

Bangladesh: Government fails to protect civil society members from targeted killings

(Bangkok, 26 April 2016) - The brutal murder of a prominent LGBTI¹ activist and his friend in Dhaka on 25 April is another grim reminder of how unsafe Bangladesh has become for those working to promote basic freedoms, human rights and democracy, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) said today.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Bangladesh Government to act urgently to protect vulnerable activists and hold the perpetrators accountable.

On 25 April, unknown assailants hacked to death Xulhaz Mannan, editor of Bangladesh's first and only LGBTI magazine, and his friend inside their home in Dhaka. This is the fourth such killing in April alone after university professor Rezaul Karim Siddique was killed on 23 April and young online activist Nazimuddin Samad was murdered on 7 April. In 2015, five bloggers were murdered in similar brazen attacks.

Not a single person has been held accountable for any of these nine killings in the last 14 months. Civil society groups in Bangladesh believe no credible investigations are underway either.

"While the brutality of the attackers is incomprehensible, the apathy of the Bangladeshi authorities towards these targeted killings is shocking and deplorable. The impunity that these vigilante groups are enjoying is only feeding their confidence and as a result making more people vulnerable in the country," said Evelyn Balais-Serrano, Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

Xulhaz Mannan worked at the United States Embassy in Dhaka and was a well-known activist who was fearlessly leading the LGBTI cause in Bangladesh. He raised awareness about LGBTI issues through his magazine *Roopbaan* and also worked with young LGBTI people to address their many concerns. He was also one of the key organisers of the annual 'rainbow parade' in Dhaka which was cancelled this year due to police instructions.

Homosexuality is criminalized in Bangladesh and this has forced many LGBTI activists to live in exile.

The Bangladesh Government's response to these killings has been extremely disappointing as is evident from the ease with which such extremists are carrying out these brazen attacks. To make matters worse, senior government ministers have been blaming victims for their plight. Immediately after the murder of online activist Nazimuddin Samad on 7 April, senior ministers were quoted in the media blaming atheists and secularist bloggers for attacks by extremists groups. This is highly irresponsible and insensitive.

¹ LGBTI - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex

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“Bangladesh is legally responsible to protect all citizens regardless of their faith, profession or sexual orientation. The authorities would fail to fulfil their human rights responsibilities if they don’t bring the perpetrators of these heinous killing to justice,” said Evelyn Balais-Serrano.

FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of Bangladesh, its international partners and all other important actors to work together to improve the security of the most vulnerable civil society members who are being targeted for their socio-political opinions and convictions.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation. FORUM-ASIA operates through its offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. Website: www.forum-asia.org

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