



13 August 2018

The President of Bangladesh,
H.E. Md Abdul Hamid

Bangladesh: Release all those arbitrarily arrested and investigate police abuse

Dear President Hamid,

We are writing to express our concerns about serious violations of civic freedoms perpetrated during recent protests in Bangladesh. We urge your government to take immediate steps to address these issues in accordance with your international human rights obligations.

Our organisations are concerned about reports that police used excessive force, including firing rubber bullets and tear gas on 4th August 2018 to disperse demonstrations in Dhaka which were triggered by the killing of two teenagers by a speeding bus on 29th July 2018. We are also concerned that the government may be covering up the actual death toll and have received information that at least three others students may have also been killed and one critical injured.

Some of the student protesters were also allegedly attacked by members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Jubo League, the student and youth wing of the ruling Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) party.

More than 20 journalists were [attacked](#), some of whom were later detained briefly by the police. At least four journalists from *The Daily Star* newspaper were reportedly beaten while at least seven photojournalists were injured in attacks in Jhigatala and Science Lab areas of the city on 5 August 2018. While some attackers wore helmets, the journalists [identified some of their attackers](#) as BCL members.

We are also concerned about the arbitrary arrest of scores of individuals around the protest, in particularly Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam who was taken from his home, just hours after he made comments on Al-Jazeera about protests in the city. He was subsequently charged under section 57 of Bangladesh's Information Communications Technology Act a provision that has been frequently used to bring charges against critics, activists and other dissenting voices in Bangladesh. He has also alleged that he was tortured while in custody. A lawyer in Sirajganj, Sakhawat Hossain

Shakil, was also [arrested](#) and remanded under Section 57 of the ICT Act on 7th August for allegedly sharing anti-government posts and expressing solidarity with safe road protesters on Facebook.

At least 22 protesters were [remanded](#) in police custody for two days and five are facing charges under Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act. Some were allegedly tortured or ill-treated in custody. They are now detained in prison as the courts have rejected the applications for bail.

In the last few months, our organisations have also [documented](#) attacks by the BCL against students protesting the civil service quota system, which reserves 30 percent of government jobs for children of freedom fighters from Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971. Academics and journalists supporting them have also been targeted. Some student activists were subsequently detained and charged. At least six are [languishing](#) in jail and according to their lawyers were allegedly tortured in police custody.

The arrest and charging of peaceful protesters and allegations of torture and ill-treatment, clearly contravene Bangladesh obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment. Our organisations also believe that the violent actions of the police at these protests are inconsistent with international human rights standards on the use of force such as the United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement, and that the failure to take appropriate measures to prevent and punish harm caused by private actors, such as the BCL, also contravenes Bangladesh's international human rights obligations.

Many of the issues above were also [raised](#) at the Human Rights Council during Bangladesh's recent Universal Periodic Review in May 2018, and received support from your government. Protecting civic freedoms is also part of Bangladesh's commitments under Agenda 2030 and these violations highlight that the country is failing abysmally to meet targets set under Goal 16 on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, and particularly [target 16:10](#) to "protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements".

Therefore, we urge your government to take the following steps as a matter of priority:

- Immediately and unconditionally release all protesters who have been arbitrarily detained for exercising their human rights, in particular photographer Shahidul Alam, and drop all charges against them;
- Carry out prompt, impartial, independent and efficient investigations into all complaints and reports of excessive use of force by the police, as well as attacks by non-state actors, against protesters and journalists, bring those responsible to justice and provide reparations to the victims;
- Review and amend all laws that restrict freedom of expression, such as section 57 of the 2006 Information and Communication Technology Act;
- Send a clear message to members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and other non-state actors that violence by them will not be tolerated;
- Create a safe and enabling environment for activists, civil society and citizens to exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly without intimidation, harassment, arrest or prosecution.

We express our sincere hope that you will consider and implement these recommendations.

Sincerely,

David E. Kode
Advocacy and Campaigns Lead
CIVICUS

Ichal Supriadi
Secretary General
Asia Democracy Network (ADN)

Basil Fernando, Director, Policy and
Programme
Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)

Henri Tiphagne
Executive Director
People's Watch

Mathew Jacob
National Coordinator
Human Rights Defenders Alert – India
(HRDA)

John Samuel
Executive Director
Forum Asia (Asian Forum for Human Rights
and Development)