

Press statement

Odhikar condemns the indiscriminate killing of hundreds of unarmed Hefazate Islam activists and curtailing media freedom

On May 6, 2013 at around 2:30 am, a reported 10 thousand members of police, Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), along with the armed cadres of the ruling party, attacked thousands of leaders and activists of Hefazate Islam Bangladesh, a non-political religious group, at Shapla Chottor, Motijheel in the Capital. The demonstrators gathered at the Shapla Chottor after their 'Dhaka blockade' programme, with the permission of the government, for a public meeting.

That night, the law enforcement agencies began by removing media people from the area and shutting down the power supply. They opened fire in the dark with live ammunition, rubber-coated steel bullets and threw tear gas shells and sound grenades indiscriminately at the unarmed leaders and activists of Hefazate Islam, many of whom were sleeping after the day-long programme.

It was obvious that they wanted to hide the brutality of the operation and the numbers of dead and injured. It has been reported that hundreds of people were killed as a result of this attack. Hefazate Islam claimed that more than 2000 people were killed and thousands were injured. Odhikar is trying to ascertain the actual number of deaths, but it is very difficult at this stage without substantial evidence. Despite this, the nature of the operation and the information received so far from the survivors, shows that the number could be very large.

One of the injured persons, Rahmatullah, who was admitted to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital for treatment, informed Odhikar that he saw many dead bodies lying on street after the attack by law-enforcing agents. It has also been alleged that members of the law-enforcing agencies took away bodies from the spot by trucks and covered vans. The state-sponsored TV channel Bangladesh Television (BTV) and private TV channels and newspapers, (most of the owners belonging or supporting to the ruling party), are silent in this regard. The Government closed down two private television channels named Diganta TV and Islamic TV at 4:30 am on May 6 due to their airing of the scene of the night-time operation.

Hefazate Islam activists brought out protest rallies against the blanket attacks and killings later on May 6 at Kanchpur in Narayanganj, Hathazari in Chittagong and Fakirhat in Bagerhat

districts, where clashes also took place between them and the police. At least 27 people were reported killed, including one BGB member and two policemen.

It is to be mentioned that clashes also occurred between the activists of Hefazate Islam and law-enforcing agents on May 5, when Hefazate Islam activists were heading peacefully towards Motijheel to join the meeting from different areas (after completing the Dhaka blockade programme). During this time, activists of the ruling party, along with police and RAB attacked the Hefazate Islam activists – most of whom were from rural areas. According to various hospital sources, at least 16 persons were reported killed and 200 others were injured during this clash. Many vehicles were vandalised and political party offices, shops and buses set on fire. A large number of Hefazate Islam leaders and activists continued their protests by remaining at Shapla Chottor in Motijheel, in order to implement their 13 point demand.

Odhikar expresses grave concern over this killing spree. Odhikar believes that State repression has reached the maximum mark, causing a dangerous and unstable situation in Bangladesh. This is the first incident of large-scale indiscriminate killing by state agencies in Dhaka city, after 42 years of the independence of Bangladesh. It is a practice that ruling party activists, along with police, often attack activists of the opposition groups during hartals and blockade programmes called by the Opposition with violent results; and this trend continues. Odhikar believes that the duty of the State is to protect the human rights of its citizens and to ensure their fundamental freedoms. The State has failed to ensure such rights; rather the State has resorted to killing, torture and repression in order to silence the dissenting voices. Odhikar condemns such acts of brutal and indiscriminate killing of the unarmed citizens by the state actors.