



FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights

and its member organization in Bangladesh

Odhikar

Joint press release

Bangladesh: End rights abuses, violence against demonstrators and journalists in response to student protests

Dhaka, Paris, 6 August 2018: Bangladeshi authorities must immediately halt the violence perpetrated by government supporters against protesters and journalists and respect the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, FIDH and its member organization Odhikar said today.

"The government's response to the student protests has been completely unacceptable. Instead of opening a dialogue with the students and listening to their legitimate grievances, the government has allowed its supporters and law enforcement agencies to unleash a new wave of violence that does not bode well for the lead-up to the upcoming general elections. The government must immediately investigate all incidents of violence and hold the perpetrators accountable,"said FIDH Vice-President Guissou Jahangiri.

Tens of thousands of students have been protesting in Dhaka since a speeding bus hit and killed two teenagers on 29 July 2018 in the Bangladeshi capital. Protesters demanded major reforms in the transportation sector, including measures to ensure safety on the roads. Predominantly peaceful protests turned into violent clashes after demonstrators were attacked by government supporters, and police used excessive force to disperse the protesters. Since the beginning of the protests, dozens have been injured, including at least 12 journalists. There have also been reports of an unknown number of protesters being arrested and detained, and of female students and journalists being molested.

According to eyewitnesses, the violence has been largely perpetrated by the ruling Awami League's student and youth wings, the Bangladesh Chhatra League and the Awami Juba League. Photos from the protests show protesters and journalists being attacked with sticks, iron rods, and machetes, while police stood by and did little to intervene and stop the attacks. Participants also reported of law enforcement personnel firing rubber bullets – and, in some cases, live bullets – and teargas canisters at protesters in an attempt to disperse the demonstrations.

FIDH and Odhikar condemn the severe restrictions on freedom of expression that have accompanied the violence against participants to the student protests. On 4 August 2018, the government ordered telecommunication operators to suspend 3G and 4G mobile Internet service across large parts of the country. As a result of the enforcement of this order, it has become increasingly difficult for people to share information and report incidents of violence as they happen.

The next day, on the evening of 5 August 2018, renowned photojournalist Shahidul Alam was arrested at his home in Dhaka by officers of the Detective Branch of police. Mr Alam was subsequently detained at the Detective Branch's offices for questioning over posts he had made on social media regarding the protests and the violence, in which he was critical of the government. He was produced in a Dhaka court today and charged under Section 57 of the repressive Information and Communication Technology Act.

“The Constitution of Bangladesh provides for the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press. The vicious attacks against students and journalists and the blanket mobile Internet suspension are unambiguous indications that the government has no intention to respect the right to freedom of expression. The international community must express its concern to the Bangladeshi government and demand the respect of its international obligations,”said Odhikar Secretary Adilur Rahman Khan.

Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies have long been accused of human rights violations, including extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and excessive use of force. FIDH and Odhikar strongly condemn the response of law enforcement agencies to these protests, including their failure to stop attacks by pro-government armed men and to respect international standards related to the policing of public assemblies. FIDH and Odhikar also call on the authorities to reveal the identities and whereabouts of those detained and to immediately release them.

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