

Odhikar's Statement on the Occasion of International Human Rights Day 2020

Institutional Transformation Urgently Needed for Protection of Rights

Dhaka, 9 December 2020: International Human Rights Day heralds the universal call for protecting rights of all human beings without any form of discrimination. The protection of human rights is necessitated more than ever while a global pandemic hits the life and liberties of the citizens.

The people of Bangladesh have been facing the COVID-19 pandemic together with the state sponsored endemic violations of human rights. Freedom of peaceful assembly and association continue along with the muzzling of press freedom and the freedom of expression. The Bangladesh government uses law enforcement agencies to suppress dissidents with impunity and members of these forces are allegedly involved in serious human rights violations, including commissions of enforced disappearance, torture and extrajudicial killings, which continue to take place in the country. The large number of cases of human rights violations that go unpunished illustrates the general climate and culture of impunity in Bangladesh.

Denial of basic healthcare facilities to the ordinary citizens continue, parallel to entertaining the ruling elite with exclusive care in this COVID-19 pandemic. Criticism of the double-standards and discriminations in the healthcare, engulfed with entrenched corruption, is dealt with by arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention. The government consistently retaliated against the dissents with the Digital Security Act-2018, the Special Powers Act-1974, and other draconian laws. It has exploited the pandemic to curtail rights by all means.

Access to justice for the victims of human rights abuses remains a far cry due to the ongoing trend of institutional complicity. All the State institutions, including law enforcement and criminal justice system have become dysfunctional and coercive. Arbitrarily detained journalists Abul Asad, Ruhul Amin Gazi, and Shafiqul Islam Kajol, cartoonists Ahmed Kishore, and writer Mushtaq Ahmed were denied bail from the court. A society cannot flourish without a justice-based approach upheld by a transparent justice system.

The pattern of committing gross human rights violation against its citizens encourages the government to disrespect everyone around its spectrum. As a result, apart from the denial of many rights as refugees, a large group of the Rohingya refugees face relocation on an isolated island without their consent and by disregarding the criticism and recommendations from the international community.

The absence of a democratization process halts the accountability of the institutions in Bangladesh. Good governance cannot be established without a vibrant parliament formed through an inclusive, participatory, free and fair electoral democracy; having embedded systems of checks and balances.

The United Nations' theme relates to the COVID-19 pandemic and focuses on the need for building back by ensuring human rights are central to recovery efforts. It shows states how failures have been exposed during the pandemic and reiterates the need to create equal opportunities for all; and to apply human rights standards to tackle entrenched, systematic, and intergenerational inequalities, exclusion and discrimination. Human rights must be at the center of the efforts, demonstrating shared humanity to bolster transformative actions and showcase practical and inspirational examples that contribute to a more resilient and just society.

In solidarity,
The Odhikar Team
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