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Written submission by Reporters without Borders on the state of freedom of information and media circulation in BANGLADESH

Overview of the press freedom situation

Working conditions for journalists have worsened significantly these past years in Bangladesh, which is ranked 129th of 179 countries listed in the 2011-2012 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders.

Although the constitution guarantees media freedom, a series of draconian laws enable the government to control the media. The main obstacles to media freedom stem from the rivalry between the opposition and the government, which often prevents journalists from doing their job. The Rapid Action Battalion, a special crime prevention unit, as well as security agencies are responsible for acts of intimidation against journalists.

The Awami League's return to power in January 2009 brought a calmer environment for the media than under the previous, military-backed interim government. At Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's behest, the authorities freed detained journalists and the intensity of harassment by the military eased off.

This fragile and partial return to normality was threatened by a series of government decisions that trampled on media freedom from 2010 onwards: an exhibition in Dhaka showing photos of extrajudicial executions by members of the Rapid Action Battalion was closed by the Dhaka police in March 2010; the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission banned Facebook during one week in May 2010 on religious grounds; the closures of Channel 1 TV and the opposition daily Amar Desh; the murder of Fateh Osmani, the magazine Shaptahik 2000's correspondent in the northeastern city of Sylhet.

Nowadays, the main problems for the media result from the political tension between

members and supporters of the opposition parties on the one hand, and those of the ruling Awami League on the other. The situation is especially critical in certain regions where the correspondents of many national media are often the victims of abuses by Awami League members, officials, criminal groups and sometimes police officers.

Bangladesh has half a dozen TV stations, a similar number of privately-owned radio stations, and scores of Bangla and several English-language dailies. This media diversity does not however compensate for the many repressive laws. Journalists can be jailed on charges of defamation or sedition. The security services continue to monitor the phone calls and emails of dozens of journalists. International media correspondents are also targeted.

Worsening of the media freedom situation in 2011 and 2012

In 2011 and 2012, there has been even more cases of journalists harassments, physical attacks, and threats of closure of media.

Reporters Without Borders is worried by a decline in the media's ability to work freely in Bangladesh and, in particular, by a spate of physical attacks and threats against journalists by criminal gangs at the end of the year 2011, as well as cases of harassment by the authorities.

There has been no let-up in the climate of violence against journalists and in fact there has been a marked increase in the number of physical attacks. By allowing harassment and violence to become so widespread, the government is directly contributing to the decline in media freedom in Bangladesh.

On 26 September 2011, the Dhaka police brought charges of conspiracy, vandalism and planned arson of government property against 15 students working as journalists for local papers and who had been covering protests by fellow students at Jagannath University against the withdrawal of government subsidies.

In March 2012, Ekushey Television (ETV) has been threatened by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission to be shut down for allegedly broadcasting illegally.

On 14 March 2012, 19 Pirojpur-based reporters, fearing for their lives, went to the city's main police station to make statements and request police protection from local Awami League leaders and supporters who had threatened to kill them at the previous day's rally because of recent critical coverage of two local Awami League parliamentarians, A.K.M.A. Awal (also known as Saidur Rahman) and Anwar Hossain. Also, broadcasting by three privately-owned TV stations had been suspended on the previous day to prevent live coverage of an opposition BNP rally in the capital.

Online censorship and Internet monitoring

The Bangladeshi state sees ICTs as positive enablers of socioeconomic development and has been working toward digitizing the country. At the end of 2011, about 3,5 % of the population had access to the Internet. About 0,25 % was connected in 2005.

Internet access in Bangladesh is not restricted by any national level filtering regime. However, the authorities have ordered and obtained on at least 3 occasions these past years the blocking of Web sites for 'subversive' and 'anti-Islamic' content. Internet is regulated by existing legislation that restrict content deemed 'defamatory' or 'offensive' or disturbing national security.

From 9 to 21 March, [Bangladesh blocked access to YouTube](#) and several other video-sharing websites "in the national interest" after it hosted a recording of a tense meeting between the prime minister and army officials following a bloody mutiny by border guards. According to Telecommunications commission chairman Zia Ahmed : "the government can take any decision to stop any activity that threatens national unity and integrity."

Access to Facebook was [blocked in Bangladesh from 29 May 2010 to 5 June 2010](#), reportedly as a result of both the posting of Mohammed cartoons and "shocking" satirical images of prominent politicians, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the opposition leader and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's first president On 28 May, thousands of demonstrators had taken to the streets of the capital, Dhaka, to demand that the site be banned because of a Mohammed cartoon competition.

The Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission told Internet Service Providers on 5 June to restore access to Facebook following the social-networking website's agreement to withdraw the "offensive content". The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) said Facebook had offended the religious feelings of the population's Muslim majority. Mahbub Alam Rodin, a young man who had allegedly posted the satirical images, was arrested for insulting the country's leaders.

The authorities [blocked the YouTube site indefinitely](#) on 17 September 2012 while Google's search engine was rendered inaccessible for a few hours, in an attempt to prevent the circulation of "Innocence of Muslims," a US-produced video that denigrates Islam. The day before, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission wrote to Google requesting the video's withdrawal "to prevent violence and social disorder."

Vigilance shall remain regarding potential overbroad online surveillance. According to the news website [bdnews24.com](#), in January 2012, a few days after reports revealed a failed coup organised online and through mobile phones, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) set up the Bangladesh Computer Security Incident Response Team (BD-CSIRT), a cybercrime watchdog unit to monitor "harmful" content

on the Internet and mobile platform. Its mission, as defined by the authorities, is to identify the sites and persons or institutions who engage in operating harmful activities against the state, society, political and religious beliefs using the mobile phone, Web site and different social networking sites.

Manhandled, tortured, injured or killed journalists in 2012:

Mutafizur Rahman Sumon – manhandled journalist

Reporters Without Borders is alarmed by the illegal detention and serious mistreatment of **Mutafizur Rahman Sumon**.

Mutafizur Rahman Sumon, 28, of the news site justnewsbd.com, was arrested on 13 July 2012 in Dhaka, and remained behind bars until the 19th. He suffered injuries at the hands of authorities.

The arrest was prompted by Sumon's campaign against impunity for crimes against media workers. Sumon was leaving a computer store when officers in civilian clothes from the Detective Branch of the Bangladesh Police forced him into their vehicle.

According to the Crime Reporters Association of Bangladesh and members of Sumon's family, the police, commanded by Inspector Motlab Hossain and Assistant Commissioner Tauhidul Islam took Sumon to a secret location. He was held there for three days, during which time he was beaten, threatened, and deprived of food and sleep. Sumon was prevented from contacting his family and a lawyer. After he refused to pay 50,000 taka (5,000 euros) that police demanded for his freedom. He was transferred on July 15th to the Darus Salam police station, on the capital city's west side, on a false charge of computer theft. The following day, he was transferred to the Dhaka main prison by a judge who rejected an official request for continued police custody. Colleagues and relatives who have visited Sumon in prison were gravely concerned for his health.

Sumon, according to his uncle, linked his arrest to his participation in several demonstrations by media workers protesting the absence of progress in the investigation of the double murder of **Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi**, husband-and-wife journalists who were killed on 11 February.

Ayaz Azad – injured journalist

In another disturbing development, correspondent **Ayaz Azad** of the daily Dainik Jaijaidin was attacked on 14 July 2012 by machete-wielding students of the Chhatra League (student branch of the ruling Bangladesh Awami League) on the campus of Islamic University in the Kushtia district of southwest Bangladesh. The journalist was hospitalized for injuries to his shoulders.

Jamal Uddin –journalist killed

Jamal Uddin, a reporter for the Jessore-based Bengali-language newspaper Gramer Kagoj, was stabbed and hacked to death by a group of men in a market in Sharsha, a subdistrict of the southwestern district of Jessore, on 15 June 2012.

Aged about 32, Uddin was abducted from his home at around 11 p.m. on 15 June by individuals who took him to Kashipur Bazar, mutilated him with knives and machetes and then abandoned him there. Residents rushed him to Jessore Medical College Hospital, where he died of injuries to the legs, hands and eyes.

His murder was probably prompted by his coverage of a local drug trafficking ring, which had already threatened to kill him. The local media community demonstrated in Sharsha on 16 June 2012 to demand the arrest of those responsible for Uddin's murder.

This is the latest in a series of particularly brutal attacks on journalists in Bangladesh. Samakal journalist A.B.M. Fazlur Rahman and several BDnews24.com reporters were the victims of violence during the month of May 2012, but instead of responding to the attacks, the authorities contribute to the threats against journalists by attacking them, arresting them and prosecuting them. RSF has urged the international community to press the Bangladeshi government to end the growing harassment and to comply with their obligation to protect freedom of information.

Golam Mustofa Sarowar and Meherun Runi

The bodies of Golam Mustofa Sarowar and his wife, Meherun Runi, were found by their 5-year-old son on February 11th morning, according to some news reports. Both journalists had been hit repeatedly with sharp weapons. Sarowar, a news editor at the Dhaka-based Maasranga Television, had recently returned to Bangladesh from Germany, where he had worked for Deutsche Welle. Runi was a senior reporter at ATN Bangla Television.

Although Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina asked the police to arrest the killers within 48 hours, 8 months after their death, the police has made no arrests and even said they were unable to determine a motive in the double murder.

At the end of April, Bangladesh High Court instructed Government to immediately transfer the murder case investigation to Rapid Action Battalion [RAB] after the investigation officers of police admitted their Zero achievement over the two months and a bit in the investigation. Court also advised formation of a high powered committee to monitor the progress of investigation.

In May 2012, significant facts seemed to translate the absence of will from the authorities to conduct efficiently the investigation. Among the several criticisms against the RAB, was the fact that the special unit waited 10 days to collect the viscera report of slain Bangladeshi journalist couple. After the report from Mohakhali Chemical Laboratory reached the medical

college, the authorities contacted the Rab several times, but remained unanswered. The bodies of the journalists had to be exhumed from Azimpur Graveyard and taken to Dhaka Medical College morgue on April 26 following a High Court order. This is considered as a major waste of time and resources by several journalists and sources close to the case.

Runi's brother Nawsher Alam Roman said the family is in the dark about the progress of the investigation. As a journalist and blogger, Abu Sufiyan, Reporters Without Borders 2012 Blog award winner, is equally concerned by the ongoing investigation. Friends of assassinated journalist couple have raised extreme concerns about the recent efforts to make the five year old child of the couple, Megh, as a key witness of the murder of his parents.. RAB efforts to interrogate the son of the journalists, is also seen as a deliberate waste of time.

At the end of August 2012, various samples and evidence collected from the bodies of the journalist couple and the crime scene were sent to the US for forensic and DNA tests. A laboratory detected the full DNA profile of a person from the T-shirt of slain journalist Meherun Runi. So far no significant results have come from these DNA tests and the credibility and capacity of the RAB to conduct a proper investigation is still put into question by many journalists and civil society workers.

Recommendations

Reporters Without Borders urgently calls upon the authorities and judiciary in Bangladesh to:

- *Take concrete measures in order to obtain results in the investigation on the murder of Golam Mustofa Sarowar and Meherun Runi. To allow civil society to monitor the progress of the investigation by regularly disclosing information on the progress of the investigation.*
- *React quickly and to take measures to stop this wave of violence and harassment, and to comply with the obligation to protect freedom of information.*
- *Release all journalists and citizens currently held in detention in connection with their professional activities and expressing their freedom of expression*
- *Lift the restrictions on national and foreign media activities, allow independent and critical coverage of the government's actions, and ensure full compliance of the Bangladesh national law and practices with Article 19 of the ICCPR.*
- *To allow access to You Tube and avoid any widespread censorship, which endangers the freedom of online media and restricts abusively access to information of the Bangladeshi population*