

FExB/মুক্ত প্রকাশ on 30 Days Audit of Media in Lockdown **Dhaka, 27 April 2020**

The government imposed a countrywide lockdown from 26 March 2020 and extended for the third consecutive period until 05 May 2020 for containment of the outbreak of the coronavirus.

Forum for Freedom of Expression, Bangladesh (FExB) or মুক্ত প্রকাশ (*in Bangla*), a network of media rights defenders has expressed deep anguish and grave concern over the developments during 30 Days of Lockdown which has taken a toll on Bangladesh news organisations, journalists, whistleblowers, and citizen-journalists.

The country is reeling from the COVID-19 crisis and the vulnerable segments of our society are the most at risk. Besides the “healthcare warriors”, the journalists are also on the frontline. The journalists and citizen-journalists are frequently targeted by state and non-state actors while reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak, which FExB reckons to be a serious threat to freedom of expression.

When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina took an effort to scale-up food aid for the disadvantaged population in response to the nationwide shutdown, the media organizations, journalists and whistleblowers had to take the brunt of anger and vengeance by local leaders and government officials including the police.

Nearly two dozen journalists were attacked, intimidated, harassed, or arrested for reporting on pilferage, corruption, and lack of accountability in food aid meant for poor people who are facing extreme hardship during the lockdown.

FExB states that Thakurgaon district is the worst place for journalism in the country after six journalists were harassed within a week.

On 19 April, two editors **Toufique Imrose Khalidi**, Editor-in-Chief of *bdnews24.com*, **Mohiuddin Sarker**, acting editor of *jagonews24.com* along with three other journalists **Rahim Suvho**, Thakurgaon correspondent of *bdnews24.com* and a local journalist **Shaown Amin** were accused under draconian Digital Security Act.

After ten days of publication of the news in two news portals on misappropriation of open market sale (OMS) rice, the Baliadangi Upazila’s Swechchhasebak League, also a local ruling party leader Mominul Islam filed a case against the journalists. The case is under investigation and none has been arrested.

It was also alleged that other journalists posted aggressive, false, and defamatory information against him (Mominul Islam) and his brother a Union Parishad chairman Aminul Islam Amin on their Facebook pages.

Liaison Office:

Voices for Interactive Choice & Empowerment (VOICE) House 67, Block-Ka,
Pisciculture Housing Society, Shyamoli, Dhaka 1207, Bangladesh.

In a separate case on 15 April, police sued **Al Mamun**, correspondent of *Dainik Odhikar* district correspondent under notorious cybersecurity laws for criticising the district civil administration in Facebook for its failure to take effective measures to contain the spread of coronavirus during the lockdown.

On 21 April, another journalist in Thakurgaon **Abdul Latif Litu**, a local correspondent of popular newspaper *Bangladesh Pratidin* and private TV channel *News 24* was assaulted by police at a check post during the lockdown.

FExB is deeply concerned regarding the series of attacks, intimidation, and harassment of journalists and other media organisations all over the country, during the 30 Days of Lockdown.

On 31 March 2020, **Sagor Chowdhury**, a freelance video-blogger and editor of a local news portal *360degree* was publicly assaulted by Nabil Hyder, son of Jashim Uddin Hyder, president of Borhanuddin Upazila Awami League and also chairman of Boro Manika Union Parishad over posting a live video on Facebook. Police arrested the perpetrator Nabil Hyder, a member of the Chattra League of Dhaka University.

On 1 April 2020, three journalists **Shah Sultan Ahmed**, Nabiganj Upazila correspondent of the *Dainik Protidiner Sangbad* in Habiganj, **Mujibur Rahman**, correspondent of *Dainik Amar Sangbad* and **Bulbul Ahmed**, correspondent of private TV *Channel-S* were attacked with a cricket bat by Mahibur Rahman Harun, chairman of Aushkandi Union Parishad and also a local leader of the ruling party. Sultan was shifted to Osmani Medical College in Sylhet with critical injuries.

Earlier, Sultan posted a live video on Facebook which revealed that the local leader (Harun) was distributing each of the families 5 kg of rice instead of the allocation of 10 kg.

On 10 April 2020, **Nasir Uddin Rocky**, a staff reporter of vernacular daily *Dainik Jugantor* in Chittagong was on his way to the newspaper office riding a motorcycle. At a check-post, the police arrested the journalist, later released unconditionally. The police officer was suspended.

On 12 April 2020, police in Bogura at a check-post, arbitrarily handcuffed and assaulted two journalists **Majedur Rahman**, correspondent of a private channel *Shomoy TV* and **Shahjahan Ali** of a private channel *Ekattor TV*. The journalists were dragged to the police station and were released. The delinquent police officers were suspended.

On 14 April 2020, police arrested **Golam Sarwar Pintu**, journalist of *Dainik Bangladesher Alo* after Sheikh Salim, a Dhaka city councillor of Ward 38 filed a case under notorious Digital Security Act with Badda Police Station.

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Pintu's crime was the publication of news regarding angry urban-poor community held protest demanding food aid during the lockdown.

On 16 April 2020, police assaulted **Tuhin Howlader**, court correspondent of a vernacular daily *Bangladesh Pratidin* in the capital Dhaka.

On 23 April 2020, Chairman of Amirganj Union Parishad in Narsingdi mercilessly assaulted **Baten Biplob**, Senior Crime Reporter and TV Anchor of *SATV KHOJ*, and **Sajal Bhuiyan** Narsingdi correspondent of TV channel *SATV*.

Baten Biplob in his Facebook post described the barbaric attack on journalist Sajal Bhuiyan who was profusely bleeding and crying in pain. He was admitted to Narsingdi government hospital. The perpetrators were not arrested and the police administration is not cooperating, it was alleged.

FExB demands to end impunity and to bring them to justice of the local leaders, police, and district administration officials responsible over the attacks, harassments, intimidations, and arrests of frontline "media warriors". #

Source: National newspapers, news portals, Article 19, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Endorsed and signed by Media Rights Defenders:

1. **Dr. Aireen Jaman**, General Secretary, *PEN International, Bangladesh*, London;
2. **Faruq Faisal**, South Asia Regional Director, *Article 19*, London;
3. **Ahmed Swapan Mahmud**, CEO, *VOICE*, Dhaka;
4. **Khairuzzaman Kamal**, Representative *International Federation of Journalists* (IFJ), Brussels;
5. **Saleem Samad**, Correspondent, *Reporter Without Borders* (RSF), Paris;
6. **Mainul Islam Khan**, Representative, *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ), New York;
7. **Biplob Mostafiz**, Member, *Mukto Prakash* (FExB), Media Rights Defender;
8. **Sayeed Ahmad**, Representative, *Front Line Defenders*, Dublin, Ireland;
9. **Ahamad Ullah**, Member, *Bangladesh Manabadhikar Sangbadik Forum* (BMSF), Dhaka;
10. **GM Mourtaza**, CEO, *CCD Bangladesh*; Rajshahi.

For more information, please contact Saleem Samad: +88-01711-530207; email: saleemsamad@hotmail.com; Faruq Faisal: +88-01730-710267, email: faruq@article19.org

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Voices for Interactive Choice & Empowerment (VOICE) House 67, Block-Ka, Pisciculture Housing Society, Shyamoli, Dhaka 1207, Bangladesh.