



JUNE 2015

FOCUS ON BANGLADESH

Violations of Freedom of Religion or Belief

– Bangladesh –



European **Humanist** Federation

In the space of three months, three secular or atheist bloggers were killed in Bangladesh for criticizing religious extremism and promoting humanism in their country:

- **Ananta Bijoy, Md Washiqur (or Oyasiqur) Rahman Babu and Avijit Roy were all hacked to death with machetes in the streets of Bangladesh on 12 May, 30 March and 27 February 2015 (respectively).**
- 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 killed 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

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.

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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, banning this party is not enough to ensure non-believers’ physical integrity and protection.

URGENT ACTION NEEDED

Nine 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.**

They request international help to be granted asylum on the grounds of freedom of religion or belief. We are particularly concerned that a few days before he was assassinated, Ananta Bijoy Das was denied a visa by Sweden to speak at a conference on press freedom on the grounds that he “might not come back to Bangladesh” and that his case was “not urgent enough” ([Read article from Washington Post](#)).

We need to act now to avoid other murders and defend the right to freedom of expression and freedom of belief in Bangladesh.

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US Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report 2015, Bangladesh situation on p.193-194
<http://iheu.org/third-atheist-writer-hacked-to-death-in-bangladesh-this-year/>
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/Youll-be-next-Bangladeshi-blogger-gets-death-threat-on-Facebook/articleshow/47477859.cms>

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