

2 September 2009

Re: Bangladesh – Government cancels human rights defender organisation's project

Human rights organisation, **Odhikar**, has received a letter on 31 August 2009 from the NGO Affairs Bureau informing the organisation that the Ministry of Home Affairs had objected to one of its projects entitled “Human Rights Defenders Training and Advocacy Programme in Bangladesh,” and that it was thereby cancelled. No official explanation was mentioned in the letter for the Ministry's objection. Odhikar is an organisation that works on awareness raising of human rights and human rights abuses in Bangladesh through monitoring and training projects.

On 20 November 2008, the “Human Rights Defenders Training and Advocacy Programme in Bangladesh” project was sent to the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs by the NGO Affairs Bureau for their comments. The project was to be funded by the Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims (RCT) in Denmark as part of a large project funded by the European Union. The NGO Affairs Bureau comes under the authority of the Office of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and is the institution through which all NGO projects are cleared prior to their gaining permission to use foreign funds. For 14 years, Odhikar, like other Bangladeshi NGOs, has been submitting projects to the NGO Affairs Bureau, for approval from the Ministry of Home Affairs as per government mandated procedure.

After five months, the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, through the NGO Affairs Bureau, finally gave its approval of the project, which then commenced with RCT funds. Prior to receiving the letter of 31 August 2009, Odhikar had already conducted advocacy meetings in five district levels on criminalising torture, fact-finding and documentation on issues relating to torture , as well as holding rallies on the occasion of International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. Odhikar had also organised a tribunal against torture and round table discussions and campaign programmes for Bangladesh to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT).

Front Line is concerned that the cancellation of Odhikar's project, “Human Rights Defenders Training and Advocacy Programme in Bangladesh,” by the Bangladeshi Government is directly related to the work of Odhikar in defence of human rights and its campaign against torture in Bangladesh.

Front Line urges the authorities in Bangladesh to:

1. Reverse the cancellation of Odhikar's “Human Rights Defenders Training and Advocacy Programme in Bangladesh,” as Front Line believes the project has been cancelled solely as a result of its human rights content;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that human rights defenders and organisations operating in Bangladesh are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals, and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.

Front Line respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights

defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw attention to Article 13: *“everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to solicit, receive and utilize resources for the express purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms through peaceful means, in accordance with article 3 of the present Declaration.”*

Yours sincerely,

Mary Lawlor

Mary Lawlor
Director