

Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada

NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations
Promoting human rights by protecting those who defend them

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Hon. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina
Office of the Prime Minister
Gona Bhaban, Old Sangsad Bhaban, Tejgaon
Dhaka, Bangladesh.
Email: pm@pmo.gov.bd

18th September 2014

Dear Prime Minister,

Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada (LRWC) calls on the Government of Bangladesh to investigate a recent violent attack against Hana Shams Ahmed, a leading human rights advocate for women's rights and indigenous rights.

Hana Shams Ahmed serves as coordinator of the International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (CHTC). CHTC works to monitor the human rights situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a highly militarised region in southern Bangladesh which is home to a large indigenous population. In 1997, a Peace Accord was reached in relation to conflict between the indigenous people and Bengali settlers in the region, although land grabbing, deforestation and land degradation associated with intensive logging and business agriculture continue to create tensions.

According to information obtained by a number of international human rights organisations,¹ Hana Shams Ahmed was violently attacked in the Banderban district by up to ten people allegedly associated with the Bengali ultra-nationalist group, Somo Odhikar Andolon. The attack occurred at around 6.30pm on 25th August after a police unit which had been detailed to protect her from such attacks disappeared. Previously, on 5 July 2014, CHTC members were attacked in their vehicle in Rangamati district while conducting a fact-finding mission.

A recent CHTC report on violence against indigenous women and girls in Chittagong Hill Tracts found that impunity is the single most important factor contributing to sexual and gender based violence in the region.

¹ This includes [Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition](#) (WHRDIC), the International Service for Human Rights and Front Line Defenders.

LRWC has observed an increasing number of attacks on human rights defenders and representatives of human rights organisations in Bangladesh, including ODHIKAR. We note what appears to be an entrenched pattern of official harassment and persecution of human rights defenders and journalists, using a range of means including arbitrary detention, search of offices and seizure of equipment and documents, withholding consent for release of approved funding, harassment of staff and family members of human rights defenders, and more recently, the introduction of repressive legislation.

LRWC calls on the Government of Bangladesh to

1. Provide Hana Shams Ahmed with protection that ensures her physical safety and her ability to carry on her work without interference;
2. Identify and punish the perpetrators of the attack on Hana Shams Ahmed through an immediate, competent and transparent investigation, followed by prosecution and trial;
3. Ensure the physical and psychological protection of the staff and associates of all human rights organisations and provide sufficient security to ensure they can continue their human rights work without constraint; and
4. Respect and protect human rights defenders and ensure they are able to conduct their legitimate work without fear of physical and psychological violence throughout Bangladesh.

Yours sincerely,

Siobhán Airey

Lawyers' Rights Watch, Canada