

IFJ Bangladesh Country Report-2006

Overview:

In Bangladesh, intimidation and harassment from politicians, the police, criminals and religious fundamentalists continued to dominate the country's media landscape. The impunity and lack of accountability of those who committed grave violations of journalists' rights is symptomatic of widespread lawlessness and lack of governance. Disturbingly, those who attempt to expose corruption and criminal activities often fall victim to these very elements.

BANGLADESH – REIGN OF IMPUNITY

It takes courage to be a journalist in Bangladesh. Intimidation and harassment from politicians, the police, criminals and religious fundamentalists continue to dominate the country's media landscape. The impunity and lack of accountability for those who have committed grave violations of journalists' rights are only symptomatic of widespread lawlessness and lack of governance.

And disturbingly, those who attempt to expose corruption and criminal activities often fall victim to these very elements.

Throughout 2005, at least 392 journalists were harassed in 264 separate incidents. Two journalists were murdered; 180 journalists received death threats; 43 faced attacks; 81 cases were filed against journalists; 50 journalists were injured by physical torture and five journalists were arrested. Apart from these, many journalists were verbally abused by political elites, especially by the stalwarts of the ruling party, such as ministers or the speaker of the parliament.

In May 2005, Gautam Das, 28, district bureau chief of the Daily Shamokal was found strangled in his office; his hands and legs broken and a rope tied around his neck. Das had been threatened in the past as he had a history of writing on local extortion, drug dealing and the activities of Islamic militant groups.

For those journalists who survived attempts on their lives, carrying out their profession continues to be risky.

On May 17, Syed Monjur Morshed, editor of the English fortnightly Horizon was attacked with a knife while he was returning home to Goran in the city. On May 21, local armed

cadres kidnapped, injured and attempted to burn, G.M. Shahid, correspondent of Dainik Khabarpotro and executive editor of Aporadh Barta.

In September, M. Mahfuz, a correspondent for Dainik Gramer Kagoj, was brutally attacked and seriously injured by five members of the underground Biplobi Communist Party (Janajuddha) at Harianakunddu, Jhinaidah. Mahfuz has been threatened several times for his reports. Mahfuz was left with head wounds requiring 17 stitches, after being stabbed with a dagger.

The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was responsible for several incidents of violence against media persons. Party workers vented their anger on journalists who dared to express dissenting opinions. In November, Habibur Rahman Hahbib, general secretary of Manikchari Press Club and correspondent of Dainik Ajker Kagoj and Dainik Supravat was beaten up by cadres of the ruling BNP. Prior to the attack, ruling party MP Wahud Bhuiyan made threats against local journalists of Khagrachari.

BNP members held a protest and set fire to the Dainik Jugantor in Ullahpara, Shirajganj. The incident occurred after the Dainik Jugantor published a report titled "Bangla Bhai – the chief of Islami Militants stays in a BNP leader's house".

Similarly, Rifat Bin Taha, journalist with the Dainik Janakantha, received a verbal death threat for a report he published on militants in Norail, South-West Bangladesh. The brother-in-law of a prominent MP Mufti Imranuzzaman threatened Bin Taha and his family if a retraction was not published within 24 hours.

Rafiqul Islam, a correspondent for daily Amar Desh in Rajshahi, was brutally attacked by members of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), the student wing of the ruling party. Ten attackers entered the Durgapur Press Club and assaulted Rafiqul, who is the club's president.

Nurul Islam, the club's general secretary, was also attacked when he tried to intervene. Prior to the attacks Rafiqul had filed a complaint with the police after he received warnings not to report on alleged extortion by JCD members, but no protection was offered.

Nayeemul Islam Khan, editor and publisher of the Daily Amader Shomoy received a threat from unidentified criminals to stop publishing the newspaper immediately otherwise they would hurl grenades at the office. In August, intimidation became widespread when seven journalists from different media organisations received death threats via post in Bagerhat, warning them against writing about the local member of parliament. This was followed a month later by death threats to nine newspaper journalists in Satkhira, who received burial shrouds through the postal service.

The letters warned against reporting matters relating to Islamic groups and spread fear among the journalists.

Threatening letters and burial shrouds were also sent to the president of the Gauranadi Press Club and Dainik Ittefaq correspondent, Giassuddin Mia, and Dainik Ajker Kagoj correspondent, Ahsan Ullah Mia, who had published reports about the fundamentalist group Hizbut Tauhid and the Purba Bangla Communist Party (Janajuddha). The letters were written in red ink and accused the journalists of being 'fake Muslims' and demanded that they give up journalism or risk being bombed.

A militant organisation calling itself Allah'r Dal (Allah's Group) sent threatening letters to ten local papers, including Dainik Chandpur Kantha. The letter demanded the release of local Allah'r Dal chief Shamim Hossein, alias Saifullah Galib, being questioned in connection to a series of bomb attacks on August 17 and October 3, 2005. In its letter, the group threatened to blow up the newspaper offices, along with other important local buildings if their demands were not met.

Proving once more that journalism is a risky profession in Bangladesh, in December, three journalists who were covering a demonstration in Gazipur, north of Dhaka, were among 30 others who were injured when a member of the Islamist movement Jamayetul Mujahideen Bangladesh set off a bomb outside a public building. At least one person was killed in the attack. The three reporters were Nazrul Islam Badami, the correspondent of the daily The New Nation, Belal Hossain of the BSS news agency and Aminul Islam of the local newspaper Ajker Janata.

Dip Azad, bureau chief of the national Bangla daily Jugantor and former treasurer of Khulna Press Club, who was fortunate to escape a bomb attack on him in January 4, 2005, faces continuous threats, has been forcibly displaced and is unable to continue his work.

High-handedness by security forces Far from bringing to justice the perpetrators of violent acts against journalists, police and security forces were themselves responsible for harassing and attacking media persons.

On July 7, 2005, ten journalists were brutally assaulted by National Security Intelligence (NSI) forces while they protested the arrest and assault of their colleagues, Sheikh Enamul Kabir and Sheikh Mamun. Ten journalists were part of a group of 15 to 20 journalists from various publications assembled to protest outside NSI headquarters. It is alleged that the NSI personnel attacked the group with bamboo sticks and iron rods, leaving ten protesters injured, two of them critically.

Kafil Uddin Anu, Dainik Saikat correspondent and Abdul Latif Bachchu, Dainik Dinkal correspondent, were arrested on false charges and threatened by a local police officer in the southeast region of Bangladesh after they published reports detailing a smuggling operation. A local member of parliament (MP) instigated the arrests and a case was filed against the reporters by an alleged smuggler.

In yet another assault on press freedom, the Government of Bangladesh cancelled the reservation for the venue of an important national journalists' convention for 'security reasons'.

On November 11, 2005, the national convention against the repression of journalists, terrorism and militancy, organised by the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), was to be held at the auditorium of the Diploma Engineers' Institute. However the NSI requested the venue authorities to cancel all reservations from November 10-14, for 'security reasons'. The reservation was cancelled just thirty hours prior to the scheduled start of the conference after being booked since October 18, 2005.

Defamation cases used to exert control Journalists who dare to investigate and report the truth in Bangladesh often find themselves fighting cases of defamation.

In July 2005, warrants for arrest were issued against the editors of two Bengali-language daily newspapers in a defamation suit filed by a member of the ruling Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) who stated that the newspapers had published reports implicating him and his two brothers in the murder of Sagir Ahmed, a leader of BNP's youth front.

In another instance, ruling party leader, Fakir Abu Bakkar Siddiqui, of Melandaha in Jamalpur district and chairman of Nayanagar Union Parishad (Union Parishad is the first tier of the local government) filed a defamation case against the daily newspapers; Dainik Bhorer Kagoj, Dainik Prothom Alo and local correspondents of Dainik Shamokal including editors and publishers of the dailies for publishing a news report on him.

In a positive move, the High Court in February 2006 granted anticipatory bail to Bazlur Rahman, editor of Dainik Sangbad. In July 2005, Dainik Sangbad published a report titled, "Conflict among local BNP members in Jamalpur". Angered by the news of his involvement in a legal case, Mosharraf Hossain filed a defamation case against Bazlur Rahman, editor of Dainik Sangbad and correspondent Utpal Kanti Ghosh.

But in March, the Dhaka Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court (CMM) issued an arrest warrant against editor, publisher and reporter of the daily Amar Desh in a defamation case.

Severe penalties against the media for exposing human rights violations and lack of governance are a matter of serious concern, given Bangladesh's record of gross human rights violations.

According to a Bangladeshi non governmental organisation, Adhikar, the security forces have killed 396 persons between January 1, 2005 and December 30, 2005, out of which 111 persons were killed in the custody of the infamous Rapid Action Battalion (RAB); 258 in police custody, and as many as 340 persons are supposed to have died in 'crossfire'.

National mechanisms of accountability are weak, or nonexistent for the most part. Trends to tighten control also do not bode well for the right to freedom of expression. In February 2006, the Government passed a bill allowing intelligence and law enforcement agencies to tap telephone conversations. Opposition members opposed the bill and said the law is unconstitutional and against the fundamental rights of citizens, as it will infringe on their right to privacy.

The impartiality of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary also leaves much to be desired. In this context, the role of media is particularly significant, and attacks on press freedom must be viewed with alarm.

Report by IFJ Asia with inputs from: Bangladesh Freedom Watch:

bangladeshfreedomwatch@yahoo.com; Bangladesh Journalists Rights Forum (BJRF):
bjrf21@yahoo.com; Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum (BMSF):
bmsf@dhaka.net