

PUBLIC

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21 December 2005

Further Information on UA 61/05 (ASA 13/003/2005, 14 March 2005) - Death Threats

BANGLADESH

Samaresh Baidya (m), journalist
Sumi Khan (f), journalist
Zubair Siddiqui (m), journalist

New names:

Abul Momen (m)]
Farok Iqbal (m)]
Biswajeet Chowdhury] **journalists**
Anjan Kumer Sen (m)]
Ali Abbas (m)]
Fifteen other journalists (names unknown)
The Deputy Police Commissioners of Kushtia, Satkhira,
Mymensingh and Dinajpur districts
The Superintendent of Police (SP) of Sylhet
Two members of the district government authorities
An unknown number of magistrates

Sumi Khan, Samaresh Baidya, and a number of other journalists from Chittagong, police and government officials and magistrates from across the country have received death threats in recent weeks. Amnesty International believes that their lives may be at risk.

According to press reports, the journalists and officials were threatened in a letter which was delivered on 6 December to the Chittagong Press Club, an organization for journalists, in the southern port city of Chittagong. The letter, purportedly from the banned Islamist group *Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB), also allegedly contained a threat to bomb the Chittagong Press Club.

The threats are believed to be part of a campaign by some Islamist groups to destabilize democratic society in Bangladesh. By threatening journalists, the judiciary and political opposition figures, as well as government officials, it seems that Islamist groups are attempting to undermine freedom of speech and belief, political expression and the judicial system.

The government has reportedly ordered that a police guard be put in place at the Chittagong Press Club and also recently arrested a number of suspected members of the JMB. However, as far as Amnesty International is aware there has been no investigation into the death threats, and no protection has been provided for those named in the letter.

Some of the journalists, including Sumi Khan and Samarash Baidiya, have previously received death threats, allegedly from other local Islamist groups whose activities they had reported on. Sumi Khan was stabbed and seriously injured on 27 April 2004. Before the attack she had received several anonymous threatening phone calls, warning her not to "defame" people in her reports, and her attackers apparently yelled at her that she would be killed if she did not stop writing. No one has yet been brought to justice in connection with the attack (see UA 164/04, ASA13/006/2004, 4 May 2004).

To Amnesty International's knowledge, Zubair Siddiqui has not received any further threats since a death threat was mailed to his office in March 2005.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Violent attacks apparently by Islamist groups against cultural gatherings, political rallies and some Muslim shrines have been taking place for several years, but in recent months they have intensified. On 17 August 2005, several hundred bombs were set off in crowded spots across the country, mainly at government offices, journalists' clubs and courts. Since then there have been a number of other bomb attacks, including some by suspected suicide bombers. The choice of targets for these recent bomb attacks appears to reveal a specific strategy to undermine freedom of speech and belief, political expression and the judicial system. Targets have included cinemas, places of worship, cultural gatherings, opposition rallies, journalists and those revealing the link between organized crime and politics. Recently, judges have also been the targets of bomb attacks.

The government's response to the violence was initially to deny that Islamist groups could be responsible, blaming instead the opposition party, the Awami League, for the bombings. Earlier this year in the face of mounting concern within and outside Bangladesh about government inaction in the face of the violence, the authorities outlawed two Islamic groups, including the JMB. Since then, a number of people suspected of involvement in the bombings, including the operations commander of the JMB, have so far been arrested.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of 22 journalists and at least eight officials from the district authorities, police and judiciary, who were named in a death threat sent to the Chittagong Press Club on 6 December;
- calling for the authorities to take immediate steps to guarantee the safety of all those threatened, in accordance with their wishes;
- welcoming the police protection ordered by the government for the Chittagong Press Club;
- calling on the government to launch prompt, independent and impartial investigations into the death threats, with the results made public and those responsible brought to justice without delay.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia
Office of the Prime Minister
Gona Bhaban
Old Sangsad Bhaban, Tejgaon,
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Fax: + 880 2 8113244 / 8113243 / 9133722

Email: pm@pmobd.org

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Md. Lutfuzzaman Babar
State Minister for Home Affairs
Ministry of Home Affairs
Bangladesh Secretariat
Building 4
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Salutation: Dear Minister of State

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Bangladesh accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 1 February 2006.