



December 9, 2015

Odhikar Statement on International Human Rights Day 2015

Human rights defenders must stand and fight against human rights violations

Human Rights Day is observed every year on 10 December, universally recognised as International Human Rights Day. It commemorates the day on which, in 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This year's Human Rights Day is devoted to the launch of a year-long campaign for the 50th anniversary of the two International Covenants on Human Rights: ICCPR and ICESCR. However, the day is being observed globally at a time when incidents of human rights violations in Bangladesh have reached a shocking level. The present government resumed power through controversial Parliamentary Elections on January 5, 2014 without a large majority of the people's vote; and almost all major political parties. 153 candidates from the ruling Awami League and its alliance were elected unopposed, out of the 300 constituencies, even before the elections were held.

The political situation of Bangladesh is in a deep crisis due to the absence of an accountable government and a very weak parliamentary Opposition. Threats of human rights violations have increased. Incidents of enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killing and torture are violations whose reporting's are on the rise. Furthermore, instances of violence against women and attacks on citizens belonging to religious and ethnic minority communities continue. The present government is ordering mass arrests and taking the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly and association of the people away; without any inclination to resolve the ongoing political crisis. It is reported that most of the victims of mass arrests are engaged in the politics of anti government political parties, BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami. As a result of these mass arrests, the prisons of Bangladesh are facing tremendous pressure, causing human disaster due to overcrowding; and the human rights of the inmates are being violated. The Government is suppressing people who have alternative beliefs and gagging dissenting voices by imposing draconian laws and filing sedition cases against them.

Meanwhile the government supported student and youth organisations are mainly engaged in political violence and various criminal activities, including sexual harassment, extortion, and violence with lethal weapons. Such cases are not investigated effectively by the police, as the perpetrators are sheltered. As a result of this reluctance, more crimes are encouraged. Moreover, members of the law enforcement agencies are also being attacked and killed by criminals and the law and order situation in the country is on a decline. Instances of putting pressure on the media, intimidation, filing cases against and attacks on journalists continue. The rights to freedom of speech and expression and of the media are also being violated. Moreover, bloggers are also being attacked and killed. In 2015, five bloggers were killed. The government blocked almost all social networking media and mobile messaging and internet applications, including Facebook, Viber and WhatsApp from November 18, 2015 for an indefinite period; on the pretext of 'security' in Bangladesh. People were largely dependent on social media for sharing information, as the electronic media are almost totally controlled by the government. The repressive law, Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006 (amended in 2009 and 2013) continues to exist. This law has curtailed the freedom of expression and the government is using this Act as a tool of oppression against human rights defenders, journalists and people who hold dissenting views. The government has also enacted the National Broadcasting Policy to control the mass media and curb freedom of expression, by imposing various restrictions and also instructed the online newspapers and news portals to be registered. The Acting Editor of the daily Amar Desh, Mahmudur Rahman has been detained in jail for about two years and eight months and the publication of the daily Amar Desh, operations of Diganta TV, Islamic TV and Channel 1 are still barred. The power to impeach the Supreme Court Judges has been given to the Parliament, for controlling the Judiciary, depriving the judicial arm of the state to function independently. Furthermore, the Cabinet gave its final approval to the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act, 2014 to control NGOs, including human rights organisations. In the meanwhile, the Sub-committee on the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs recommended the incorporation of provisions into the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Ordinance 1978 for taking action against Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for making derogatory remarks about the State, Parliament or the Constitution. This law, as it stands, will violate freedom of expression and association; and will control human rights and voluntary organisations; which is contrary to the Constitution of Bangladesh and the UN Declaration for Human Rights Defenders. The more the government curtailing rights to freedom of expression,

assembly and association and suppressing the dissenting voices; the more extreme situation is being created in the country.

Odhikar believes that a democratic state needs to be constituted based on equality, human dignity and social justice which were the main perception of the Liberation War of Bangladesh; and there is no alternative way other than people's mobilization and fight against injustice. Thus, on this 2015 International Human Rights Day, the people of Bangladesh have to be organised in order to restore their voting rights and every human rights defender, with the families of the victims and the people, has to stand against human rights abuses as one voice.

In solidarity,
The Odhikar Team