

Journalist F M Masum Tortured by Members of RAB-10

Fact Finding Report Odhikar

At 10.00 am on October 22, 2009, members of RAB¹-10 (Rapid Action Battalion) raided the house of Mohammad Salauddin at 167/1 South Jatrabari of Jatrabari, Dhaka to arrest a narcotics trader. During the raid, the RAB-10 members without reason arrested F M Masum (28), a journalist of the daily New Age. The RAB members tortured Masum on several occasions at the RAB office till 10.00 pm that night.

Odhikar conducted a fact-finding mission into the incident. During the fact-finding, Odhikar spoke with:

- F M Masum, the victim of torture
- Eye-witnesses
- F M Masum's Doctor
- Members of the law enforcement agencies.



Picture: F M Masum

F M Masum (28), the victim of torture

F M Masum told Odhikar that he came from the village of Bakal of Agoiljhara, Barisal. His Father's name is Eskander Ali, a retired officer of the Bangladesh Army. Masum lived in a rented house on the second floor of a six storied building owned by Mohammad Salauddin at 167/1, South Jatrabari. He had been employed at the daily newspaper The Bangladesh Today for the last two years. On July 5, 2009, Masum joined the daily New Age as a Staff Reporter. At 10.00 am on October 22, 2009, Masum came down from the second floor after hearing a considerable amount of ranting at the main gate. Through the gap in the collapsible gate he saw 4-5 men standing outside demanding that the gate be opened. Masum asked them who they were. They answered saying that they were RAB members. Masum asked them for proof. At one point in the conversation Masum saw that some of the men were holding onto Baby Akhtar (35), the wife of Mohammad Salauddin, the owner of the building. Masum passed on the gate keys to the men through the gap in the gate. As he was doing that, one of the RAB members, who was tall and had a dark complexion, grabbed Masum's arm and twisted it. Masum introduced himself as a journalist of the daily New Age and asked them what he had done to deserve a twisted arm. In reply Masum was punched on the right eye which started bleeding. The RAB man began to punch and jab Masum because apparently he had delayed in opening the

¹ RAB: Rapid Action Battalion. A law enforcement agency of Bangladesh.

gate. He was then dragged to the fifth floor of the building. As Masum took every single step, he was kicked, slapped and punched from behind. When they all reached the fifth floor, Masum was blindfolded with a black cloth. The RAB men then used an iron rod and the blunt end of a large blade to beat his feet, ankles, knees, thighs, ribs, arms, elbows, waist, wrists and back. His cheeks were grievously injured with a metal object. This caused the back of Masum's ears to split open. Masum was not in a position to hear anything because his ears were clotted with blood. Masum was tortured for 45 minutes and his room was ransacked. The RAB man, who was tall and had dark a complexion said that he had been a member of the Chattra League² while studying at Dhaka University. He threatened to finish Masum off in 'crossfire' because he would not face any trouble doing so. The RAB Officer was constantly saying, 'The owner of this house is engaged in narcotics trade and you are his assistant'. Masum told them in response that he knew nothing about these allegations. Paying no heed, the RAB Officer opened his blindfolds and kicked him again and again till they reached his room on the second floor. He also took Taka 1500/- from Masum's wallet and also his cell phone. 6 bottles of alcohol were kept on Masum's bed and he was forced to take a photo with those bottles. Masum was blindfolded again.

He was taken into a car and they all reached the Dholpur office of RAB-10 at 11.00 am. Later on he was kept in a cell and his blindfolds were taken off for some time. Masum came to learn afterwards that the concerned RAB Officer was Flight Lieutenant Anisur Rahman. Inside that cell Anis, ASP³ Sayem and 3-4 other men arrived and blindfolded him again. Masum was handcuffed and he pleaded Anis not to beat him without reason. Anis then trampled on his chest with his boots after laying him down on the floor. 4-5 men beat Masum with iron rods from his feet up to his neck and punched his cheeks and ears. Masum was tortured like this several times. He was deprived of water the whole day. At 10.00 pm, journalists Shoukot Ali Khan, Abir Nawaz Farazi, Ohidul Islam and the Bureau Chief of Bangladesh Today, Oliullah, came to the office of S M Kamal Hossain, the Director of RAB-10. After the arrival of journalists, Masum was brought from the cell to the office of Director S M Kamal Hossain. Director Kamal then told the journalists to sign a document stating that they had collected Masum in a state of good health. When this offer was rejected, Director Kamal passed over a document for signing, which included descriptions of where Masum had been injured. Eventually Masum's colleagues took him from the RAB office to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital at 10.30 pm and admitted him to Ward Number 31 for treatment. When the news crew initially tried to enter the hospital premises the hospital authorities tried to prevent them from doing so. Due to the arrival of various news crews in large numbers, the hospital suddenly released Masum at 4.00 am on October 23, 2009 without any logical reason. His father took him home. Masum stated that his father admitted him to the Dhaka Community Hospital at 3.25 pm. His patient registration number was 3083/09; and the bed number was Mini-Cabin 6 of Semi-Cabin F. Masum demanded that those who tortured him be brought to justice subject to an impartial investigation.

Khuki Begum (40), Eye-witness

Khuki Begum told Odhikar that she lived in the room just beside Masum's. At 10.00 am on October 22, 2009, Khuki opened her door on hearing people talking outside. She saw several men, some in plain clothes and others in RAB uniform were kicking and punching Masum in front of her door. They were also grabbing hold of Masum's hair and striking his head against the wall. Masum was crying out and begging the men to stop beating him. In a handcuffed state, Masum was beaten and taken to the fifth floor from the second floor. From her door Khuki saw several of the men place a few bottles on Masum's bed. Later on they brought Masum from the

² Chattra League: The student wing of the Bangladesh Awami League, one of the major political parties in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Awami League is in power.

³ ASP: Assistant Superintendent of Police.

fifth floor back to the second floor and took photos of him in front of the bottles. At 10.45 am, the RAB members left with Baby Akhtar, the land lady and Masum.

Doctor Fatema-tuz-Zohra, Masum's Doctor, Dhaka Community Hospital, Moghbazaar, Dhaka

Odhikar talked to Doctor Fatema-tuz-Zohra while Masum was receiving treatment. She informed Odhikar that Masum had been suffering from pain all over his body due the beatings he received. She said that there were blood clots in his right eye and ears. He was undergoing necessary treatment, she added.

Nusrat Jahan Srity (18), 162, South Jatrabari, Dhaka 1204

Nusrat Jahan Srity told Odhikar that the 6 storied building at 167/1, South Jatrabari, belonged to her father, Mohammad Salauddin. Two persons named Bongo Miah and Arju Begum used to sell narcotics at the end of the street in front of her father's building. After her father obstructed Bongo and Arju, they complained against Mohammad Salauddin at the Jatrabari Police Station and made an allegation about his involvement in the narcotics business. As a consequence of this allegation, members of RAB-10 arrested Srity's father on October 13, 2009 at noon. On October 22, 2009, according to Srity, Bongo and Arju conveyed a complaint at the RAB-10 headquarters against Srity's mother, Baby Akhtar (35), for selling narcotics. At 10.00 am that day, Srity's mother, Baby Akhtar, had gone to the neighboring building. She was arrested there by four to five men who claimed to be from RAB. The men used extremely bad language, insulting Baby as they brought her towards the building gate. Hearing her mother's screams, Srity ran towards her. The RAB members threatened to arrest her also. The RAB members tried to take her mother to the fifth floor of their building. Two female RAB members on uniform began to beat up Baby with canes because she did not agree to go to the fifth floor. Later on they handcuffed her to the gate of the neighboring building. The RAB members then ordered that the collapsible gate be opened. That was when journalist F M Masum, the tenant living on the second floor came downstairs. Masum asked for the identities of the men. Paying no heed to Masum's question, the plain clothed men asked him to unlock the gate. Masum's slight delay in opening the gate caused him to receive kicks and punches from the plain clothed men. At one point Masum was taken up to the fifth floor of the building in handcuffs. After a while, Srity's mother was also dragged up to the fifth floor. Srity went on to say that one of the plain clothed RAB members who had brought Pethedin and bottles of alcohol in a bag placed them in her mother's room and took photos of them with her mother in the picture. The male RAB members dragged Srity's mother around from one place to another and kicked and punched different parts of her body. At 10.45 am, the RAB members left taking Srity's mother and Masum with them after blindfolding them with black cloths. Srity recalled that Masum was beaten with a *chapa*⁴ without any reason in front of many people. The RAB members with their boots trampled on Masum's chest. Journalist Masum's screams caused residents of the whole locality to gather. However, the RAB members did not allow anyone to come near.

S M Kamal Hossain, Director, RAB-10

S M Kamal Hossain told Odhikar that on the basis of very specific information, Flight Lieutenant Anisur Rahman with his force raided the house of Salauddin alias Shui Salauddin at 167/1 South Jatrabari at 10.00 am on October 22, 2009. They arrested narcotics trader Baby Akhtar from outside her house and took her to the gate of their 6-storied building. The RAB members began to look around for people because the gate was closed. A man from inside the building then came down and the RAB members told him to open the gate. Instead of complying the man delayed in opening the gate and asked why Baby Akhtar was being arrested. Urging the RAB members to enter, people from around the building began to shout out that bottles of

⁴ Chapati: A large knife mostly used by butchers.

alcohol were being destroyed on the fifth floor. There was a scuffle between the RAB members and the man because of the delay in opening the gate. Baby Akhtar was arrested and brought into custody with 31 bottles of Phensidyl⁵ and 95 syringes. The man with whom the RAB members had a scuffle was also arrested. During interrogation at the camp, it was found that the man was a journalist of the daily New Age. Immediately upon knowing this, Kamal Hossain summoned Flight Lieutenant Anis and asked him why the man had been beaten. When Anis failed to provide an answer, Kamal Hossain, taking permission from the RAB Headquarters, closed (withdrew) Anis and sent him off to the Headquarters. Kamal Hossain expressed his apology for the mistreatment of a journalist at the hands of a RAB member.

Odhikar seeks a proper investigation into this matter and justice for F M Masum. The perpetrators must be punished and Masum awarded appropriate compensation.

-The End of Report-

⁵ Phensidyl is a banned, intoxicating cough syrup. It is smuggled into Bangladesh from India.