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BANGLADESH: ONE YEAR SINCE SECULAR BLOGGER ANANTA BIJOY DAS WAS KILLED AND STILL NO JUSTICE

The Bangladeshi authorities must intensify efforts to hold to account the killers of secular blogger [Ananta Bijoy Das](#) and to end the impunity that exists for a wave of killings of human rights defenders and others, Amnesty International said on the anniversary of Ananata Bijoy Das' death.

On 12 May 2015, while on his way to work Bijoy Das was approached by masked men carrying machetes in Sylhet, Bangladesh. They struck him on the head and body and then reportedly fled into the crowds. Bijoy Das was taken to hospital where he was declared dead. The attack was claimed by a violent group purporting to act in the name of Islam, Ansar al-Islam (also known as Ansarullah Bangla Team), which claims to have links to al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent.

Bijoy Das was a well-known secular blogger in Bangladesh and contributor to the secularist website Mukto Mona, a site previously moderated by [Ajivit Roy](#), a blogger and writer who was also killed in 2015 on a Dhaka street by men carrying machetes. Bijoy Das had also won Mukto Mona's annual award in 2006 for "spreading secular and humanist ideals and messages." Friends of Bijoy Das say he had criticized violence in the name of religion, and promoted science and rationalism.

One year on, no one has been held to account for Bijoy Das' death. Four suspects have been arrested in the past year by the Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID), but there has been no other notable progress on the case. No one has been prosecuted and there have been no updates on when a possible trial could start.

This type of impunity is widespread and not limited to Ananta Bijoy Das' case. Since February 2013, Amnesty International is aware of at least seven killings of secular bloggers, publishers and other human rights defenders in Bangladesh, most recently the killing of [Nazimuddin Samad](#) in Dhaka on 6 April 2016. The attacks all fit a similar pattern where the human rights defenders have been hacked to death, often in broad daylight, by violent groups who claim their victims were targeted because they offended Islam. In only one case – the killing of blogger Rajib Haidar in February 2013 – has anyone been held to account. Suspected perpetrators of other killings have as yet not been brought to justice, although investigations are underway and arrests have been made in some of the cases¹

Attacks by violent groups purporting to act in the name of Islam have increased recently in Bangladesh, and targeted other human rights defenders who are not expressly secularists. In 2016, those killed have

¹ The secular activists killed since February 2013 are: Rajib Haider, Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman, Ananta Bijoy Das, Niloy Neel, Arefin Faisal Dipon and Nizamuddin Samad.

included [Xulhaz Mannan](#), a prominent LGBTI rights defender, a university professor, a Hindu tailor accused of insulting Islam, and a Sufi Muslim leader. These attacks have been claimed by groups with purported links to Al-Qaeda or the armed group calling itself the Islamic State, yet no one has been held to account for them, although investigations are underway and arrests have been made in some of the cases

The impunity around these killings has created a climate of fear among human rights defenders in Bangladesh, many of whom have been forced underground or into exile out of worry that they could become the next target. Many defenders say the police have been unwilling or unable to provide them with protection, or are reluctant to approach the authorities out of fear that they themselves could be prosecuted. Several bloggers have also been charged under [Section 57 of the Information, Communications and Technology Act \(ICT Act\)](#), which criminalises writings that may “hurt religious belief”. LGBTI defender who approach the police have also been threatened with prosecution as homosexuality is illegal in Bangladesh.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the Bangladeshi authorities have not only failed to categorically condemn these killings, but instead have appeared to shift the blame on the victims.

Senior government officials have called on bloggers and human rights defenders to stop writing and disseminating content which “hurts religious sentiment” or else face charges under draconian laws restricting the right to freedom of expression, such as the ICT Act. After the killing of Nazimuddin Samad, for example, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said that part of the investigation would be to scrutinise Nazimuddin Samad’s writing to see if it contained anything “objectionable” about religion. The public reaction of the Bangladeshi authorities was recently [highlighted by a group of NGOs on World Press Freedom Day, 3 May 2016](#).

Recommendations

Amnesty International calls on the Bangladeshi authorities to:

- Intensify the investigations into recent attacks against human rights defenders and others and hold those suspected to be responsible to account in fair and transparent trials without recourse to the death penalty;
- Provide protection to human rights defenders and others who have been threatened or under risk of attack, and to stop charging or threatening to charge defenders with offences under laws that impermissibly restrict freedom of expression or criminalize their sexuality; and
- Publicly condemn these killings and send a strong signal that Bangladesh will protect, promote and fulfil the right to freedom of expression.