



URGENT ALERT!
Odhikar's Anti-Torture Project
Cancelled – Again

20 February 2010

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) received information that the NGO Affairs Bureau of the Bangladesh government released its decision to cancel Odhikar's anti-torture project for the second time.

Odhikar is a member organization of FORUM-ASIA. Its project, entitled "Human Rights Defenders Training and Advocacy Programme in Bangladesh", focuses mainly on the issue of torture. The project's activities include advocacy on criminalizing torture, establishing a tribunal against torture, and organizing roundtable discussions on torture-related issues. It also has campaign programmes advocating Bangladesh to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OP-CAT).

Odhikar's anti-torture project was first approved by the NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladeshi government on 28 April 2009. It is being funded by the Rehabilitation and Research Centres for Torture Victims (RCT) in Denmark, which is a part of the European Union funded OP-CAT project.

On 17 August 2009, the NGO Affairs Bureau issued a letter ordering Odhikar to shut down its anti-torture project. According to the letter, the project was objected to by the Ministry of Home Affairs, resulting in the project's cancellation. In response to the letter of the NGO Affairs Bureau, Odhikar filed a writ petition (No. 6550/2009) to the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, challenging the cancellation order. Consequently, on 11 October 2009, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court ruled against the government and stayed the NGO Affairs Bureau's order. Odhikar's project thus resumed and continued until its completion date on 31 December 2009.

After 31 December 2009, the European Union approved to extend Odhikar's anti-torture project up until the end of March 2010. Therefore, the RCT requested Odhikar to extend its project to March 2010. On 17 January 2010, Odhikar re-submitted the project again to the NGO Affairs Bureau, along with the project budget and prescribed government forms for the three-month extension, which are required for the renewal process.

However, on 11 February 2010, the NGO Affairs Bureau issued a letter refusing the extension of Odhikar's project. The NGO Affairs Bureau claims that its refusal to allow the extension of the project is based on the Ministry of Home Affairs's objection.

FORUM-ASIA believes that the act of the NGO Affairs Bureau refusing to allow the extension of the project of Odhikar is a violation of Article 13 of the UN Declaration

on Human Rights Defenders, which expressly states that everyone has the right to receive and utilize resources for the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights through peaceful means. Moreover, torture is one of the main concerns in Bangladesh right now and the project of Odhikar is clearly an important mechanism tackling this issue. This act of the NGO Affairs Bureau clearly belies the public pronouncements of the government that it has “zero tolerance on torture”. To demonstrate that it is indeed sincere in its pronouncement to combat torture, the government of Bangladesh must open the space to allow defenders to actively work and take concrete steps on this issue.

Suggested Action:

Please write letters to Ms. Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh and Mr. Mustak Hassan Md. Iftekhar, the Director General of the NGO Affairs Bureau, strongly urging them to overturn the decision of refusing an extension of Odhikar’s project on torture. They should allow Odhikar to extend its project to demonstrate the sincerity of its declaration that it has “zero tolerance on torture”.

Please send your letters to:

Ms. Sheikh Hasina

Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh
Prime Minister’s Office
Old Sangsad Bhaban
Tejgaon, Dhaka-1215
Bangladesh
Telephone : 880-2-8151157
Fax : 880-2-8113244
E-mail : info@pmo.gov.bd

Mr. Mustak Hassan Md. Iftekhar

Director General of the NGO Affairs Bureau
NGO Affairs Bureau
Matsya Bhaban (9th Floor)
13 # Shaheed Captain Mansur Ali Sarani
Ramna, Dhaka-1000 Bangladesh
Telephone : 880-2-9563827
Fax : 880-2-9562844
E-mail : info@ngoab.gov.bd