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The Observatory
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Joint statement

Bangladesh: New proposed legislation to stifle the voice of rights defenders

Paris-Geneva-Dhaka, June 26, 2015 – Authorities in Bangladesh must reject the proposed Cyber Security Act 2015 and the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2014, as they both violate international human rights standards on freedom of expression and association, said the Observatory and Odhikar.

Bangladesh authorities are aiming to tighten their control over free expression through the newly proposed Cyber Security Act 2015. This Act, which is currently awaiting approval by the Cabinet, widens the scope of crimes and imposes harsher sentences than the existing Information and Communication (ICT) Act. It also grants the authorities the right to prosecute any person, including foreigners, who threatens Bangladesh's "national security" through online communications. The existing ICT Act already criminalises defamatory and "anti-State" publications and has been used to target dissenting voices, in particular human rights defenders, and this repression would only increase in scope and severity with the newly proposed legislation.

The proposed Cyber Security Act is part of a systemic approach by the Bangladesh authorities to stifle free expression and severely restrict the work of civil society. The *Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2014*, which was already approved by the Cabinet in 2014 and is currently before the Parliament in order to be passed into law, subjects the work of civil society organizations to increasing control by the government. According to this Act, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will not be allowed to receive any foreign donations without prior permission from the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGO-AB), and will need to inform the NGO-AB of any activities they undertake with such funds. The NGO-AB, which is under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister's Office, has the authority to inspect, monitor and suspend the activities of NGOs that receive foreign funding, with no appeal or independent review mechanism.

"These proposed legislative reforms will result in greater repression of free expression and the ability of human rights defenders to work safely, freely and effectively in Bangladesh", said Karim Lahidji, President of FIDH. The right of every individual to freedom of association and expression is a fundamental and universal right enshrined in numerous international treaties and standards, particularly Article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Bangladesh has ratified.

"We call on the authorities in Bangladesh to immediately reject these two proposed acts, and ensure that legislation in Bangladesh is in line with international law and protects fundamental freedoms and human rights", stated Gerald Staberock, Secretary General of OMCT

The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (OBS) was created in 1997 by FIDH and OMCT. The objective of this programme is to intervene to prevent or remedy to situations of repression against human rights defenders.

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