

RIB & ARTICLE 19

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ARTICLE 19 and Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB) are calling on UN Member States to make recommendations to the Bangladeshi Government to protect journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders, reform legal restrictions on freedom of expression and protect the right to free expression of religious groups and minorities during its third Universal Periodic Review (UPR). In a Joint Submission to the UN Human Rights Council's UPR mechanism, we find that despite Bangladesh accepting many recommendations related to the exercise of free expression, and associated rights, at its second UPR in May 2013, minimal progress has been made on their implementation and in some areas there has been backsliding on protection of this right.

In the submission, ARTICLE 19 and RIB highlight a worrying increase in the rate of attacks on journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders in the country, and impunity for these. In the period under review, and up to June 2017, ARTICLE 19 recorded 1,159 violations against journalists, bloggers, and human rights defenders, including 20 murders, 10 cases of abduction, 167 cases of serious bodily injury, 253 cases of minor assault, 113 verified threats, 2 attempted killing, 126 cases of destruction of equipment, and 52 gender-based attacks. Harassment through unwarranted application of the law also accounted for a large proportion of attacks, with 120 criminal defamation cases, 89 other vexatious litigations, 115 cases under section 57 of the ICT Act 2006, and 92 cases of arrest and remand in police custody.

The levels of impunity for killings of journalists, bloggers and HRDs have improved somewhat compared to the previous period under review, however the slow rate of investigations into attacks and punishment for perpetrators remains worrying. We urge UN Member States to call on the government of Bangladesh to ensure attacks on journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders are investigated fully, and to implement recommendations to ensure a safe and enabling environment for them to carry out their work, in line with international standards.

Bangladesh also accepted a number of recommendations during its previous review to reform laws which are not in line with international human rights law on freedom of expression, however many of these laws remain in place and new legislative proposals which threaten free expression have been put forward. Provisions of the Penal Code which criminalise defamation and religious insult, as well as restrictions on freedom of expression online through the Information Communications Technology Act and the draft Digital Security Act, impose impermissibly broad limits on free expression online and offline and must be repealed or reformed.

"We hope that the third cycle of the UPR will prove a catalyst for action, and that the government will, over the next few months, make serious efforts to fulfill its commitments and roll back new restrictions imposed during this cycle of review", said Tahmina Rahman, Director of ARTICLE 19 Bangladesh & South Asia.

Bangladesh's third UPR will take place in Geneva in May 2018.