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Bangladesh: Harassment of news editors must stop

In yet another attack on press freedom in Bangladesh, warrants of arrests were issued on 11 June against Mahfuz Anam, the editor and publisher of The Daily Star, Matiur Rahman, the editor of the Daily Prothom Alo, and Abdul Jalil, the Secretary General of the main opposition party, the Awami League.

This followed the publication, on 3 June, of a letter written by Abdul Jalil expressing his opinion about the candidacy of a Bangladeshi nominee for an executive position in an international organization. The letter contained opinion critical of the nominee, a senior government official, who in turn filed a complaint before Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Court under sections of the Bangladesh Penal Code which provide for up to two years' imprisonment for "defamation".

Amnesty International would consider anyone detained in connection with the writing or publication of this letter as a prisoner of conscience. The Government of Bangladesh must act now to stop the detention from happening.

Harassment of the two leading editors is in sharp contrast to a recent plea by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia at a meeting of the South Asian Free Media Association that journalists should sharpen their pens "to write against narrowness, limited vision, conflict and disputes (to) build up powerful public opinion in South Asia in favour of peace, friendship, humanism and cooperation."

Amnesty International is urging the Government of Bangladesh to ensure that under no circumstances will Mahfuz Anam, Matiur Rahman and Abdul Jalil be detained in connection with the writing and publication of this letter.

Amnesty International further urges the Government of Bangladesh to reform the Penal Code to ensure once and for all that no one expressing an opinion peacefully will be detained or imprisoned under the so-called "criminal defamation" laws.

Background

Despite pledges by authorities to uphold the freedom of the press, journalists are frequently targets of attacks, intimidation and harassment. Dozens of journalists have been assaulted with impunity either by the police when covering demonstrations or by armed gangs affiliated to various political parties. In addition, several journalists have been arrested and accused of a range of politically motivated charges including sedition. They have been taken into custody for weeks or sometimes months and many of them have been tortured or ill-treated while in custody.

The recent use of "defamation" criminal law against these two leading editors may signal a new move to coerce journalists to refrain from publishing articles deemed critical of the authorities.

Amnesty International takes no position with regard to views expressed in the letter. The organization believes that there should be no restriction on the right to freedom of expression within the scope envisaged in the international human rights law.

Following the warrants of arrest, lawyers rushed to the Metropolitan Magistrate Court in Dhaka and obtained bail. This means that the two newspaper editors and the writer of the letter are temporarily protected against arbitrary detention, but they continue to be at risk. In the past, the Government of Bangladesh has repeatedly ignored court orders for release on bail of those accused or detained on politically motivated grounds.

Lawyers argue that standard practice for dealing with claims of "defamation" is in the first instance a representation in writing to the paper involved for publication of a rejoinder. Another remedy is to seek compensation in the civil court. Neither of these options were pursued by the complainant who holds a senior government position.

The letter has reportedly been published in over a dozen newspapers in Bangladesh. The fact, however, that only these two newspapers - which are known for their commitment to high standards of professionalism and independence - have been targeted point to an alarming possibility that the government may seek to impose restrictions on the freedom of the press in the country.

Public Document

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