

# **STATE OF PRESS FREEDOM IN BANGLADESH-2004**



Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum-BMSF

**Report by:**

KHAIRUZZAMAN KAMAL

Executive Director

Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum-BMSF

**Journalism** became a most risky profession in Bangladesh. The risks are on the increase day to day with harassment torture arrest and death threats with white cloths for their news reports and opinions which reflect social realities. Bangladesh is one of the most dangerous and violent countries in South Asia for journalists. Seven Journalists were killed from January 2004 to March 2005 and 352 were given death threats, 210 tortured or harassed in 110 incidents of press bashing, Cases were filed against 35 newsman while another 35 threatened 25 injured. Seven were arrested and ten harassed. Growing muscle power of various circles of wrongdoers is making media reporting risky every passing day, showing a substantial number of journalists subjected to assault across the country.

Sheikh Belaluddin Ahmmed a correspondent with the Bengali-language daily Sangram, was killed in a bomb attack on February this year. The bomb exploded at a press club in the city of Khulna on February 5. The bomb, which was hidden in a bag hanging from a motorcycle, detonated at around 9:15 p.m. as Belaluddin approached the vehicle Three other journalists were hurt, but their injuries were not life-threatening. On February 8, Khulna journalists observed a news blackout and formed a human chain at the press club to protest the bombing. Across the country, journalists took to the streets to condemn the attack, demanding that authorities find and punish those responsible.

Freelance journalist Shahid Anwar, of the Daily Asian Express was Killed on 24 October 2004 inside his office in Kataban area at Dhaka city. Police have suggested one possible motive for the killing is a business rivalry but are yet to confirm any suspects or motives connected to the murder. Anwar is the fifth journalist to be killed in Bangladesh in 2004. Anwar is the second journalist murdered in Bangladesh in two months.

Unidentified assailants killed Dipankar Charawarti, an editor of Daily Durjoy Bangla, in September in northern Bogra district. Dipankar Chakrabarty, Executive Editor the Bogra-based Durjoy Bangla newspaper was brutally murdered near his home in Sherpur Upazila On 2 October 2004, He was the fifth journalist to be killed in Bangladesh since the beginning of the year. Chakrabarty had taken tea at a local restaurant and was attacked by unidentified assailants while walking home. He was attacked with traditional axes and knives from behind and beheaded. Chakrabarty was the vice-president of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, ex-president of Bogra Union of Journalists (BUJ) and Sherpur Press Club and incumbent convener of Sherpur Reporters' Unity.

Kamal Hossain, 35, Correspondent of the daily Ajker Kagoj was killed on 22 August. He was a general secretary of the Manikchhari press club under Chittagone Divission , He had earlier received death threats from some miscreants.

### **Bomb kills Khulna journalist Manik Shaha**

An unidentified man bombed to death Manik Chandra Saha, staff correspondent of the daily Sangbad, in Khulna January 15, 2004, sparking a string of demonstrations including hartal for tomorrow and Sunday in the city and a swell of panic among locals.

Police said the powerful handmade bomb blew the head off his body at about 1:00pm on Mirzapur Road in the latest in a series of journalist killings in the district since 2002.

The 50-year-old journalist, also Khulna-based stringer of BBC and former president of Khulna Press Club, was heading home at Ahsan Ahmed Road by rickshaw. His body was sent to Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH) for autopsy.

Police seized bomb splinters, wires and a pencil battery from the scene, some 20 yards off the press club, after the incident that brought city life to a virtual halt. Security was tightened in and around the city, but no-one was arrested until early last night.

Witnesses said a man went to the press club at about 12:30pm and talked to Manik about a personal matter minutes before he boarded a rickshaw to get back home.

The man called Manik from behind -- his rickshaw a few steps ahead -- and another man hurled the bomb at him as soon as he got down from the vehicle. He died instantly. The rickshawpuller fled.

Journalists who were at the press club rushed out on hearing the explosion and found his headless, blood-smeared body on the ground. They took the body to the KMCH.

Police believe the killing was the result of his outspoken, uncompromising stand against law and order downslide in the southwestern district with a long history of outlaw violence.

Local journalists brought out a procession yesterday afternoon in protest at the murder of the prominent reporter, who was also senior staff correspondent of New Age.

"His reports regularly probed ... into underground political activities of the region. We consider the attack ... an infringement on freedom of expression," says New Age in a press release.

Khulna Press Club called a daylong hartal in the metropolitan city for tomorrow as part of a seven-day programme that includes wearing of black badges, protest rally, mourning procession and hoisting of black flags atop local newspaper offices.

The main opposition Awami League called another daylong hartal for Sunday in the city to protest the murder.

Leaders of political parties, including the ruling BNP, rushed to hospital to pay their last respect to the slain journalist and expressed solidarity with the hartal call and other programmes drawn up at a meeting at 3:30pm by Khulna Press Club with its President Humayun Kabir Balu in the chair.

Khulna district and city units of Puja Udjapan Parishad condemned the murder of Manik, one of parishad leaders.

Manik, also member of Khulna District Bar Association and Vice-chairman of Khulna South Herald School, entered journalism in 1984 and was closely associated with many socio-cultural organisations.

He left behind his parents, wife and two minor daughters.

Senior police officers, including Police Commissioner Mustafizur Rahman, visited the scene and the press club.

Khulna Union of Journalists and Metropolitan Union of Journalists also condemned the killing and demanded arrest of the killers in 24 hours.

Manik joined BBC as a stringer in 1994 and now-closed Ekushey TV as its divisional correspondent in 2000.

The senior crime reporter of Dainik Purbanchal, Shaikh Haroon-ar-Rashid, was gunned down at Mujjunni under Khalishpur Police Station in March 2002 and the Dainik Anirvan crime reporters Nahor Ali and Shukur Hossain were murdered in Dumuria the same year.

Dainik Janmabhumi Editor Humayun Kabir Balu was killed and his elder son injured in a bomb attack June 27,2004 apparently by a leftist extremist posing as a peanut vendor in southwestern Khulna City, police and witnesses said.

Balu, 58, also president of Khulna Press Club, suffered critical injuries to his back and legs at 12:15pm in front of his house-cum-office on Islampur Road soon after getting down from his car and died at Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH) at 1:50pm, sparking protests.

The Janajuddha faction of outlawed Purbo Banglar Communist Party claimed responsibility for the killing by cellphone to a photojournalist at Khulna Press Club, but police could not confirm the claim.

His death was the second high-profile journalist killing after New Age's special correspondent Manik Chandra Saha on January 15 in the city, dubbed as the valley of death for bloodshed by outlaws.

Witnesses said a young man approached Balu when his car pulled over in front of the house from his mother's Iqbalnagar house and hurled at least two bombs from his peanut basket at him in the well-orchestrated attack, rocking the entire area and badly damaging the car.

His younger son and daughter, who were also in the car, survived the attack unscathed. The elder son, Asif Kabir, is being treated for splinter injuries at a city clinic.

As the news of Balu's death in the operating theatre of the KMCH broke, hundreds of shell-shocked people, including journalists, political leaders and other professionals gathered outside the hospital, disconsolate with grief at the fatal frequency of violence in the otherwise serene city.

According to his family, Balu, serving his third stint as Khulna Press Club president since last October, received several death threats from outlaws for espousing a bold stand against them in his mass-circulation local newspaper and fuelling anti-outlaw sentiment in the wake of Manik's killing.

His latest death threat came from the Janajuddha faction.

Akbar Ali, deputy commissioner (South) of Khulna Metropolitan Police, blamed the outlaws operating in Khulna, the heart of restive southwest, for the killing. But he would not give details.

Paramilitaries of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) were called in to assist armed police to maintain peace.

Police retrieved two live hand bombs from the peanut basket left behind in the UNO Park opposite the house of Balu by the killer.

## **WAVE OF PROTEST**

The killing of Balu, a valiant freedom fighter with an opulent past in student politics, triggered a wave of protest in Khulna and elsewhere.

The main opposition Awami League (AL) brought out a huge protest procession in Khulna, demanding immediate arrest and exemplary punishment to the killers and will stage countrywide demonstrations tomorrow.

An emergency meeting of AL Central Working Committee with party President Sheikh Hasina in the chair also decided to hold a press conference on June 30 from where it will announce the next course of agitation programmes.

Hasina, also the leader of the opposition, is likely to visit Khulna today to protest the killing and express sympathy for the members of the bereaved family.

She is also likely to address a protest rally at Khulna Press Club.

BNP leaders including Mayor Shaikh Tayebur Rahman condemned the killing.

Khulna-based journalists unveiled a seven-day mourning and protest programmes including a daylong hartal tomorrow and a mourning rally on July 1 in Khulna.

Other programmes include holding a protest rally, wearing black badges, hoisting black flags at the press club and all local newspaper offices, staging mourning procession and offering milad mahfil.

The leaders of Khulna Press Club, Khulna Union of Journalists (KUJ) and Metropolitan Union of Journalists (MUJ) and editors of local dailies in separate statements demanded exemplary punishment to the killers.

The coffin of Balu was kept at his house to enable people to pay their last respect to him before burial at Basupara graveyard today, after a namaz-e-Janaza at Shahid Hadis Park at 11:00am and another at Iqbalnagar Mosque after Zohr prayers.

Balu, who was born in Itna village in Narail on October 4, 1947, participated in the movement against Hamidur Rahman Education Commission in 1962 long before doing his BA in 1974.

He became the joint convenor of 'Swadhin Bangla Chhatra Sangram Parishad' during the Liberation War, the central committee vice-president of Chhatra League in 1970 and represented Bangladesh to a youth rally in Berlin in 1972.

He was elected publicity secretary of Khulna City Awami League in 1976.

Balu was elected president of Khulna Press Club in 1984, 1998 and 2003. He became the vice-president of Khulna Zonal Newspaper Editors' Association in 1990 and a member of Mongla Port Authority in 1998.

In 1992, he received the president's award and the gold medal of Dr Ashraf Siddiqui Foundation the next year for his contribution to journalism.

Balu is survived by his 80-year-old mother, two sons and a daughter. His first wife Akhtar Jahan Ruma died of cancer in 1981, leaving behind their son Asif. His second wife Ara Kabir, mother of son Ashik and daughter Tumpa, died of a stroke in 2001.

Freelance journalists Mr Nabile Ahmmed 27, was killed in Dhaka on March 07, 2004 by some miscreants. Family members of a former reporter identified his body at Mitford hospital morgue five days after he was murdered at Keraniganj.

The body of Nabil A Latif, 27, a former cultural reporter of daily New Age, was identified by his family members at Mitford hospital morgue last night, where it was kept for five days.

Nabil was hacked to death by unidentified assailants at Keraniganj Tuesday last.

Police said the killers stabbed him in the throat before hacking and torturing him to death Tuesday night and dumped his body in a playground at Brahmansur, some seven kilometres from Keraniganj Police Station.

After finding his body, Sub-Inspector Mohammad Afazuddin filed a murder case with the station Wednesday. In the FIR, he said unidentified miscreants abducted him by tact and hacked him to death in cold blood.

Nabil, father of a one-and-a-half-year-old son, left his house at 5/C, Siddheshwari Tuesday morning telling he might go to Sylhet. He never returned home.

As the family lost all trace of him, Jamal Ahmed, Nabil's brother-in-law, lodged a general dairy with Ramna Police Station Thursday.

Finding a chequebook issued by Janata Bank Moghbazar Branch in a pocket of Nabil's trousers, Keraniganj police contacted the branch, collected his address from there and informed his family yesterday morning.

Farhana Sultana, Nabil's wife, said he also worked for Zoom Super Com Limited at Defence Officers' Housing Society (DOHS). He was also a member of a musical band named Empire.

Only son of Abdul Latif, now living in Italy, Nabil was known as a modest and polite young man in his locality and among his former colleagues at the New Age.

### **Journalist arrested on "murder" charge**

On 10 May, 2004 police arrested Aurobindo Pal (m) a free-lance press photographer at Nandail, Mymensingh, in north-central Bangladesh on charges of "murder" after he refused to hand over the negative films he took during police firing at a polling centre on May 9.

Police barged into the house at dawn of Aurobindo Pal, who is also the Vice-President of Nandail Press Club and searched his room and demanded to hand over the film or face dire consequences. A day earlier to his arrest, he is an eyewitness of the police firing at Achargaon High School voting centre for Nandail municipality election. He courageously took photographs of the incident, when Khohinoor Miah, Superintendent of Police (chief) of Mymensingh himself was responsible for ordering to fire upon the voters.

Earlier Khohinoor Miah, Assistant Police Commissioner was blamed for physical torture of journalist Saleem Samad in December 2003. The United States embassy and Embassies of European Union in Dhaka have imposed restriction on his travel to North America and Europe for abusing human rights.

Earlier police clashed with voters at the polling station and killed two protesters, a least 17 persons were arrested. Aurobindo with courage took photographs. He was requested to hand over the film, but declined.

In the morning of Monday at 3:45 am, police searched his home demanding to hand over the negatives of the photographs he took at the voting centre, failing to find the film he was taken to the police station. Soon the officer-in-charge of the Nandail police station said he has order from his superior to confiscate the film and failing he should be arrested.

The District Commissioner (district administrator) of Mymensingh told the lawyers of the journalist that the police chief has refused to listen to his advise. The lawyers would move bail petition on Tuesday (today). It is unlikely that he would be released as he has been charged under Criminal Procedure Code (Cr.PC) 302, a non-bailable section.

Members of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party's youth wing, the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), went on a rampage around midday attacking opposition student demonstrators with sticks and iron rods, injuring at least 40 protesters, according to Bangladeshi news reports. Six opposition organizations were protesting the August 21 assassination attempt on opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, and calling for the ruling government to resign.

When journalists took photographs of the violence, members of the JCD turned on them, beating them, grabbing their cameras, and confiscating their film, according to the English-language newspaper The Daily Star. Journalists injured in the melee included Sahabul Huq Sabu, a reporter with the Bangla-language daily Ittefaq; Mokarram Hossain Shubho, university correspondent for the Bangla-language daily Prothom Alo; photographer Zia Islam, of Prothom Alo; and photographer Amran Hossain, of The Daily Star. Four others, including photographers for the English-language daily New Age and the Bangla-language daily Bhorer Kagoj, were also attacked but not fully identified in press accounts.

JCD members also attacked the offices of Dhaka University's journalism department, beating down the door of the chairman, Golam Rahman, and ransacking the office of senior professor Arefin Siddique, according to the United News of Bangladesh (UNB), the national news wire service. Opposition representatives accused the police of standing by while the JCD attacked the students and journalists, doing nothing to defend them. Campus groups, including the Dhaka University Journalists Association, condemned the violence, and called for the arrest and expulsion of JCD members responsible for the attacks.

The president of the JCD, Shahabuddin Laltu, denied responsibility for the assaults, claiming that those responsible for the violence against the journalists were "outsiders," according to the UNB.

Clashes between rival political activist groups frequently break out on the Dhaka University campus. Tensions have heightened in recent days in the wake of the grenade attack on Awami League head Sheikh Hasina as she was leaving a rally in protest of another bomb attack in August.

At least 13 journalists have been killed in south and south-west Bangladesh in the past ten years.

More than 40 journalists were attacked and assaulted across the country in July this year alone.

A total of 20 journalists were assaulted and injured, two were abducted and 11 others were threatened in the countryside in July. A total of 28 journalists were subjected to attacks in August. Twelve press club offices were attacked. A few days before his murder he had helped police to identify some gang members. Political militants, criminal gangs or religious extremists constantly target journalists in Bangladesh for brutal attack.

Since 18 August, the daily Prothom Alo has received threats from several Islamist organisations angered by the newspaper's exposure on Middle East funding for the religious schools, the madrasas. Eight journalists were injured in grenade attacks on the Awami League opposition party rally in Dhaka on 21 August. Four journalists have been assaulted since 13 August and more than 60 others have been threatened in less than one month. In the May-June period, 108 journalists were tortured or harassed in 80 incidents of press bashing.

The highest number of 31 subjected to assault in Rajshahi division and the lowest six in Sylhet. A total of 108 newsmen having fallen under mischief of the muscle-flexing circles, 103 belong to print media while five to electronic media. Cases were filed against 30 newsmen while 30 threatened, 14 injured, six arrested and 10 harassed, Besides, the houses of five came under attack; three were prevented from distributing newspapers, three kidnapped and six obstructed from discharging their professional duties. Reporting on terrorist activities, corruption, intra-party grouping, smuggling, extortion, conflict of the UP chairmen, drug running, activities of the extremist groups and immoral acts of police were cited as the cause of ire against the reporters. Out of 80 incidents, 34 took place under the influence of political leaders and activists, 16 of businessmen and smugglers, 11 of police and administrative officials, and three for rivalry among the journalists. Reasons for 16 of the incidents were not known.

A total of 30 journalists were injured, 29 attacked, 60 more threatened and three were arrested in the first three months ( January to March )2004. Bangladesh appeared to be one of the most violent countries in the world for journalists, with almost daily cases of physical assaults and intimidation-particularly in rural areas. Local journalists say they are increasingly under threat for reporting on political violence, graft, and organized crime, but that the main cause of brutality against the press in Bangladesh is pervasive corruption. The professional rights and freedom of journalists are being curbed frequently now either by laws or by other restraints imposed by the government. The risks are on the increase with arrest, torture and even death for their news reports which reflect social realities.

Despite these risks, more and more qualified and competent youths are joining the profession of journalism, with the conviction that journalism is a noble profession. Simultaneously, big companies in the country are investing large some of money in media sector. Within the last four

years the print media has been enormously upgraded in line with the growing demand of the readers. Electronic media are also flourishing in the country. Besides the state-owned television, three private televisions are in the air now. Another 3 or four companies is trying to get licenses to install private TV stations.

According to the statistics there are 7750 journalists working in different newspapers and news agencies in Bangladesh. Among them 2600 are full-time journalists. There are 25 journalists' related organizations in Dhaka.

The Bangladesh Journalists Rights Forum (BJRF) and Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum-BMSF are national organization of the journalists in the country attempting to organize journalists in 64 Districts.

Working conditions of journalists are not good at all. Although the Fifth Wage Board Award was announced in October 1997, most of the newspapers are still now reluctant to implement it. Even the Newspaper Employees (Condition and Services) Act, 1974 is formulated, the professional journalists are working without wages and in extremely adverse conditions. The division in the main journalists' union weakened the struggle against the irregularities.

The Government advertisement policies are also hindering the development of newspaper industries. Newspapers, which publish news about corruption or misdeeds of the government, find themselves without advertisements, thus making it difficult to continue publication. Following are some specific cases of violation of press freedom: During the past few years journalists' organizations and leaders of journalists' community urged the government to stop harassment of journalists.

### **Mass Media and Laws**

According to the Ministry of Information, 2215 newspapers and periodicals, including 378 national and regional dailies, are being published in the country. Additionally, Four news agencies including Bengali News service Bangladesh Sangbad Sangtha (BSS), a state-owned national news agency, and the privately owned national news agency- the United News of Bangladesh (UNB), Annandha Bangla Sangbad (ABAS) News service and National News Service (NNB) are operating in the country.

At present, Bangladesh also has a state-owned television and three satellite television stations in the private sector. The media in Bangladesh face restrictive laws enacted right from 1876 to 1991 which restrain freedom of expression. These laws control private media, news agencies, radio, television, theatre, audio-video materials, VCR rental and video copying, cinema, advertising, and telecommunication. Main reason for repression of journalists . The disunity among of journalists and journalists organizations has been continuing to the harm of the country and the community have main reason for repression of journalists .This disunity is responsible for oppression of journalists who can not raise united voice . This situation must be changed for the wealthy growth by journalists and healthy growth of democratic society. Journalists will be fighting for their rights and this call for total unity of the journalists' community. Most of the press lord of Bangladesh have been publishing news papers to protect their businesses and others interest. It is time for journalists to get united to realize their demands and work for realization of their democratic rights as well the rights of the people.

### **Action Plan of BJRF:**

The Bangladesh Journalists Rights Forum (BJRF) organized seminars and workshops on different issues in 64 districts to promote open discussion .Political leaders and Member of parliaments and leaders and representatives of professional associations were present in seminars and workshops . The BJRF also organised various national seminar in different parts in Bangladesh. The BJRF also organized a national seminar at the National Press Club, Dhaka, recently, where speakers addressed the issue of risks and prospects of journalism in Bangladesh. They urged the government to formulate a Special Protection Act to ensure professional rights and safety for journalists. They also stressed the needed for greater coordination in the journalists community, particularly between different organizations and greater unity among the journalists' organizations to uphold rights of journalists. The BJRF will organise and campaigns programme in 64 districts with local journalists organisation and press club nest two years for journalists unity and capacity building. The BJRF will organise campaigns awareness programme for press freedom at a time on May 3 international press freedom day around the country.

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