



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS CONFERENCE

Venue: Zakariya City Holiday Resort, Khadimnagar, Sylhet

Date: May 17-18, 2013



Organised by Odhikar

INTRODUCTION

On May 17 and 18, Odhikar organised a Human Rights Defenders Conference in Zakariya City Holiday Resort, Khadimnagar, Sylhet.

The objective for arranging a Human Rights Defenders Conference is to strengthen the human rights activism. It is very important for human rights defenders to learn and share strategies with each other. It encourages novice human rights activists to learn from veteran human rights activists through sharing and exchanging experiences. The objective of this conference was to assess the knowledge of HRDs on issues regarding sensitivity, diversity, challenges, security and protection. A total of participants participated in the conference. The HRDs exchanged their views and pledged to promote human rights and combat human rights violations. Details of the conference proceedings are given below:

CONTENTS

The conference ran with several contents:

1. Challenges of Human Rights Activism
2. Human Rights Defenders Activism: How to mitigate gaps between the field and Odhikar office
3. People's Movement
4. Formation of the Bangladesh Alliance against Torture

ACTIVITIES

The Human Rights Defenders Conference was a two-day event, held at the Zakariya City Holiday Resort at Khadimnagar in Sylhet. The following is a daily activity report of the conference:

Day 1: May 17, 2013, Friday

Inaugural session

The inaugural session started at 10:00am. The session was chaired by Mr. ASM Nasiruddin Elan, Director of Odhikar.



Photo: (From left) Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam, Ex-President of Sylhet District Bar Association, ASM Nasiruddin Elan, Director, Odhikar, Adilur Rahman Khan, Secretary, Odhikar, Goutam Das, Member of Editorial Board, Chintaa

ASM Nasiruddin Elan introduced the guests to the human rights defenders, announced the inauguration of the conference and invited Adilur Rahman Khan to take the session forward.

Adilur Rahman Khan said that Odhikar has been struggling to establish human rights in Bangladesh for last 18 years. Forty two years have passed since the liberation war, but the war remains unfinished, as people's human rights are not established. He said that Odhikar is trying to stay beside the people and establish a true democratic state, which has still not been possible to achieve. People from different areas and occupation attended the conference and pledged to promote rights of the citizen. The people who went there are privileged because they successfully came to defend human rights whereas many others could not even go that far. He mentioned that it would be an opportunity to discuss and improve the resistance throughout the year. Odhikar came up with many activities to raise the voice against torture, enforced disappearances, violence against women, etc. The scope of improvement was discussed on that two-day conference.

Goutam Das, Member of the editorial body of fortnightly 'Chintaa' said that there is a connection between the words 'human rights defender' and 'democratic state', that is, creating a true

‘democratic state should be the ultimate goal for the HRDs’. So the human rights defenders must remember their goal.

Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam, Ex-President of Sylhet District Bar Association said that the principle of Bangladesh has not changed for the last 42 years. In 1972 it was declared by the then government that ‘Naxal’ activists should be shot at sight. Every criminal should be brought to justice in a democratic state and no one should be executed without facing justice. However, at present, the current state minister declared that anyone creating anomalies or involved in terrorising should be shot at sight. Whatever ideology one follows, they should be treated with democratic practices. They should get a chance to defend themselves with the help of the law.

Session: Challenges of Human Rights Activism

After the inaugural session, the first session of Day One started at 11:00am. The session- ‘Challenges of Human Rights Activism’ was chaired by ASM Nasiruddin Elan. He invited Adilur Rahman Khan to continue the session.

Adilur Rahman Khan said that Odhikar has been struggling since its inception. The challenge is basically faced due to the violation of human rights. In 1971, the country gained a land, map and a flag but the challenge of ensuring rights to the people has remained a continuous struggle. After the parliamentary government replaced military dictatorship in 1991, the country has not seen many differences in the function of the state as extrajudicial killing and other forms of human rights violation continued such as ‘Operation Clean Heart’. But, a military backed government came to power again in 2007. Odhikar struggled a lot when the director was arrested and several human rights defenders were taken to several ‘stadiums’ which were considered as torture cells. During the UPR session at UN in 2009 the current foreign minister Dipu Moni said that the government had ‘zero tolerance’ on extrajudicial killings and torture while both continued in the country. This year during the UPR session she mentioned some ‘untrue’ information, such as there are no extrajudicial killings or enforced disappearances in the country and the law enforcement agencies only fire to defend themselves. On February 2013 when the government compromised with the verdict of a war criminal, there was a mass uprising against it where Odhikar also showed its support. But later on, the government thwarted the uprising with the help of law enforcement agencies and the student wing of Awami League¹. Newspaper offices were vandalised and some of the media were barred to continue and the Acting Editor of ‘Daily Amar Desh’ was arrested. A mass-killing of ‘Hefajat-e-Islam’ was carried out in May for the first time since the liberation. Unaccounted numbers of ‘Hefajat-e-Islam’ people were killed by the law enforcement agencies to secure the Motijheel area of Dhaka. These people were not from the privileged part of the society, but to stick to the basic human rights principle, these issues should be taken into account. The workers who were forced to work at Rana Plaza in Savar and those who lost their lives were also not among the privileged section of the society. Odhikar is struggling to stand for the rights of these underprivileged people

¹ The 14 party alliances presently in power led by Awami League.

while facing continuous threats and being monitored. Those who are working with Odhikar have to face the same consequence. So the people who went to the conference should think again whether they are going to continue with the struggle or not. The unfinished liberation war may reach its end one day but the current situation is grave and the human rights defenders should play actively and sensibly to save the country from getting worse.

Rezaul Karim Hashmi said that the human rights defenders have to face challenges and the risks incorporated with it. He or she must not feel satisfied by just composing a report on human rights violence. The perpetrators should understand that human rights defenders are observing them; they are also inspiring and organising others to defend human rights. Human rights are the same for everyone with different political ideology, religious beliefs, ethnicity, etc.

Goutam Das said that the objective of a human rights defender remains at achieving a democratic constitution. Till then, the struggle continues to ensure human rights. There will be differences in opinions among the people of a country i.e. the citizens but there is a common point, which is, that no one will violate the rights of other citizens. The people will have to constitute the state on this ground. The place where these common beliefs are written is known as the Constitution. It will constitute the basic rights, which is currently at the third part of the Constitution. So why does the State not ensure rights when it is supposed to be the State's responsibility? The reason was that after the liberation war, the people got a country. How the State will function was not thought at that time. 'Country' and 'State' are two different terms. He said that it is a core responsibility of a human rights defender to explain others the 'sense of being a citizen'. If this sense does not develop, ensuring human rights will continue to be far out of reach. The differences in opinions and conflicts will remain in the State but a way has to be identified to solve these conflicts. Justice has to be based on righteousness. Therefore, the issue of reconstituting the constitution has arisen. It should be reconstituted based on the following issues: political equality has to be established, no one should face social degradation and justice should be delivered. These issues will have to be spread throughout the society. The citizens will then think that they belong to the state. Later on, these citizens have to have the power to reconstitute the constitution which is the job of political parties. It is not the duty of a human rights defender or a human rights organisation. Republic means 'a state that is reconstituted by the people'. So a human rights defender should have an unbiased view towards people of all beliefs and ideologies. Personal likings should not influence a human rights defender's behaviour.

Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam said that the people who are working in the grass root level can share a better picture of the challenges that are faced by human rights defenders. He depicted the history of human rights violation throughout the world and also quoted some of the efforts that solved the problems like Comrade Mao Tse-tung of China and UN after the World War. He said that the first constitution of the country in 1972 was questionable as it was not constituted by the representatives of the country and the basic rights were not ensured. The process of constituting the constitution was not democratic at that time whereas the countries around the world that got liberated tried to

keep its constitution fair and supportive of human rights. It should have been constituted by an assembly including people from all the occupations, class, etc. The human rights defenders should especially have participated in the process. The election of the reserved seats of the assembly is not direct, they are elected indirectly. So the women from the general public failed to get an opportunity to get elected. There were no basic difference between the Constitution of Pakistan in 1956 and the Constitution of Bangladesh in 1972. Food, clothes, education, shelter and treatment are not considered as basic rights in the Constitution of Bangladesh. There have been 15 amendments of the Constitution but still there has been no change of ensuring the basic rights. Bangladesh is experiencing extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearance since 1972 when ‘Rakkhi Bahini’ killed 30,000 leftists in order to suppress the opposition political parties. The formation of RAB maintained similar consequences to this day and even the creators of RAB have faced the same fate as they had once used on their opponents. Elite forces like Cheetah, Cobra and so on and operations like ‘Operation Clean Heart’, or the recent killings and attacks on Hefajat-e-Islam activists on the dark night of 5 May 2013 have caused grave human rights violation. Hence, to prevent these situations the Constitution should be reconstituted and implemented properly meeting international standards.

After Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam’s speech, the floor was open to the human rights defenders where they shared their experiences and challenges and asked questions.



Photo: Discussion

Session: Continuation of the previous session

After a short break, the session continued. The session was chaired by Mr. Rezaul Karim Hashmi. In this session, human rights defenders shared their views regarding several human rights issues and asked related questions to a panel formed by Sazzad Hussain, Rezaul Karim Hashmi, Ahabul Yusuf Khan and Nazibullah Quraishe.



Photo: (From left) Sazzad Hussain, Rezaul Karim Hashmi, Ahabul Yusuf Khan, Nazibullah Quraishie

Session: Mitigating the gaps between the field and Odhikar office

A session was held on the topic to reduce the gaps in getting information between Odhikar's office and grassroots level human rights defenders. The session was chaired by J. K. Nissan.

The discussants of this session were Sazzad Hussain, Rezaul Karim Hashmi and Nazibullah Quraishie. In this session both the office staffs of Odhikar and the human rights defenders from the field discussed about how to minimize the gaps of understanding and information.

The human rights defenders raised some points regarding the gaps. These are given below:

- The police stations and prisons do not cooperate when human rights activists introduce themselves as human rights defender. They fear of being blackmailed after disclosing information;
- When information or reports are sent or if any threat is faced, it is informed to the focal person, but some of them want to inform the office as well.



Photo- Discussion at conference

Day 2: Session 1: Documentation

On May 18, the session started at 9:30am. The session was chaired by J. K. Nissan. He introduced Odhikar's documentation and fact finding team who discussed about Odhikar's documentation procedures and technique. The group consisted of Abida Sultana, Ahabul Yusuf Khan, Ahsanuzzaman Fahim and Nazibullah Quraishe.

Abida Sultana told the participants to be careful when the documentations are prepared because the data are very important. These data are used by different stakeholders and by national and international media. Ahsanuzzaman Fahim pointed out some of the common mistakes and how to overcome them. They also displayed some practical examples as well. Afterwards, local HRDS were given some tests. The errors of those tests were shared with the participants to mitigate the error in future.



Photo: From (left) Ahabul Yusuf Khan, Ahsanuzzaman Fahim, Abida Sultana

Day 2: People's Movement

This session was chaired by Mr. Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam. The discussants were ASM Nasiruddin Elan and Rezaul Karim Hashmi.

ASM Nasiruddin Elan said that those who want to defend human rights have to have an intense desire to ensure rights of the citizen. To ensure human rights and establish democracy he, along with others, joined the movement against dictatorship. Many of them gave their lives for the movement. Every year on February 14, the young generation celebrates Valentine's Day but on that day many students were killed at the University of Dhaka in police fire for protesting against an oppressive decision by the concurrent dictator government. Human rights movement is very much related to people's movement. The reason why Odhikar was established in 1994 pertains to continuing the movement to ensure human rights. That is why working with Odhikar is sometimes risky as it remains vocal and protests against human rights violation. The information collected for documentation is important but if the defenders fail to respond or protest against these issues, the movement fails. For any kind of incident, anyone can have a political view but a human rights defender has to think from a human rights perspective. A human rights defender or organisation

cannot talk in favour of a perpetrator of human rights violation. Odhikar stands for those who are deprived even if the state, powerful people or parties are against them irrespective of their political beliefs.

Mr. Rezaul Karim Hashmi said that activities related to human rights need to be more prominent and organised. Any act violating human rights has to be uprooted from the society. The state used to commit many extrajudicial killings but they reduced the activities following the vocal and vibrant protests carried out by the human rights organisation against such atrocities. However, the state forces have continued human rights violation in the form of enforced disappearance.

Movements should be organised in such a manner that human rights defenders can participate properly. The people who were present at the conference should be role models so that others join them in the movement. A human rights defender cannot stop human rights violence but they can raise awareness and make efforts to bring the perpetrators to justice. He shared some incidents where the situation could have been different if the people responded more actively. If barriers could be arranged for the perpetrators, then they will not find any place to exist. So, more people should be engaged in the movement.

An open floor discussion was held where the human rights defenders shared their views, questions and answers. Adilur Rahman Khan thanked all the participants for a successful conference and hoped that all defenders will be active to protect and promote human rights.

Day 2: Formation of Alliance Against Torture

In the last session of the day, an alliance against torture was formed aiming at waging movement against torture. A 15-member body of the alliance was also formed with Goutam Das, a member of the board of editors from the fortnightly 'Chintaa' as its convenor and the Director of Odhikar ASM Nasir Uddin Elan as the member secretary. It also includes former Sylhet Bar Association president Emdadullah Shahidul Islam, Odhikar secretary Adilur Rahman Khan and human rights activists Mohammad Nur Khan, Rezaul Karim Hashmi, Benzin Khan, Taskin Fahmina, Sazzad Hossain, Nazmunnahar Jhumur, Osman Mohammad Jahangir, Sardar M Anisur Rahman, Abul Kalam Azad and Nur Aftabul Alam and journalist Shahiduzzaman as the members.

Human Rights Defenders Conference

Date: May 17-18, 2013

Organised by: Odhikar

Venue: Zakariya City Holiday Resort

Khadimnagar, Sylhet

Day 01: Friday, May 17, 2013

Inaugural session:

Time	Contents/Topics	
09.30 AM-10.00 AM	Registration	Abida Sultana
10.00 AM-10.30 AM	Introduction and Chair	ASM Nasiruddin Elan
	Inauguration of Conference	Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam, Ex-President, Sylhet District Bar Association Adilur Rahman Khan Goutam Das
10.30 AM-11.00 AM	Tea break	
11.00 AM-1.00PM	Challenges of Human Rights Activism	Chair: ASM Nasiruddin Elan
		Adilur Rahman Khan Goutam Das Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam Rezaul Karim Hashmi
1.00 PM-2.30 PM	Lunch and Prayer Break	
2.30 PM — 4.00 PM	Continuation	Chair: Rezaul Karim Hashmi
		Sazzad Hussain Ahabul Yusuf Khan Nazibullah Quraishie
4.00 PM-4.30 PM	Tea break	
4.30 PM- 5.30 PM	Human Rights Defenders Activism: How to mitigate gaps between the field and Odhikar office	Chair: J K Nishan
		Rezaul Karim Hashmi Sazzad Hussain Nazibullah Quraishie
8 .00 PM-9.00 PM	Dinner	
9.30 PM-10.30 PM	Cultural Programme	Al Azam Khan Abida Sultana

Day 02: Saturday, May 18, 2013

Time	Contents/Topics	Moderator/Facilitators
09.30 AM-11.00 AM	A review of the first day's work	Chair: Rezaul Karim Hashmi
		Mohammad Ahsanuzzaman Ahabul Yusuf Khan Nazibullah Quraishe
11.00AM-11.30AM	Tea Break	
11.30AM-1.00 PM	People's Movement	Chair: Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam
		ASM Nasiruddin Elan Rezaul Karim Hashmi
1.00PM-1.30 PM	Formation of the Bangladesh Alliance against Torture	ASM Nasiruddin Elan J K Nishan
1.30 PM-2.00 PM	Closing Session	ASM Nasiruddin Elan Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam
2.00 PM-3.00PM	Lunch	

Participant's List

Human Rights Defenders Conference

Organised by Odhikar

Date: May 17-18, 2013

Venue: Zastat Holiday Resort,
Zakariya City, Khadimnagar, Sylhet

SL	District	Name	Details
1.	Chapainawabganj	Foyisal Mahmud	Journalist
2.	Chittagong	Osman Md. Jahangir	Journalist
3.	Chittagong	Humaira Jannat Himali	Student
4.	Chittagong	Mohammad Zia Uddin	Teacher
5.	Chittagong	Md. Jashim Uddin	HRD
6.	Chittagong	Sohag Kumar Biswas	Staff Reporter (Amar Desh)
7.	Chittagong	Abdullah Mazumder	Journalist
8.	Chittagong	Mohammad Manzurul Islam	Journalist
9.	Chittagong	Mohammad Imran	Student
10.	Chittagong	Rokshana Akter	HRD
11.	Chittagong	Md. Rakibul Islam	HRD
12.	Feni	Nazmul Hoque Shamim	Journalist
13.	Jessore	Ashraful Alam Salim	Journalist
14.	Jessore	Mst. Shamoly Akter	Student
15.	Khulna	Khalilur Rahman Sumon	Journalist
16.	Khulna	Md. Nuruzzaman	Journalist
17.	Kushtia	Shumi Sharmin	HRD
18.	Lakshmipur	Masudur Rahaman Khan Bhutto	Journalist
19.	Lakshmipur	Marzan Chowdhury Shimu	Teacher
20.	Magura	Masum Billah	Journalist
21.	Munshiganj	Md. Arafat Ujjaman	Journalist
22.	Munshiganj	Mahmudul Hasan Munna	Student
23.	Mymensingh	Md. Wahiduzzaman	Journalist
24.	Narayanganj	Billal Hossain Robin	Journalist (Manobzamin)
25.	Noakhali	Mahmudul Huq Foez	Journalist
26.	Pabna	Abul Kalam Azad	Teacher
27.	Pabna	Md. Biplob Alam Khan	Teacher
28.	Rajbari	Md. Shajid Hossain	Journalist
29.	Rajbari	Sabita Rani kundu	Teacher
30.	Rajshahi	Sarder M. Anisur Rahman	Journalist (Amar Desh)
31.	Rajshahi	Ayesha Siddiqua	Student
32.	Rajshahi	Fahmida Akter Himi	Student
33.	Rajshahi	Sahanaj Parven	Student

34	Rangamati	Bijoy Dhor	Journalist
35	Satkhira	Adv. Nazmun Nahar	Advocate
36	Satkhira	Tumpa Rani Bosu	Student
37	Satkhira	Mithu Mallick	Teacher
38	Sirajganj	Md. Golam Mostofa Rubel	Journalist
39	Sirajganj	Nasima Khatun	Teacher
40	Sirajganj	Waleda Khatun	Student
41	Sirajganj	Ruksana Islam Joya	Social worker
42	Sunamganj	Aminul Hoque	Journalist
43	Sunamganj	A.F.M. Yeahia	Student
44	Sunamganj	Lal Mia	Teacher
45	Sunamganj	Abid Ali	Teacher
46	Sunamganj	Tarek Miah	Student
47	Sylhet	Md. Muhibur Rahman	Journalist
48	Sylhet	Tasnova Tazin	HRD
49	Sylhet	Nazma Akter Khan	Advocate
50	Sylhet	Nasima Begum	Advocate
51	Sylhet	Rayna Begum	Advocate
52	Sylhet	Ali Ahsan Habib	HRD
53	Sylhet	Mohammed Shah Alam	HRD
54	Sylhet	Adv. Azizur Rahman	Advocate
55	Sylhet	Md. Mostafizur Rahman	Probationary Lawyer
56	Sylhet	Md. Abdullah	Advocate
57	Sylhet	Md. Fayshal Ahmed	Advocate
58	Sylhet	Md. Rafiq Ahmed	Advocate
59	Sylhet	Zahirul Anam Khan	Advocate
60	Sylhet	Adv. Md. Jahangir Alam	Advocate
61	Sylhet	Chowdhury Delwar Hussain Selim	HRD
62	Sylhet	Md. Mirza Hussain	Advocate
63	Sylhet	Md. Abdus Salam	HRD
64	Sylhet	Md. Faizur Rashid	HRD
65	Sylhet	Syed Kawsar Ahmed	Advocate
66	Tangail	Mukul Akter	Advocate
67	Tangail	Rezwan Ahmed Sharif	Journalist/HRD
68	Thakurgaon	Nur Aftabul Alam Rupom	Teacher
69	Dhaka	Adilur Rahman Khan	Secretary, Odhikar
70	Dhaka	Goutam Das	Member of Editorial Board, Chintaa
71	Dhaka	Emad Ullah Shahidul Islam	Ex-President, Sylhet District Bar Association
72	Dhaka	Shawkatuzzaman	HRD
73	Dhaka	ASM Nasiruddin Elan	Director, Odhikar
74	Dhaka	Sazzad Hussain	Odhikar

75	Dhaka	J.K Nishan	Odhikar
76	Dhaka	Rezaul Karim Hashmi	Odhikar
77	Dhaka	Nabila Farheen	Student
78	Dhaka	Abida Sultana	Odhikar
79	Dhaka	Nazibulla Quraishe	Odhikar
80	Dhaka	Mohammad Ahsanuzzaman	Odhikar
81	Dhaka	Ahbabul Yusuf Khan	Odhikar
82	Dhaka	Md. Saiful Islam	Odhikar
83	Dhaka	Md. Mukidur Rahman	Odhikar
84	Dhaka	Al Azam Khan	Odhikar
85	Dhaka	Maksud Ahmed	Odhikar