of life in Pakistan and the scheme to remove the chief justice was thwarted, although he was again illegally removed from his post, along with 55 other senior judges, including 13 from the Supreme Court, when Musharraf seized power through an unconstitutional declaration of emergency rule at the end of the year.

The lawyers, judges and others of Pakistan have been making great sacrifices to defend the independence of their judiciary as a last bastion against the otherwise unchallenged power of the military. This struggle is continuing today.

The 3rd Asian Human Rights Defenders Award is thus awarded to these two leading lawyers both in recognition of their personal sacrifices as well as to them as representatives of the entire people's movement against dictatorship in Pakistan.

For his leading role in fighting against the removal of the chief justice and promoting the struggle for an independent judiciary, Munir Malik was arrested and drugged, causing him to suffer renal failure. He is still recovering today. Choudhry Aitezaz Ahsan has been kept under detention since the emergency was imposed on 3 November 2007.

The two lawyers' leadership, courage and unswerving commitment to their profession, their integrity and their country are strongly symbolic of their cause. In them we acknowledge and award all of the lawyers, judges and others who have refused to bow down to the immoral pressure of military force, including all of those dismissed from their posts and kept in their houses. They stand today as the representatives of civilized society and institutional commonsense in Pakistan, in stark contrast to the barbarism and primitive feudal order represented by Musharraf and his allies.

By making this award we also again emphasize that the international community is obliged to support the people of Pakistan at a time that they are faced with the very real threat of being subjected to the sole authority of a merciless and self-interested executive authority. We call upon others to join with us in open expression of support for these lawyers and their struggle.

### **ABOUT THE AWARDEES**



**Munir A Malik** was President of the Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan from October 2006 to October 2007. He has fought for the independence of the judiciary and independence of the legal profession consistently. When Chief Justice Iftikhar M Chaudhary was removed unconstitutionally by General Musharraf, he was among the senior lawyers who openly defied the move and led his peers in their struggle to oppose it, which swelled into a massive outpouring of dissent against military dictatorship from people in all quarters and professions. As a result, he was arrested and imprisoned. While held in the notorious Attock Jail under supervision of the ISI, the military intelligence agency, he was given drugs that he was told were painkillers. Thereafter he suffered renal failure. His life was saved only due to massive local and international pressure that led to the authorities acquiescing to the needed medical intervention. He is still undergoing treatment.



**Choudhry Aitezaz Ahsan** is the serving President of the Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan and he too has consistently fought for the independence of judiciary and lawyers. He also led the protests against the attack on the chief justice. He successfully represented the chief justice in the case for his reappointment, despite heavy pressure being brought upon him not to do so. He was put under house arrest together with senior judges and other lawyers when the emergency was imposed illegally on 3 November 2007 and remains there to this day.

#### **ABOUT THE ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER AWARD**

The Asian Human Rights Commission recognizes that human rights and liberties are expanded most by persons willing to make a sacrifice in the defence of these principles. Society is obliged to recognize and honor such sacrifices. For these reasons it has chosen to present awards to human rights defenders at opportune moments. Nominees must be exemplary human rights defenders with whom--or on behalf of whom--the AHRC has worked intensely over some time, and for whom the symbolic act of receiving the award will be significant. Nominations may be submitted to the AHRC executive director by anyone, at any time. The Board of Directors reserves the exclusive right to accept or reject any nomination.

The inaugural AHRC Human Rights Defender Award was presented to Michael Anthony Fernando in 2003, in recognition of his struggle for basic freedoms in Sri Lanka. Fernando served a nine-month jail term for contempt of court arising from a fundamental rights case in the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. He was jailed because of his determination to uphold principles of liberty with an uncommon sense of courage, seriousness and self-sacrifice. The UN Human Rights Committee ultimately held that his imprisonment was a violation of his rights under international law. See further: <http://campaigns.ahrchk.net/tonyfernando>.

The second Human Rights Defenders Award was made posthumously to Somchai Neelaphaijit, a lawyer from Thailand, for his work on behalf of torture victims as a result of which he was abducted and forcibly disappeared by a group of police officers who have never been punished. The award was made in recognition both of his work as well as the emerging movement in Thailand, led by Somchai's wife, Angkhana, to acknowledge and establish a system of accountability relating to disappearances in Thailand. See further: <http://campaigns.ahrchk.net/somchai>.

