PUBLIC STATEMENT

BANGLADESH

Government should ensure safety of Taslima Nasrin

Amnesty International is calling on the Government of Bangladesh to ensure the safety and security of Taslima Nasrin, who returned to the country earlier this month after four years of self imposed exile in Europe.

The human rights organisation is urging the government to ensure that the charges of hurting religious sentiment pending against her are dropped.

Although there are no reports, at present, to indicate that Nasrin has been arrested or taken to prison, Amnesty International would oppose her detention in connection with such charges that relate purely to the peaceful exercise of her right to freedom of expression.

If she were imprisoned on these grounds, the organisation would consider her a prisoner of conscience and campaign for her immediate and unconditional release.

Background information

Taslima Nasrin fled Bangladesh in 1994 when former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's government ordered her arrest after an Indian newspaper quoted her as saying the Koran should be rewritten. Taslima Nasrin maintains she was misquoted but does favour changes in Islamic law to give more rights to women.

The writer had previously been subjected to threats from the Islamist group, Council of Soldiers of Islam, who called for her death in October 1993. They claimed that her bestselling novel *Lajja* (Shame) -- which is about a Hindu family attacked by Muslims after the destruction of the Babri Mosque in India in 1992-- had hurt their religious sentiments.

Before her return to Bangladesh, Taslima Nasrin met with her mother who was undergoing treatment for cancer in New York. After her mother was diagnosed as having only a few months left to live, Nasrin decided to accompany her back to Bangladesh. However, she has been forced to go into hiding after news of her arrival has sparked a wave of demonstrations by Islamist groups demanding her arrest and execution.

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