

August 5, 2024

Re: Open Letter with Urgent Action Required regarding the Condemnation of Bangladesh Government's Brutal Crackdown and Manipulation Efforts

We, the undersigned, urgently bring to your attention a disturbing development concerning the Government of Bangladesh. An email dated 25 July 2024, sent by the Government to its overseas embassies, instructs them to counter the current narrative regarding the situation in Bangladesh. This communication seeks to manipulate host governments and media outlets, mitigate negative portrayals, and exploit favourable diaspora to distort public perception.

We vehemently condemn the Bangladesh Government's brazen attempts to spread misinformation and fabricate narratives about the situation in the country. These actions are a deliberate effort to obscure the truth and prevent the real picture from being exposed. This communication from the Bangladesh Government is nothing short of foreign interference and transnational repression. Such actions are intolerable and violate the core principles of free speech and democratic engagement.

The protests broke out on 1 July 2024, quickly spreading across universities in Bangladesh. Students were demanding the repeal of the quota system reinstated by the High Court on June 5, 2024, which reserved 30% of first and second-class government jobs for descendants of 1971 freedom fighters. Although the system was abolished in 2018 after widespread protests, its reinstatement prompted a new wave of demonstrations, with students calling it discriminatory and demanding its cancellation.

The protesting students were met with a brutal crackdown and unprecedented violence, highlighting the Awami League government's continued pattern of violent repression against peaceful assembly and dissent. Over 200 protestors have been killed, 9000 arrested, and countless others severely injured. Security forces, including police and military, have resorted to extreme measures and a shoot-to-kill approach, as evidenced by firing bird shots and pellets at close range, using tear gas in enclosed spaces, and conducting overnight abductions. Videos verified by Amnesty International show officers dragging injured protesters and failing to provide medical aid.

These actions have caused severe injuries and permanent disabilities. The use of armed forces against unarmed civilians is a gross abuse of power and a violation of international norms.

On July 21, 2024, the Supreme Court scrapped most quotas, but students in Bangladesh have expanded their protests. They now demand a public apology and acceptance of responsibility from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the resignation of key ministers and university officials, and a ban on the Bangladesh Chhatra League from student politics, among other demands. They vow to continue protesting until these demands are met.

The witch hunt against protest leaders and participants has intensified, with overnight abductions and arbitrary arrests of student human rights defenders. The government is relentless in silencing and punishing those demanding justice and reform, with alarming reports of torture and ill-treatment of detainees.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the government-imposed Internet shutdown, which lasted for 11 days. Not only the Internet and mobile services are cut off, online media are inaccessible. The Internet is still slowed while restrictions persist on social media platforms and two online media that were based outside Bangladesh: Netra News and Bangla Outlook could not be accessed from inside Bangladesh. This deliberate action has severely limited communication and access to information. Such measures are clear attempts to limit freedom of expression, freedom of press, and digital rights, and control the narrative by cutting off the population from the outside world. This is an egregious assault on freedom of information and a desperate bid to hide the government's crimes.

Journalists have been targeted in this violent crackdown. At least 30 reporters have been attacked, and at least three journalists have been killed while covering the protests. This assault on press freedom is a direct attack on democracy and must be condemned in the strongest terms.

The role of the military and police along with vigilante groups such as the Bangladesh Chhatra League, in perpetuating this violence is undeniable and reprehensible. Soldiers have been deployed on the streets, tanks stationed across Dhaka, and curfews imposed to crush the protests. The government's response, marked by abductions, severe beatings, and impunity for state-aligned vigilantes, showcases a regime willing to go to any lengths to desperately cling to power. The use

of armed forces against unarmed civilians is a gross abuse of power and a violation of international norms.

We echo the urgent calls from United Nations experts, including Human Rights Chief Volker Turk and Special Rapporteur Irene Khan, for an impartial, independent, and transparent investigation into the alleged human rights violations during the crackdown on protesters. The government's handling of the mass protests, marked by significant casualties and widespread arrests, must be scrutinized without delay.

We demand that embassies and international bodies take immediate action as outlined below:

1. Call on the Bangladesh Government to immediately halt all killings and other forms of violence against protesters.
2. Immediately advocate for and support an international commission of inquiry, established by the UN Human Rights Council, for an impartial, independent, and transparent investigation into the human rights violations.
3. Resist any and all pressures from the Bangladesh Government to alter the narrative and ensure that accurate and truthful information is disseminated.
4. Urgently support secure platforms for documenting and submitting evidence of human rights abuses.
5. Work tirelessly to hold those responsible for human rights violations accountable through appropriate legal and diplomatic channels.
6. Demand the immediate restoration of full internet access and the lifting of all restrictions on social media platforms and online news outlets to ensure the free flow of information.
7. Strongly condemn the use of military and police forces against unarmed civilians and demand the immediate demilitarization of the response to peaceful protests.
8. Stand in solidarity with the people of Bangladesh who are courageously fighting for justice and democratic reform.

The international community must remain vigilant against the Bangladesh Government's egregious attempts to manipulate the narrative. We must collectively ensure that accurate information prevails, and the voices of those fighting for justice and reform in Bangladesh are heard and

supported. We urge all concerned parties to decisively reject misinformation and uphold the principles of transparency, accountability, human rights and the rule of law.

Sincerely,

Signature Organizations (Alphabetical Order as of August 4, 2024)

1. Advocacy Forum-Nepal
2. Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) Indonesia
3. Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN)
4. Asean Youth Forum (AYF)
5. Asia Dalit Rights Forum (ADRF)
6. Asia Democracy Network
7. Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
8. Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN Indonesia).
9. Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)
10. Asociación Pro Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos - El Salvador
11. Association of Parents and Family Members of the Disappeared (AFMD)-Sri Lanka
12. Association of Women for Awareness and Motivation (AWAM)
13. Balaod Mindanaw
14. Bir Duino - Kyrgyzstan
15. Bytes for All, Pakistan
16. Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC Cambodia)
17. Capital Punishment Justice Project, Australia
18. Citizens Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), South Korea
19. Coalition for Equality - Kyrgyzstan
20. Conflict Victims' Society for Justice, Nepal
21. Defence of Human Rights Pakistan (DHR)
22. Desaparecidos, Philippines
23. Families of the Disappeared (FOD) - Sri Lanka
24. Free Jonas Burgos Movement, Philippines
25. Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) / Initiative for International Dialogue. (IID).

26. Human Rights Hub, Sri Lanka
27. Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI)
28. Human Rights Now (Japan)
29. Hustisya, Philippines
30. Indonesia Legal Aid and Human Rights Association (PBHI).
31. Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI)
32. Indonesian Legal Aid and Human Rights Association (PBHI)
33. Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM) Indonesia
34. International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearances (ICAED)
35. International Legal Initiative Foundation, Kazakhstan
36. Jagriti Child and Youth Concern Nepal (JCYCN)
37. Karapatan Alliance, Philippines
38. Karnali Integrated Rural Development and Research Centre, Nepal
39. Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law
40. Law and Society Trust (LST) Sri Lanka
41. Legal Literacy-Nepal
42. Liga Guatemalteca de Higiene Mental, Guatemala
43. Madres de Plaza de Mayo - Linea Fundadora - Argentina.
44. Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)
45. National Commission for Justice and Peace, NCJP
46. Nonviolence International Canada
47. Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA)
48. PIKAT Demokrasi, Indonesia
49. Public Association “Dignity”, Kazakhstan
50. Pusat Komas
51. South Asia Youth Network
52. Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet), Indonesia
53. Sri Lanka Democracy Network.
54. Sydney Policy and Analysis Center
55. Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFD-P)
56. The Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS)

57. The Globe International Center
58. Think Centre, Singapore
59. Torture Coalition and Survivors Support Coalition, Washington DC
60. We Remember-Belarus
61. Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), Nepal