

## **Bangladesh: Arbitrary Deregistration of human rights organisation, Odhikar`is a clear act of reprisal**

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 14 June 2022) — The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns the arbitrary deregistration of Odhikar by the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) of Bangladesh.

Odhikar, a prominent human rights organisation in Bangladesh and a member of FORUM-ASIA, had applied for renewal<sup>1</sup> of its registration to the NGOAB in 2014, as mandated under the Foreign Donation (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Rules-1978, which now has been repealed and replaced by a controversial law, the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Law 2016<sup>2</sup>. Due to the inaction of NGOAB for several years, Odhikar filed a writ petition at the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh in 2019.

While the matter was sub-judice before the Court, the Bureau issued a letter to Odhikar on 5 June 2022, arbitrarily rejecting its renewal application, only three days before the High Court Division Bench was scheduled to hear the matter.

“The arbitrary decision to deregister Odhikar by the NGOAB is a clear act of reprisal and is highly concerning and condemnable. This is aimed at instilling a chilling effect on human rights organisations and defenders in the country and highlights the deteriorating situation of civic space in Bangladesh”, said FORUM-ASIA.

The NGOAB said the registration of Odhikar cannot be renewed for multiple reasons, including publication of “misleading information” about extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances which have “seriously tarnished the image of the state to the world”. The NGOAB had not decided on the renewal of Odhikar’s registration for eight years<sup>3</sup>, which impacted the work of Odhikar. This deregistration will make it difficult for Odhikar to continue its human rights work as they will no longer be eligible to access foreign funding.

### **NUMEROUS REPRISALS AGAINST ODHIKAR**

Pertinently, there have been numerous reprisals and cases of judicial harassment<sup>4</sup> against Odhikar and its staff since 2013. In May 2013, Odhikar’s Secretary Adilur Rahman Khan and Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan were detained in relation to a fact-finding report issued by Odhikar in 2013 on extra-judicial killings by security forces and law-enforcement agencies in Bangladesh. They were charged under the Information and Communication Technology Act and are undergoing trial before the Cyber Tribunal of Dhaka and face up to 10 years of imprisonment if convicted. The intimidation and surveillance of Odhikar and its staff is recurring and has been documented by Odhikar’s monitoring reports<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/rights-organisation-odhikar-denied-registration-renewal-434262>

<sup>2</sup><http://l.forum-asia.org/bangladeshfdrb>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/govt-scraps-odhikars-registration-3041306>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/8/bangladesh-scrapping-rights-groups-licence-a-chilling-message>

<sup>5</sup>[http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/HRR\\_Jan-March\\_2022\\_English.pdf](http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/HRR_Jan-March_2022_English.pdf)

In December 2021, the United States' Treasury Department imposed sanctions<sup>6</sup> on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a special unit of Bangladeshi police, in response to allegations of large-scale human rights violations, mainly extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances. Two months later, in February 2022, the NGOAB sent Odhikar a letter requesting additional information, including its income and expenditure statement, the list of existing staff, and the names and full addresses of those that the organisation had alleged were extrajudicially killed and disappeared between 2009 and 2021. This action by the bureau is seen as a direct reprisal against Odhikar for their human rights work, especially their documentation of extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances and the sanctions from the United States.

FORUM-ASIA expresses its solidarity with Odhikar and calls on the Bangladeshi authorities to immediately recall the decision of rejecting Odhikar's renewal application thereby ensuring it to carry on their human rights work. FORUM-ASIA reiterates<sup>7</sup> its earlier call to repeal the Foreign Donation (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act, 2016 as it imposes restrictions on civil society organisations' ability to access resources.

"The Bangladesh government instead of targeting and harassing civil society organisations and human rights defenders should create an enabling environment for civil society organisations to continue their human rights work", said FORUM-ASIA.

#### **Background:**

Since its inception in 1994, Odhikar has played a crucial role in promoting and protecting human rights, including by systematically documenting human rights violations and abuses in Bangladesh. Odhikar has worked closely with many international organisations, including the United Nations, in documenting the extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances allegedly perpetrated by the security forces in Bangladesh and seeking accountability.

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#### **About FORUM-ASIA:**

**The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)** is a network of 85 member organisations across 23 countries, mainly in Asia. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. The FORUM-ASIA Secretariat is based in Bangkok, with offices in Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. [www.forum-asia.org](http://www.forum-asia.org)

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/southasiasource/us-sanctions-on-bangladeshs-rab-what-happened-whats-next/>

<sup>7</sup><http://l.forum-asia.org/bangladeshfdrb>