

Press Freedom in Bangladesh-2006-2007

A STATE OF EMERGENCY FOR JOURNALISTS

The declaration of a state of emergency in January this year, with blanket media censorship, struck at the heart of press freedom in Bangladesh. Sparked by recurring turmoil between the two major political parties, the state of emergency was declared on January 11, with an army-backed caretaker administration and a presidential order to gag the media.

There was a complete news blackout for nearly two days, with all television channels ordered to suspend broadcasting. The newspapers were also advised to treat news 'carefully' and reports and articles have been published in freely all media.

However, following a series of meetings between editors, senior journalists and the officials of the newly formed caretaker administration, the ban was relaxed allowing the media to report factually, especially on political stories. Television channels went back on-air with news programs and the newspapers began to publish stories, albeit with some degree of censorship.

The Information Ministry is now encouraging the media to support the interim administration's cause, resulting in a kind of self-censorship, as no media reports wish to be perceived as critical to the present administration.

Government advice for journalists

The government issued a letter on April 17, 2007 to all media outlets asking them not to publish or broadcast ill-motivated, harassing or misinformative reports about anybody.

"Recently we have noticed that some of the media are publishing or broadcasting dishonest and unprofessional political statements, satirical sketches, cartoons, features, etc, which are creating confusion among the people," said the letter signed by Iftekhar Hossain, principal information officer of the Press Information Department under the Ministry of Information.

"You are requested to be more vigilant to ensure that the mass media do not provide any room for activities, propaganda or reports that are unnecessarily harassing or misinformative about anyone," the letter stated.

"The government hopes that the country's mass media will take greater care in publishing/broadcasting apolitical and substantial news, features, discussions, satirical sketches and cartoons, in order to maintain the positive role of the electronic and print media," the letter added.

"Moreover, it has also been noticed that some newspapers are publishing motivated and exaggerated reports about government officials, businessmen, professionals, intellectuals, and politicians in an effort to create confusion among the people," the letter went on.

"A few of the news media are spreading intentional misinformation about people of different classes and professions as a strategy for illegally extorting money, which is counterproductive to healthy, constructive and responsible journalism," Iftekhar said in the letter.

The letter also stated, "The mass media's role in carrying out the government's ongoing multifaceted reform programmes has been praised by all quarters. Because of this positive role, the government is always proactive in maintaining the freedom of the electronic and print media in spite of the country being under a state of emergency."

"As a result, the government has been flexible and tolerant in implementing the provisions of the Emergency Powers Act, 2007," the letter said

Shocking number of targeted journalists

Prior to the caretaker administration, the media faced troubled times. The ministers, members of parliament, local leaders and workers of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) engaged in media-bashing and harassment of journalists when corruption and anomalies were uncovered by the press.

Statistics show that the leaders and activists of the BNP-led four-party alliance were involved in at least 89 incidents of violence against journalists in 2006 alone. At least 462 journalists reported being attacked or harassed in 238 separate incidents. Among them, 247 were physically assaulted and 73 received death threats. Some 43 cases were filed in which at least 137 journalists were being sued. Additionally, journalists were verbally abused by the political stalwarts and their activists, repeating the trend of previous years. This continued until the neutral caretaker administration was handed power in October.

The highest number of physical assault on journalists was recorded in May 2006. At least 106 journalists were either physically assaulted or harassed in only 23 separate incidents, and six journalists received death threats. In Kushtia a ruling BNP member of parliament, Shahidul Islam, sent his loyal armed cadres to attack a journalists' convention that was taking place near the Kushtia Press Club on May 29. Many senior journalists, who were invited from Dhaka to attend the program, including the former president of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) and the *Bangladesh Observer* editor, Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, were injured in the attack.

On March 5, 2007, Jamal Uddin, correspondent for the news agency ABAS and the local daily *Dainik Giri Darpan*, went missing from his home in Kathaltala. The next day, his body was found near the Rangamati Lake. A part of his face was damaged and other parts of his body were found to have been scratched. A rope was also tied around his neck. The post-mortem report, released 12 days after the body was found, concluded that Uddin probably committed suicide. His colleagues and relatives however, have rejected this finding, saying it was based on circumstantial evidence, and that Uddin had no suicidal tendencies. Police claimed that they found an audio cassette on Uddin's body, where he recorded a suicide note. However, police refused to allow his colleagues to listen to the audio. One suspect has reportedly been arrested.

Media Owners and Journalists Jailed, Accused and Attacked

During the anti-corruption drive of the caretaker government, the joint forces have arrested a number of media owners. They face a variety of charges including promoting criminals, money laundering, abuse of authority and extortion. Those detained include the owner of television channels NTV and RTV and Bengali

language newspaper *Amar Desh*, Mosaddek Ali Falu (who also happens to a politician of the BNP), Enayetur Rahman Bappi, managing director of NTV, and Mahammad Abdus Selim, chairperson of Channel 1.

In the print media, persons arrested include Nurul Islam Babul, owner of the Bengali daily *Dainik Jugantor*, and Atiqullah Khan Masud, editor and publisher of *Dainik Janakantha*. Masud was detained at his office by joint forces, at about 10.30pm on March 8. Staff were not allowed to enter or leave until Masud was taken. He was not informed of the reason for his arrest but the officer said it was an order of a higher authority. Although a Dhaka court approved Masud's one-month detention from March 13, the High Court ordered the government to show cause as to why Masud's detention would not be considered illegal. Government press releases state that Masud was detained for running the newspaper on foreign funds and publishing propaganda to tarnish the image of the government. He was also accused of occupying land illegally in the name of housing businesses.

Masud also faces a number of defamation charges, including a case filed by a lawyer from the BNP, and his reporter Shangkar Kumar Dey, for running a 'defamatory' news item about the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) on December 5. Barrister Omar Sadat, the son-in-law of former minister and BNP leader Shajahan Siraj, also filed a similar case which argued the accused published a story headlined 'RAB shows its true colours at Hawa Bhaban's directives,' which tarnished the public image of RAB. Metropolitan magistrate Syed Mohammad Muzibul Haq, has ordered a judicial inquiry into the matter.

On February 26 the 12-storey building which houses private television channels NTV and RTV, and national daily newspaper *Dainik Amar Desh*, almost completely burnt down when it was set alight. Four people died, including a woman, and many others were seriously injured. Whether it was an act of sabotage or an accident remains unclear. The television channels' broadcast had to be suspended after the fire damaged all its equipment, control rooms and studios. *Dainik Amar Desh* continues to publish from a different location. NTV has resumed a test transmission for a couple of hours daily, however it is still uncertain as to when both channels will return to air full-time.

The Fourth Estate in Uncertain Times

The detention of top media owners sparked job security concerns among Bangladeshi journalists. With no sign of their release in the immediate future, organisations face ever tighter operating constraints.

Despite regular pressure on the media, there have been some positive developments, as demonstrated with the Ekushey Television (ETV). ETV relaunched on air from March 2007, following a High Court verdict, although there are still controversies over their use of Bangladesh Television (BTV)'s terrestrial facility. ETV was earlier shut down in 2002.

On April 18, 2007 Government of Bangladesh file a case in High Court to cancellation ETV trestle) facility (to stop use of Bangladesh Television transmission setup. During this reporting period case is going in the court for hearing.

Journalists are facing less intimidation and harassment, as the government focuses on its anti-corruption drive against high-profile politicians. Cleaning up state institutions and increasing accountability would go a long way to establishing a more journalist-friendly environment, and limit the scope for media harassment. The current government must make a strong commitment to this goal.

The interim administration has sought to involve the media in its fight against corruption and other social injustices. There are regular briefings from the office of the Chief Adviser, and other advisers are also readily available to talk to the media. A number of them acknowledge the crucial role the media is playing at this juncture of the nation's history. Some commentators have dubbed the media a 'parliament', representing people in the absence of a political government.

In the absence of critical reports of the interim administration, however, Bangladesh's media is still censored and falls short of its duty as the Fourth Estate.

MEDIA WORKERS KILLED

Jamal Uddin - March 6, 2007

Jamal Uddin, a 25 year old correspondent for the ABAS news agency and local daily *Dainik Giri Darpan* in Rangamati, in the southwest of Bangladesh, was found dead near the Bangladesh Tourism Complex. Uddin had been missing from his home in Kathaltala since March 5. His body was found under a tree near the Rangamati Lake with a rope around his neck. He had injuries to his face and a broken neck. Uddin's family and colleagues rejected the suicide verdict of the post-mortem report and demanded a fresh investigation into the case.

MEDIA WORKERS TORTURED

Shafiqul Islam Shafiq – October 28, 2006

Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) arrested Shafiqul Islam Shafiq, correspondent of private photo agency *Focus Bangla*, from Shikdari Bazar, Bagmara Upazila in Rajshahi. He was accused of having contact with extremists. Later Shafiq was handed over to police and jailed. During Shafiq's hearing at the magistrates' court, he alleged that RAB members gave him electric shocks and tortured him for eight hours by hanging him upside down at their office. The RAB official also reportedly threatened that if Shafiq spoke to anyone about the torture he would be implicated in 10 murder cases. Shafiq said that while he was nearly unconscious the officials took three signatures on blank paper. The Officer in Charge of Bagmara police station, Motiar Rahman, told reporters that Shafiq confessed to the police about his involvement with extremists. On November 1, Shafiq applied for bail to the first class

magistrate court but the prosecution sought more time for interrogation. "If he does not confess, he will be killed in crossfire," RAB officials allegedly threatened.

MEDIA WORKERS ATTACKED

Attack on *Dainik Andolaner Bazar* – May 30, 2006

BNP lawmaker Shahidul Islam's cadres attacked Quality Press at Courtpara area and stopped the publication of *Dainik Andolaner Bazar* daily for continuing to run critical reports on the local government. The cadres attacked and threatened the press employees and snatched the documents required to print the newspaper. As a result, no issue of *Dainik Andolaner Bazar* came out on May 30. The newspaper earlier sought security for its reporters and staff from the local administration.

Eight journalists assaulted – June 1, 2006

Eight journalists were injured as police charged a journalists' procession with batons in Satkhira. The journalists, wearing black badges, were staging a silent procession from Satkhira Press Club, protesting the May 29 attack on journalists in Kushtia by the ruling party cadres. Police swung into action when the demonstrators tried to enter the Deputy Commissioner's office to submit a memorandum. The injured journalists were Kalyan Banerjee of *Dainik Prothom Alo*, M Qamruzzaman of *UNB* and *Amar Desh*, Habibur Rahman of Channel I, Mozaffar Rahman of *Dainik Janmobhumi*, Raghunath Kha of *Dainik Patradoot*, Manirul Islam of *Dainik Ajker Kagoj*, and photojournalists Ashrafuzzaman Asha and Tamjibur Rahman Tamjid. Defying police obstruction, the angry journalists later formed a human chain on the court premises. They also submitted a memorandum to the Prime Minister and the State Minister for Home Affairs demanding immediate arrests and punishment of the culprits involved in the attack on journalists in Kushtia.

Arson attack on *Dainik Jugantor* – July 25, 2006

Islami Chhatra Shibir activists attacked and set fire to the offices of *Dainik Nayadiganta* in Ullapara, in response to critical articles of a possible MP candidate.

Ajizar Rahman - August 28, 2006

Bangladesh Awami League leaders of Khetlal, Joypurhat attacked Ajizar Rahman, the Khetlal correspondent for *Dainik Prothom Alo*. Abdul Majid Mollah, Upazilla General Secretary of Awami League, led the group, which also included Publication Secretary Sirajul Islam Sarder, Secretary of Cultural Affairs Golam Mohiuddin, President of Jubo League Enamul Hoque Fight and several others. They beat Ajizar and stole his money and mobile phone. The attackers then threatened to break his hands and legs if he published any news against their views. Reports of clashes

between the local groups of Awami League were published in several dailies in the lead up to the attack.

University correspondents attacked – September 16, 2006

A group of Chhatra League activists attacked university correspondents at the Dhaka University campus for attending an opposing group's press conference. Around five minutes into the press conference, organised by the misplaced leaders of the Chhatra League, the Chhatra League's current leaders arrived and attacked journalists with rods, sharp weapons, hockey sticks and iron bars. A number of journalists were injured, among them Palash Sarker, correspondent for *Dainik Jai Jai Din*, Kamrul Hasan Khan from the *Daily Star*, Mazharul Anwar Khan Shipu from *Dainik Janakantha*, Niladri Shekhar from *Dainik Amader Shomoy* and Masumal Jaki from the *Daily Observer*. Kamrul Hasan Khan sustained serious head injuries. The Dhaka University Journalists' Association protested the incident, decided to boycott all news of Chhatra League, and filed a case with authorities.

Rupgonj Press Club - October 2, 2006

Cadres of local Jubodal launched an attack on a general meeting at Rupgonj Press Club in Rupgonj, near Dhaka. Relatives of local Jubodal General Secretary Ripon and several other identified criminals damaged furniture and injured seven journalists. The attackers went to the Press Club and asked the caretaker for the whereabouts of the journalists. When the caretaker refused to give the group the keys to the club, they assaulted him and broke into the Club. A. Sohel of *Dainik Manabzamin*, A. Hy Milon of *Dainik Jugantor*, Abul Hasan Asif of *Dainik Inqilab*, Khalil Sikdar of *Ajker Kagoj*, Abdul Kalam Shakil of NTV, Ashiqur Rahman Hannan of *Dainik Sangbad* and Maqbul Hossain of *Dainik Dinkal* all sustained injuries.

Ansar Hossain – November 13, 2006

A group of criminals attacked Ansar Hossain, correspondent for *Dainik Amar Desh* and news agency BDNews24, at his Noniya Chara house in Cox's Bazar. The miscreants allegedly attacked him with sharp knives for his articles on criminal activities. A case has been filed with the Cox's Bazar Police Station in connection with this attack.

Shafiq Ahmed, Monju Hossain, Shimanto Khokon, Sajedur Rahman, Monir Hossain – November 23, 2006

BNP activists attacked journalists in front of the BNP party's central office in Naya Paltan in Dhaka, leaving at least five injured. The activists accused the group of poor coverage and misreporting of BNP party programmes. The injured included Shafiq Ahmed, reporter, Monju Hossain, cameraman for STV, Shimanto Khokon, reporter, Sajedur Rahman, cameraman for RTV, and Monir Hossain, cameraman for ATN Bangla. BNP activists also attempted to vandalise a van belonging to ATN Bangla parked on the party office premises. One of the BNP leaders immediately came down to the street and brought the situation under control. Later in a press release the party leaders apologised for the incident and assured that the culprits would be punished.

MEDIA WORKERS THREATENED AND HARASSED

Zahurul Islam – May 13, 2006

Lal Chand, the leader of a group of miscreants which has alleged links to the BNP, threatened Zahurul Islam, correspondent of *Dainik Ittefaq*, in Daulatpur Upazilla of Kushtia. Islam had published an article which alleged Lal Chand was responsible for the kidnapping of a farmer. Chand said the journalist would be killed by “crossfire”, a euphemism for unlawful killing by law-enforcement. Lal Chand also mentioned that he could not kill the correspondent because the killing might put local MP Bachchu Molla in trouble. Lal Chand has about 50 charges, including murder cases, pending with different police stations.

M. Zahed Chowdhury – May 15, 2006

Tazul Islam, assistant sub inspector of police threatened to break the legs and hands of M. Zahed Chowdhury, staff reporter of *Dainik Desh Bidesh* and correspondent of *Dainik Purbakone*. The incident happened due to the publication of a report in *Dainik Desh Bidesh* and *Dainik Purbakone* on police corruption.

Ahsan Habib – May 28, 2006

Ahsan Habib, correspondent of *Dainik Prothom Alo* in Ranisongkoil was beaten by police, including Abu Sayeed, the officer in charge of Ranisongkoil police station. Habib was covering a transport workers meeting when police started beating the reporter in response to an article Habib had written about local police torturing a businessman in their custody. Habib was then taken to the police station where he sustained more beatings and verbal abuse before his father arrived to post bail.

Jasim Mahmud – June 24, 2006

Jasim Mahmud, correspondent of *Dainik Prothom Alo* in Chatkhil, Noakhali, received death threats from Alauddin, the youth wing of BNP (the ruling coalition), after he published a critical article on the group.

Kazi Ishaq Ahmed and Sohelur Rahman – July 26, 2006

Police official Farid Ahmed threatened to kill Kazi Ishaq Ahmed, correspondent of *Dainik Janakantha* and Sohelur Rahman, correspondent of *Dainik Dinkal* after the newspapers published reports of Ahmed’s illegal activities.

Jahanara Ferdous – July 28, 2006

The local Chhatradal (the student wing of the ruling party) President Muhammad Zahir Uddin Arif verbally abused Jahanara Ferdous, a female reporter with the local *Weekly Jahur*. Members of the group went to her house and threatened to kill her. Arif and the local ruling party cadres also distributed leaflets with vulgar and unpleasant words against the journalist in Porshorum market earlier in the month.

Moniruzzaman Payel – September 7, 2006

Moniruzzaman Payel, Editor and Publisher of *Dainik Bancharampur Barta*, a local newspaper published from Brahmanbaria, east of Dhaka, was forced to flee his home in fear of a BNP supported attack. On September 7, General Secretary of Bancharampur Upazila BNP M M Ilias locked up the office of *Dainik Bancharampur Barta* with Moniruzzaman inside. He managed to flee through the back door, after which armed cadres led by Upazila Chhatradal Secretary Emdadul Haque Syed launched a search for him. Moniruzzaman was forced to go into hiding. The cadres

then issued threats to his relatives and family members. On October 5, Moniruzzaman sought security from the District Commissioner and Police Super in fear for his life.

Jatin Majumder – October 14, 2006

Cadres of VP Jainal in Feni, southeast of the country, threatened to kill Jatin Majumder, correspondent of *Dainik Jugantor*, if she didn't retract her report on VP's Jainal's activities in Jugator.

OBSTACLES TO THE DOMESTIC FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

Jahangir Alam –July 18, 2006

Security personnel at the Dhanmondi office of Awami League (AL) barred Jahangir Alam, reporter of *Dainik Prothom Alo* from covering AL President Sheikh Hasina's meeting with the party's grassroots level leaders. Earlier, similar restrictions were imposed on journalists of a number of national dailies and television channels including *Dainik Jai Jai Din*, *Dainik Dinkal*, *Dainik Sangram*, NTV, RTV, Channel I, Bangla Vision and Boishakhi Television. AL sources said Hasina was unhappy with the recent coverage of her programmes in *Dainik Prothom Alo* and directed the officials not to permit the daily's correspondent any access to AL programmes. Journalists of the other newspapers present at the AL office protested the move and left the office.

Journalists' entrance prohibited in secretariat – October 31, 2006

Home Secretary SM Johurul Islam announced a new order prohibiting journalists' entrance into the secretariat after office hours. All the journalists who hold accreditation cards have to abide by the new order. The Home Secretary told journalists the new order was issued in the interest of the security of the nation. He also said that all the government orders and statements would now be sent to Press Club so the journalists would not have to come to the secretariat for information. However, not all journalists are members of the National Press Club and journalists' argued the new restrictions would make it much harder to get information.

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