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BANGLADESH: CALL FOR PROTECTION OF TASLIMA NASRIN AND OTHER JOURNALISTS

"I am in grave danger. Fundamentalists are demanding my death. They have declared prize money for my head again. Situation is dangerous now. They could kill me at any moment. Please save me."

Amnesty International received this message 10 days ago from Taslima Nasrin, a feminist Bangladeshi author who has been in hiding for six weeks after a warrant was issued for her arrest on charges of blasphemy.

Islamist groups earlier offered reward money to anyone that kills her because she is alleged to have insulted the religious feelings of Muslims during an interview with an Indian newspaper. Nasrin says she was misquoted.

Taslima Nasrin is among a number of people and organizations who have had *fatwas* -- Islamic religious decrees -- pronounced against them in a recent wave of Islamist activities in Bangladesh.

"We are gravely concerned that the Bangladesh Government has not only failed to protect such people from death threats, but has also actually endorsed the *fatwas* by issuing warrants for the same people's arrest on charges of blasphemy," Amnesty International said.

Journalists reporting on Taslima Nasrin and Islamist activities continue to be attacked by Islamist groups. Spokespersons of the journalists' union in Bangladesh say that 24 newspapers have been attacked, mostly by Islamists, over the last three years. There has also been an attack on an Islamist paper by secularist groups.

Foreign non-governmental organizations have also been threatened or have had their offices set on fire and bomb attacks have been made on individuals, including Dr Ahmad Sharif, an intellectual who has been labelled an apostate and Shafik Rehman, editor of the daily *Jai Jai Din*.

During country-wide strikes on 30 June -- called by Islamists pressing for Taslima Nasrin's death and by secularists protesting against rising fundamentalism -- over 200 people were injured and one person was killed in clashes between Islamist and secularist groups.

Several of the participating groups have announced that further agitation is planned for July, with a protest march converging from all parts of Bangladesh on Dhaka on 29 July.

Thirteen Islamist groups formed an alliance on 9 July to intensify their battle against "renegades" like Taslima Nasrin and "all anti-Islamic forces". They are pressing the government to enact an anti-blasphemy law, to declare the minority Ahmadis a non-Muslim sect and to ban "anti-Islamic" newspapers.

Amnesty International has repeatedly urged the Bangladesh Government to provide protection for Taslima Nasrin and others against whom death threats have been issued by Islamists, and to drop the blasphemy charges against them.

On 27 June, the government responded with a letter saying that because a relative of Taslima Nasrin's had brought a private complaint against the person announcing a cash award for her murder, the government need not undertake any further action. It said "now it is for the court to decide whether there is credible evidence to establish the alleged death threat against her."

"Even if individuals are bringing private complaints, the government is obliged to investigate death threats made against its citizens," Amnesty International said. "It must ensure the safety of anyone under threat of arbitrary and unlawful execution."

The human rights organization has written back reiterating its call to drop the charges against Taslima Nasrin and others if they were solely brought for the exercise of their right to freedom of expression. If Nasrin were imprisoned on the current charges against her, Amnesty International would consider her a prisoner of conscience and call for her immediate and unconditional release.

The government recently made a public statement that it would prosecute those responsible for such death threats. However, nothing has yet been done and Amnesty International believes this was an empty promise.

"Instead of issuing arrest warrants for people who receive death threats from Islamist groups, the Government of Bangladesh should publicly condemn these *fatwas* and promptly bring those responsible to justice," Amnesty International said.

"If they had done this in the first place, the present wave of death threats to Taslima Nasrin and others may not have taken place." ENDS/