

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety/torture/prisoner of conscience

BANGLADESH

Jahangir Alam Akash (m), journalist, human rights defender

Human rights defender Jahangir Alam Akash was arrested on 24 October. According to reports he has been severely tortured, and has not been given the urgent medical treatment he needs.

A group of 10-12 Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) agents in plain clothes came to his house, in the north-western city of Rajshahi, and banged on the door at about 2am. His wife did not let them in until they told her who they were; she asked to see a search warrant, but they refused, saying they wanted to search the house for "illegal arms". Fearing they would kill her husband if there were no witnesses, she called several neighbours to see what was happening. The RAB agents grabbed Jahangir Alam Akash, and began slapping him hard on the face, shouting abuse. They then put him in handcuffs, wrapped a black cloth around his head and took him away.

He was taken to a nearby army camp where he was reportedly beaten severely. He has now been moved to the Rajshahi Jail hospital: he reportedly has cuts and bruises all over his body, his legs are very swollen and he is unable to walk. The hospital is reportedly not providing the medical attention he needs.

Jahangir Alam Akash is the local head of two NGOs, the Task Force against Torture and the Bangladesh Institute of Human Rights. His concern with human rights has been a powerful influence on his work as head of the Rajshahi office of the independent TV station CBS News: on 2 May he produced a report on an attempted extrajudicial execution by RAB agents that had taken place in Rajshahi that day. This was broadcast several times on 3 May. The report included a detailed account by the victim's wife of how RAB agents had come into the family house and shot her husband, in front of her and their daughter, even though he was offering no resistance.

That evening Jahangir Alam Akash received a threatening phone call from a man who said he was a major in the local RAB office, and told Jahangir Alam Akash he should not have reported on RAB activities. The man warned him not to meddle in RAB affairs, or produce any more reports on the RAB, or else he would face serious consequences. This threat drew international condemnation, which reportedly delayed any RAB retribution until now.

He has been charged with "extortion", on the basis of claims made on 23 October by a man who had reportedly been convicted of rape on the basis of the evidence provided by Jahangir Alam Akash as a concerned individual. His friends and family have described the charge as false, politically motivated and a pretext to detain him for opposing RAB human rights violations.

Jahangir Alam Akash has received death threats many times because of his work, and has been assaulted several times after writing articles critical of local politicians. He was abducted in July 2003, blindfolded and severely beaten, after he published a report on the rivalry between two groups within the main ruling party.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

On 11 January President Ijuddin Ahmed declared a state of emergency after weeks of violence over the date of elections and electoral reforms between supporters of the former ruling coalition and supporters of parties opposing them. Elections scheduled for 22 January were postponed indefinitely and a new civilian caretaker

government, backed by the army, sworn in. Under the state of emergency, political rallies are banned, and freedom of expression severely restricted.

Hundreds of people have reportedly been killed by the RAB, a paramilitary police force whose members are drawn from the army and police, set up in March 2004. Government sources say the deaths have been caused by crossfire between RAB agents and suspected criminals, but there are persistent reports that the deaths have been deliberate killings by the RAB. Despite this, no RAB agents have ever been brought to justice for any of the killings.

The caretaker government like previous governments in Bangladesh has failed to protect people against army and RAB excesses, or to bring any of their personnel to justice for abusing human rights.

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

- expressing concern that journalist Jahangir Alam Akash was arrested by plainclothes RAB agents on 24 October, and has reportedly been tortured in custody;
- urging the authorities to release him immediately and unconditionally, as he is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for broadcasting reports critical of the RAB;
- urging them to ensure that Jahangir Alam Akash is protected from any further torture, and given any medical attention he may require;
- urging the authorities to have the reports of the torture of Jahangir Alam Akash investigated by an independent, impartial and competent body, and bring those responsible to justice.

APPEALS TO:

Equivalent to prime minister

Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed

Chief Adviser

Office of the Chief Adviser

Bangladesh

Fax: +880 2 8113243

Email: info@pmo.gov.bd

Salutation: Dear Chief Adviser

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 13 December 2007.