

## PRESS RELEASE - THE OBSERVATORY

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### **Bangladesh: Authorities threaten NGOs for denouncing human rights abuses**

**Geneva, Paris, August 4, 2015 – The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders strongly condemns the statement issued by the Bangladeshi police which accuses NGOs *Odhikar* and *the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission (BAMAK)* of acting illegally and subversively, simply for having published reports on extrajudicial killings supposedly committed by the authorities.**

On August 2, 2015, the Media and Public Relations wing of the Police Headquarters in Dhaka issued a statement condemning newspaper reports on extrajudicial killings which cited *Odhikar*, a member organisation of OMCT and FIDH, and *BAMAK*. The Press Release, which is entitled "*Police did not commit extrajudicial killings. Statements of Odhikar and BAMAK are unlawful; only subversive campaigns*", affirms that the statements made by the two organisations "contravene the existing laws of Bangladesh, which is synonymous to challenging Rule of Law and the judicial system"<sup>1</sup>.

The Police Press Release further states that questioning the activities of the police threatens the reputation of the police and amounts to defamation and a criminal act, and may be considered as a subversive activity.

***"This new attack against independent civil society in Bangladesh is completely unacceptable and deepens the ongoing crackdown against critical voices inside the country. The scrutiny of governmental activities by NGOs is not a challenge to rule of law as affirmed in the statement; on the contrary, such questioning and scrutiny is absolutely essential to ensure the full respect of human rights in Bangladesh"*** said OMCT Secretary General Gerald Staberock.

The Observatory recalls that *Odhikar* has been under extreme pressure since August 2013 when authorities arrested Mr. **Adilur Rahman Khan**, *Odhikar* Secretary, member of OMCT General Assembly and Final Nominee for the Martin Ennals Award 2014, on trumped up charges related to his human rights work. Since then, attacks and harassment against *Odhikar* have been constant, including judicial harassment of both Mr. Khan and Mr. **Nasiruddin Elan**, *Odhikar* Director, and surveillance and repression against *Odhikar*, its staff, and their relatives<sup>2</sup>.

***"We fear another wave of repression and persecution against Odhikar and other independent organisations in Bangladesh. The language of this Police press release indicates an abuse of existing laws to repress legitimate human rights work, which violates international human rights law"*** stated FIDH President Karim Lahidji. ***"We therefore call on the EU and other foreign donors to call for the immediate end to the crackdown on civil society, and to express that free expression and association are necessary for the deepening of their relations with Bangladesh"***.

This smear campaign takes place in an already repressive context for civil society due to the attempts by the Bangladesh authorities to stifle free expression and to severely restrict their work.

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<sup>1</sup> Unofficial translation.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on the case see Observatory's Urgent Appeal BGD 001 / 0813 / OBS 074.5, February 5, 2014, available at: <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/bangladesh/2014/02/d22541/> and <https://www.fidh.org/International-Federation-for-Human-Rights/asia/bangladesh/14598-bangladesh-acts-of-harassment-against-the-staff-of-odhikar-and-in>.



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The *Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2014*, which was approved by the Cabinet in 2014 and is currently before the Parliament in order to be passed into law, subjects the work of civil society organizations to increased control by the government and restricts foreign funding to Bangladeshi NGOs, which is a violation of human rights standards.

In addition, the newly proposed *Cyber Security Act 2015* aims to further tighten the control of the authorities over free expression, going beyond the existing *Information and Communication (ICT) Act* which already criminalises defamatory and “anti-State” publications and has been used to target dissenting voices, in particular human rights defenders.

*The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OBS) was created in 1997 by OMCT and FIDH. The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy to situations of repression against human rights defenders.*

**For more information, please contact:**

- **OMCT: Miguel Martín Zumalacárregui: +41 22 809 49 24**
- **FIDH: Arthur Manet/Lucie Kroening: + 33 1 43 55 25 18**