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The situation of freethinkers in Bangladesh



Briefing note

By the European Humanist
Federation

Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of speech have dramatically increased over the past few years in Bangladesh. This year, four secular and humanist bloggers were hacked to death by Islamist groups for “insulting Islam”. Niladri Chatterjee (Niloy Neel), Ananta Bijoy Das, Md Washiqur Rahman Babu and Avijit Roy were murdered on respectively 7 August, 12 May, 30 March and 27 February 2015.

These four murders follow a succession of attacks and “blasphemy”-type prosecutions over several years against those who identify as non-religious or humanist, or those who seek to criticize political Islam in Bangladesh. For instance:

- Prof. Shafiul Islam was murdered on 25 November 2014.
- On 31 March 2014, teenaged bloggers Kazi Mahbubur Rahman Raihan and Ullash Das were sent to jail for Facebook comments supposedly “insulting” Islam and the Prophet. This was only after they had been attacked and beaten by a mob.
- In 15 February 2013, blogger, architect and activist Ahmed Rajeeb Haider was hacked to death.
- Asif Mahiuddin was stabbed in January 2013 and survived that attack, only to be arrested on 3 April of the same year and charged with “offending Islam and its Prophet”.
- Subrata Adhikari Shuvo, Mashiur Rahman Biplob, and Rasel Parvez were also arrested for “hurting religious sentiments” in 2013.
- Writer Taslima Nasrin (Sakharov Prize 1994) was forced to leave Bangladesh to escape arrest and death.

These writers were attacked and murdered because they were proponents of secularism and humanism, voiced skeptical and rationalist arguments and called for justice and freedom. All had been accused of ‘blasphemy’ or ‘offending Islam’ one way or another. **Most of them were on the “hit-list” set up in 2013 by Islamist groups and targeting 84 secular bloggers and writers.**

BLASPHEMY LAWS IN BANGLADESH

Though in theory a secular democracy, the ruling governments of Bangladesh have frequently given into pressure from Islamist parties, and continue to prosecute atheists and others on malicious charges of “insulting religion” and related crimes.

Section 295A of the Penal Code states that any person who has “deliberate” or malicious” intent to “hurt religious sentiments” can be imprisoned and this has been used in practice to prosecute and imprison atheist and secularist activists.

Similarly, the Code of Criminal Procedure includes several clauses (99a-f) that states “the government may confiscate all copies of a newspaper if it publishes anything subversive of the state or provoking an uprising or anything that creates enmity and hatred among

the citizens or denigrates religious beliefs.” Various forms of artistic expression by freethinkers— including blogs, books and films—have been banned or censored.

In 2013, after tensions of the predominantly secular Shahbag protests and the trial of Islamist party Jamaat-e-Islami leaders for war crimes, an estimated 100,000 Islamists took to the streets of Dhaka calling for “death to the atheist bloggers”. Jamaat called for a new “blasphemy law” with a death penalty. The Islamist protesters demanded the arrests of 84 named bloggers.

In August 2013, following pressure from Islamists, the Government amended the Information and Communication Act, criminalizing defamation of religion, creating a *de facto* “blasphemy” law. Any statement published or transmitted by any person if found to cause to hurt or may hurt religious belief, then that person will be regarded as committed an offence.

Following Ananta Bijoy’s murder, Bangladesh’s government banned the Ansarullah Bangla Team who claimed responsibility for the three recent killings. However, this is not enough to ensure non-believers’ physical integrity and protection. After last murder of Niladri Chatterjee Niloy, Bangladesh’s authorities completely failed in proceeding to investigations and even played Islamists’ game by warning humanist bloggers: “Do not cross the limit. Do not hurt anyone’s religious belief”. They further suggested that more bloggers criticizing religion and advocating humanism would be arrested under the country’s online communications laws.¹

URGENT ACTION NEEDED

Ten out of the 84 secular bloggers and writers on the “hit-list” created by Islamist groups have already been killed for “insulting Islam”. **All those targeted face direct death threats and need to remain in hiding.**

Numerous human rights organisations like Amnesty, Reporters without Borders, PEN International, the International Humanist and Ethical Union and the European Humanist Federation (EHF) have been overwhelmed by calls for help from other targeted bloggers in Dhaka. They have all stopped their writings and most of them face imminent death threats and want to leave the country.

Besides usual political lobbying, the European Humanist Federation is now working with the aforementioned NGOs to evaluate the threats and look for temporary/permanent relocation programmes. The priority is to help them leaving the country before other murders are perpetrated.

¹ For more information about the political context in Bangladesh, please visit our sister organisation the International Humanist and Ethical Union at: www.iheu.org or end-blasphemy-laws.org/

The EHF therefore urges European governments to study all possibilities for temporary relocation and permanent asylum for the bloggers.

The EHF also urges European governments and EU institutions to pressure Bangladesh government to:

- Act urgently to bring to justice those responsible for attacks against atheist bloggers.
- Do all in its power to stop the violent campaign against those who profess no religion, criticise Islamism, political Islam, or religious views.
- Make a clear and public statement clarifying that the right to freedom of religion or belief applies to those with no religious belief as well.
- Amend legislation, specifically the Penal Code, Code of Criminal Procedure and the Information Communications Technology Act 2006, so as to bring it in to line with international human rights standards.
- Ensure that law enforcement agencies uphold the right to freedom of expression, and provide training to those agencies on how to deal with crimes against those seeking to exercise free expression.

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And visit: <http://humanistfederation.eu/news-fhe.php?pages=speak-out-for-bangladesh-bloggers>

The European Humanist Federation, based in Brussels, was created in 1991 and unites more than 60 humanist and secularist organisations from about 20 European countries.

It is the largest umbrella organisation of humanist associations in Europe, promoting a secular Europe, defending equal treatment of everyone regardless of religion or belief, fighting religious conservatism and privilege in Europe and at the EU level.

It is a partner of the international campaign : END BLASPHEMY LAWS end-blasphemy-laws.org/

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