

Public Statement

15 March 2002

AI Index ASA 13/005/2002 - News Service Nr. 48

Bangladesh: Arrest of possible prisoners of conscience

The arrest on 13 March 2002 of two staff members of the non-governmental organization, Proshika ("A Centre for Human Development") has raised serious concern about the Bangladeshi government's observance of its obligations under international human rights law to ensure the right to freedom of expression.

Police arrested Omar Tarek Chowdhury, deputy director of Proshika and Ajharul Hoque, an employee of the organization, on allegations that they had been in possession of "documents" relating to attacks against members of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. Details of the alleged "documents" have not been made public. However, sources close to Proshika believe the documents obtained by police consist of several analytical articles relating to writ petitions filed previously before the High Court seeking action by the government regarding attacks against members of the minority groups in Bangladesh.

The arrest of Omar Tarek Chowdhury and Ajharul Hoque has raised concern not only about their own right to freedom of expression, but also it has sent a disturbing message to those seeking to defend the human rights of Bangladeshi citizens.

The two prisoners are now detained under the Special Powers Act (SPA). The broadly formulated grounds for detention allow people to be detained effectively as prisoners of conscience. Ironically, the government has pledged to repeal the SPA, but it continues to detain people under this law. So far no formal charges have been framed against the two prisoners. On the basis of reported statements by the police that they

have been detained for possession of "documents" relating to attacks on members of minority groups, Amnesty International believes they may be prisoners of conscience.

Background

Following the general elections on 1 October 2001, members of the Hindu minority were reportedly attacked by supporters of the coalition led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party and which won the election, because of their perceived support for the rival Awami League party. Attacks included alleged rape of over 100 women.

In December 2001, Amnesty International published a report on attacks against members of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh. In a letter dated 6 December 2001 the organization urged the government to take decisive action to protect members of minority groups, initiate a full, impartial and independent investigation of the attacks, make the result of this investigation public and bring perpetrators to justice. So far, Amnesty International has not received a reply to this letter. It is not therefore clear if an independent investigation of the attacks has taken place.

Earlier in late November, the High Court, acting on a petition filed before it, ordered the government to explain why it has not done more to protect the country's religious Hindu minority. The government has not yet provided this explanation before the court.

Human rights defenders worldwide as well as in Bangladesh have continued to urge the government to ensure the safety of minority groups and bring perpetrators of the attacks to justice.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>