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Bangladesh: Attacks on journalists rise with tension around war crimes tribunal

A string of recent violent attacks against journalists and media workers, including the murder of a blogger, shows the urgent need to better protect individuals commenting on Bangladesh's ongoing war crimes tribunal, Amnesty International said.

The latest attack on Wednesday morning left a journalist from an online news site seriously injured.

Those targeted include journalists and bloggers calling on the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) to impose death sentences on people accused of mass scale human rights abuses during Bangladesh's 1971 independence war.

"The government must do their utmost to ensure that individuals at risk of retaliation for commenting on or interacting with the ICT are given the protection they need. People must be able to exercise their right to freedom of expression without fear," said Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International's Bangladesh Researcher.

On Friday 15 February, blogger Ahmed Rajib Haidar was brutally beaten and stabbed to death in his home in the capital Dhaka.

Haidar is a well-known blogger and had posted comments critical of the opposition political party Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), one senior leader of which has been convicted and seven more are facing trial at the ICT.

Early on Wednesday morning, Sumon Mahbub, a journalist with the online news site bdnews24.com, was left seriously injured after being rammed by a car in an apparently targeted attack in Dhaka.

The offices of bdnews24.com had started receiving threats earlier this week after publishing an online poll which showed support for banning JI.

No one has been arrested or claimed responsibility for either attack. JI on 17 February condemned the murder of Haidar and said it was not involved.

"We urge the authorities to carry out a thorough, independent and impartial investigation into these attacks, otherwise violence could continue with impunity," Faiz said.

Equally at risk are journalists and bloggers critical of the ICT.

Amnesty International has received disturbing reports that some individuals criticizing the tribunal's proceedings have been threatened and may be at risk of retaliatory violence.

Background

The ICT was set up in 2010 to try people suspected of crimes under international law, including genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, committed during the country's 1971 war of independence.

The tribunal handed down its first sentences in January 2013, sentencing one of the accused, Abul Kalam Azad, to death for crimes against humanity. On 5 February, senior JI member Abdul Quader Molla was sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity.

The Shahbag neighbourhood of Dhaka has seen mass protests calling for Molla to be sentenced to death since 5 February. Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all circumstances.

Meanwhile, JI has been holding rallies throughout the country and calling for daylong strikes, demanding the release of their leaders who are on trial at the ICT.