



Philippines govt to overhaul inhumane, overcrowded jails

## UN GAZA EMPLOYEE ACCUSED OF 'AIDING HAMAS'

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MANIPUR: Indian political activist Irom Sharmila licks honey from her hand to break her fast in Imphal, north-eastern Indian state of Manipur, India yesterday. One of India's most prominent political activists ended a 16-year hunger strike yesterday, licking honey from her hand and declaring 'I will never forget this moment.' \_ AP

# INDIA'S 'IRON LADY' ENDS 16-YEAR HUNGER STRIKE

## 'IRON LADY OF MANIPUR' SHARMILA EYES POLITICS

**GUWAHATI:** An Indian rights activist who has waged what is thought to be the world's longest hunger strike ended her 16-year fast yesterday after vowing to continue her struggle by standing for election in her home state. Irom Sharmila, dubbed the "Iron Lady of Manipur" for her unwavering protest against alleged rights abuses by security forces in the insurgency-hit northeast Indian state, was released on bail after she promised a court she would end her fast.

The 44-year-old had been held in judicial custody on charges of attempting suicide—still a criminal offence in India—and confined to a hospital where she was force-fed through a nasal tube. Speaking to journalists outside the court in the Manipur capital Imphal, she said her long campaign had not worked. "I went on a fast for about 16 years thinking I could change the system, but I now realise that this will not yield any result."

"So I decided to end my fast and join politics and then fight for the cause that I undertook this mission for—justice," she told journalists, speaking in her native Meitei language. Irom is campaigning for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which covers large parts of the northeast and the restive state of Kashmir. It gives Indian forces sweeping powers to search, enter property and shoot on sight, and has been criticized as a cover for human rights abuses. The Indian government says security forces need the powers to help them battle multiple rebel groups whose long-standing demands range from secession to greater autonomy and land rights.

### Frail but determined

Amnesty International India campaigner Abhirr VP called Irom's hunger strike "a testament to her passion for

human rights, and her belief that a draconian law like the AFSPA has no place in any society". Irom began her fast on November 2, 2000 after allegedly witnessing the killing of 10 people by the army at a bus stop near her home. Two weeks ago she surprised supporters by declaring she would end it to stand as an independent candidate in state elections to be held next year. "My fight so far has been all alone and so I have decided to wage a war against the (AFSPA) act democratically by becoming a lawmaker instead of continuing with my fast," she told reporters at the time.

Yesterday she appeared frail but determined as she spoke to reporters, the plastic tubing still taped to her nose. After the hearing she was taken back to the hospital where she has spent much of the past 16 years to complete the legal formalities of her bail. Magistrate Lamkhanpau Tonsing said she was being released after submitting bail of 10,000 rupees (\$150) and a written pledge to stop her fast. It is not clear whether she will return to the family home—she has said she would like to marry her fiancé, a British national of Indian origin who she met after starting her fast.

Doctors have said she will need medical help to begin eating again. Amnesty International declared her a Prisoner of Conscience in 2013 and she has received several prestigious international prizes, including a lifetime achievement award from the Asian Human Rights Commission. But support in her home state has waned in recent years. Irom's brother Singhajit told journalists she would either contest the election as an independent candidate or form a new party to "fight for the causes of the people of Manipur". — AFP

## 5 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT 'IRON LADY'

**NEW DELHI:** Indian human rights activist Irom Sharmila ended a 16-year hunger strike—thought to be the world's longest—yesterday to stand for election. Here are five things to know about the woman known as the "Iron Lady of Manipur".

### Who is Irom Sharmila?

The 44-year-old poet and activist was born in a small village in the remote and insurgency-wracked northeast Indian state of Manipur. She belongs to the Meitei ethnic group who dominate Manipur. She began fasting in 2000 after allegedly witnessing the army kill 10 people at a bus stop near her home. She has been held in judicial custody almost ever since, and has spent much of the last 16 years confined to a hospital ward.

### What is hunger strike about?

She is campaigning for the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) in Manipur, a remote and impoverished Indian state that is home to a number of separatist insurgent groups. The controversial act allows India's security forces to shoot on sight and arrest anybody without a warrant and is in force in Indian-administered Kashmir and across much of the northeast. Last month the Supreme Court ordered an investigation into the use of "excessive and retaliatory" force by police and the military in Manipur.

### How has she been kept alive?

She has been force-fed via a nasal drip in hospital. Images taken when she emerges from hospital to make one of her frequent court appearances in Manipur show her looking emaciated and frail, with plastic tubes taped to her nose. — AFP

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## INDIA POLITICIAN HANGS HIMSELF

**GUWAHATI:** The former chief minister of a remote Indian region disputed with China was found dead and hanging from a ceiling fan yesterday, police and officials said, after a court ruled last month that his appointment had been illegal. The Supreme Court ruling dealt a blow to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ambitions of expanding in the northeast, where his Bharatiya Janata Party scored its first state election victory in the region with a win in Assam in May.

Kalikhho Pul, 47, until July the chief minister of the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, had suffered from depression and was upset over the judgment, his aides told media. "He has committed suicide," Nabam Tuki, a senior lawmaker of the opposition Congress party said in the capital of the vast but sparsely populated region bordering China. Pul's family discovered the body in his bedroom at the chief minister's residence. Media said he had left a diary, which police were examining. A politician with Congress since 1995, Pul became chief minister in February after rebelling against the party.

He was put in charge by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's federal government, which had imposed direct rule in the state to end a political crisis. But the Supreme Court held illegal the imposition of president's rule, as it is called in India, ordering that the dislodged Congress should return to power immediately, forcing Pul from office. China claims more than 90,000 sq km (35,000 sq miles) of territory disputed by India in the eastern sector of the Himalayas. Much of that forms the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China calls South Tibet. India says China occupies 38,000 square km (14,600 sq miles) of its territory on the Aksai Chin plateau in the west. — Reuters