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Bangladesh: Kushtia attack highlights need for protection of journalists

Freedom of expression is one of the most fundamental of human rights. As campaigning begins for the 2007 national elections, Amnesty International believes that it is particularly important for all citizens to be able to peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression and opinion without fear of intimidation or harassment. Furthermore Amnesty International recognises that journalists, through accurate and objective reporting, play a pivotal role in allowing all citizens to enjoy their right of access to information. The organisation calls on the Government of Bangladesh to ensure this role remains protected.

Amnesty International condemns the recent attack on a peaceful protest rally organised by journalists in Kushtia, on 29 May 2006. It has been reported that a number of individuals, armed with rocks and bricks, violently disrupted the program of the rally allegedly on the instigation of a Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) member of parliament in Kushtia. While a limited number of local police were at the scene, they reportedly did little to protect the journalists, many of who were badly injured.

The rally was held to protest the recent harassment of four Kushtia-based journalists who had been accused of extortion by a BNP member of parliament after reporting on the upcoming election. The journalists, Tarikul Islam Tarik, Al Mamun Sagar, Mizanur Rahman and Hamidur Rahman, denied the charges and were granted bail by the High Court. They reportedly had to flee Kushtia in early May to escape threats and harassment following the filing of charges, and only returned to Kushtia on the day of the protest rally. Following the attack on the participants of the rally, they had to again flee the area and remain in fear of threats and intimidation.

Following the incidents of violence at the rally, the printing of the *Dainik Andolaner Bazar*, a daily newspaper that continued to print articles relating to the elections, is also reported to have been suspended on the instigation of the same BNP member of parliament.

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Bangladesh to take effective measures to investigate all allegations of intimidation and violent attacks on journalists in Kushtia. Investigations should be prompt and those found to be responsible must be brought to justice in accordance with international standards of fair trial, regardless of their position or political affiliation.

