

PRESS RELEASE – THE OBSERVATORY

BANGLADESH: Judicial harassment against free speech defenders continues

Paris-Geneva, August 14, 2015 – The three-year prison sentence handed down to Mr. Mahmudur Rahman yesterday morning by a Dhaka Court is yet another example of the abusive use of the judicial system to target free speech defenders, declared the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders.

“The assault on freedom of expression is growing in Bangladesh, as any dissent is stifled through judicial harassment, civil society is silenced through increasingly repressive laws, and violent crimes against those who exercise free speech are tacitly permitted,” stated Karim Lahidji, FIDH President. ***“Mahmudur Rahman must be released immediately”***, he added.

Mr. **Mahmudur Rahman**, acting editor of the *Amar Desh* newspaper, was sentenced yesterday to three years in prison by a Dhaka Court for charges brought against him in 2010 by the Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which accused him of failing to submit his wealth statement. He intends to appeal the sentencing.

Mr. Rahman has been detained since April 11, 2013. The *Amar Desh* printing press was sealed only hours after his arrest, and has remained closed since. From April 11 to 24, 2013, Mr. Rahman was subjected to torture while held in police custody, and eventually charged with sedition and unlawful publication of a Skype conversation between Md Nizamul Huq, an International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) Judge, and an external consultant¹ on December 9, 2012. The published conversation raised doubts about the impartiality of the ICT and led to the resignation of Judge Huq on December 11, 2012.

Prior to his arrest in 2013, Mr. Rahman had already been the target of judicial harassment. In November 2012, he reported to an Observatory fact-finding mission that the Bangladeshi authorities had brought nearly 50 defamation and sedition cases against him since 2008, notably for publishing a report on alleged corruption practices of the Prime Minister and her relatives, and that he was already subjected to torture and ill-treatment while he was arbitrarily detained in relation to these charges².

“We call on the Bangladeshi judiciary to put an end to any form of harassment and violence, including torture and ill-treatment, against free speech defenders and to strongly reject any evidence that is obtained through torture”, said Gerald Staberock, OMCT Secretary General. ***“We also urge the Bangladeshi authorities to carry out a prompt, impartial and transparent investigation on the above-mentioned allegations of torture and ill-treatment, and ensure that those responsible are held accountable”***, he concluded.

Mr. Rahman's latest conviction is only the last example of the increasing use of intimidation against those who peacefully exercise and defend the right to free speech in Bangladesh. Four bloggers have been brutally murdered since February 2015, with police failing to file charges in any of the cases. In addition, Bangladesh's existing blasphemy laws criminalise

¹ See FIDH-OMCT Press Release of December 5, 2013, available at: <https://www.fidh.org/International-Federation-for-Human-Rights/asia/bangladesh/14345-bangladesh-guarantee-personal-integrity-and-release-acting-editor-of-amar> and <http://www.omct.org/urgent-campaigns/urgent-interventions/bangladesh/2013/12/d22487/>

² For more information, see the Observatory's International Fact-Finding Mission report, *Bangladesh: Human Rights Defenders Trapped in a Polarised Political Environment*, November 2013, available at: <https://www.fidh.org/International-Federation-for-Human-Rights/asia/bangladesh/14232-bangladesh-alarming-escalation-of-threats-to-human-rights-defenders> and <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/reports-and-publications/bangladesh/2013/11/d22434/>.

peaceful free speech related to religion, and the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2014, along with the proposed 2015 Cyber Security Act, serve to stifle free expression and severely restrict the work of civil society³.

The Observatory urges the Bangladeshi government to uphold its obligation under international law to ensure that its people can exercise and defend the right to freedom of expression as well as all other human rights.

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OBS) was created in 1997 by FIDH and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT). The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy situations of repression against human rights defenders.

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³ See Observatory Press Release of August 4, 2015, available at: <https://www.fidh.org/International-Federation-for-Human-Rights/asia/bangladesh/bangladesh-authorities-threaten-ngos-for-denouncing-human-rights> and <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/statements/bangladesh/2015/08/d23295/>.