

Statement of Odhikar

Odhikar: An organisation persecuted for defending human rights

August 10, 2014 is the first anniversary of the abduction and detention of the Secretary of Odhikar, Adilur Rahman Khan, for defending human rights. Since 2009, Odhikar has been suppressed and put under pressure by the present Awami League regime due to its ability to be vocal against violations of human rights. The Organisation has gone through several bouts of crisis, hindrance, harassment and adversity; brought about by the government and its agencies. The levels of surveillance and intimidation by the authorities have gone through different phases. Odhikar experienced high levels of harassment after the submission of its human rights report at the second cycle of the Universal Periodic Review, at the UN Human Rights Council in April 2013. The report highlighted violations of human rights and criticized the state actors for perpetration and neglect. Odhikar has to now endure serious crises, both financial and practical due to impediments created by the government, through the NGO Affairs Bureau. Because of its credible human rights reporting; and its non-partisan, outspoken and vigilant stand, Odhikar is a constant target of state repression.

At 10:20 pm on August 10, 2013 Advocate Adilur Rahman Khan, Secretary of Odhikar was abducted by plain clothed members of the Detective Branch of police and detained in jail in connection with a case filed under section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (amended 2009) and Sections 505 (c) and 505A of the Penal Code, in relation to Odhikar's fact-finding report on allegations of extrajudicial killings during the operation carried out on May 5-6, 2013 by security forces, in the context of the gathering of Hefazate Islam activists in Dhaka. On October 8, 2013 the High Court Division of Supreme Court of Bangladesh granted ad-interim bail to Adilur Rahman Khan. On 11 October 2013, Adilur Rahman Khan was released from Kashimpur Jail – 1 on bail after spending 62 days in detention. It is to be mentioned that his bail application was rejected once by the Magistrate Court and twice by the Cyber Crimes Tribunal, despite the offence being a bail-able one.

Odhikar's Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan was also charged with Adilur Rahman Khan; and the Cyber Crime Tribunal Judge issued a warrant of arrest against him on September 11, 2013. Elan voluntarily surrendered before the Cyber Crimes Tribunal and his lawyers appeared before the Tribunal on November 6, 2013 and sought bail.

The Judge, Shamsul Alam, rejected the bail plea and ordered that Elan be sent to jail. On 24 November 2013, the High Court Division ordered six-month ad interim bail to Nasiruddin Elan. He was released on December 1, 2013.

Apart from arresting and detaining Adilur and Elan, the Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan police raided Odhikar's office and seized computers that contained important and sensitive documents of victims and their families. Till date, the authorities have not returned the computers. The government has virtually shut down Odhikar, using various forms of harassment, including smear campaigns organised by the government affiliated media.

The Organisation is continuously under surveillance and its staff being harassed by various intelligence agencies including Special Branch of police (SB), National Security Intelligence (NSI) and Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). Their activities, movement and cell phones are being monitored all the time. Their constant visibility and intimidation in front of Odhikar office is hindering its regular organisational activities. Most recently, on 6 August 2014, a man claiming to be from the DGFI was inquiring about Odhikar's Director at his home town in Munshiganj.

Human rights defenders, who are associated with Odhikar at the district level, face harassment while gathering information on human rights violations. Due to constant barriers, surveillance and intimidation, Odhikar had to let go of six regular staff. Despite being persecuted and under surveillance, Odhikar regularly publishes its monthly human rights monitoring reports on human rights abuses perpetrated in Bangladesh.

The NGO Affairs Bureau and Anti-Corruption Commission have also suddenly become remarkably pro-active in checking Odhikar's funding sources and financial reports; and harassing the Organisation for information they already have. The NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), which is under the Prime Minister's Office, has barred the release of funds for Odhikar's projects which the Bureau had earlier approved.

In Bangladesh, the liberal space for freedom of opinion, expression and thought in line with freedom of assembly and of association, has experienced an abrupt decline. Over the years several repressive laws have been enacted and continue to remain in force on grounds of national security and combating terrorism. The crackdown and intimidation on Odhikar has had an alarming effect on civil society organisations and human rights defenders active in Bangladesh. It has created a sense of insecurity among the human rights community in Bangladesh.

As a human rights organisation it is Odhikar's duty to highlight human rights violations, with no discrimination whatsoever; and take appropriate measures to prevent future violations. The Government is harassing Odhikar, most of the people associated with it and victims of human rights violations and their family members; gagging their voices and hampering their activities.

Odhikar urges the government to respect the UN Declaration of Human Rights Defenders and recall its commitments given at various international forums, including the UN HRC. It also demands the government repeal all repressive laws, including ICT Act. Odhikar also urges all human rights defenders to stand in solidarity with the Organisation in order to protest this persecution and forceful closure; and to enable human rights to be enforced in Bangladesh.

The Odhikar Team

www.odhikar.org