



Against Trafficking
in Women

PRESS RELEASE

MILITARY-BACKED GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH RESTRAINS UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR, SIGMA HUDA, FROM LEAVING THE COUNTRY, ARRESTS HER HUSBAND, TORTURES HER BROTHER-IN-LAW AND HARRASSES HER DAUGHTER

"Janice Raymond, Co-Executive Director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, has been in constant contact with UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking, Sigma Huda. Raymond states that the government of Bangladesh has recently issued a restraining order preventing Sigma Huda from leaving the country to fulfill her duties as Special Rapporteur and to deliver a key report on trafficking before the Human Rights Council in Geneva on June 11, 2007. She alleges that the government fears that Special Rapporteur Huda will discredit the military-backed government and spotlight its recent human rights abuses in detaining and torturing over 95,000 Bangladeshis. We join UN Watch and other NGOs in calling upon governments and UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, to take action against the Bangladeshi government's harassment of human rights expert Sigma Huda and the illegal detention, torture and harassment of her family members."

TIMELINE

2006

Oct. 27 –BNP government ends 5 year term. Caretaker (interim) government takes over. Election to be held within 90 days.

Military removes caretaker government and declares state of emergency. Suspends all fundamental rights. Monitoring of former governmental officials and human rights activists begins. Emergency government prohibits any criticism of government.

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2007

Feb. 4 – in the early morning hours @3:00 am, Nazmul and Sigma Huda's residence is invaded by the Joint Task Force, the house is searched, money, cell phones, passports, video equipment, computers, local and foreign currency are confiscated, and Nazmul Huda, former member of the BNP cabinet and Bangladeshi MP, is arrested without warrant. Later, they seized a recently purchased 4-wheel drive vehicle. Nazmul's whereabouts unknown for 30 hours.

Feb. 5 – Nazmul brought to police station and to court on that day. Bail petition is heard and refused. No grounds given. Detention order sent by Ministry of Home Affairs detains Nazmul for 30 days. Nazmul is moved to a jail in Rangpur, a town in North Bengal, making access to lawyer impossible and family meetings difficult.

February – Nazmul ordered to submit statement of assets within 72 hours from receipt of order. Taking advantage of this order, Sigma seeks and receives permission to meet with Nazmul to prepare the statement.

February 25 – Statement of assets submitted to Anti-Corruption Commission. Nazmul's detention extended for another period of 30 days. . No access to lawyer permitted to Nazmul. Constant surveillance of family by members of security forces.

March 7 – Sigma Huda learns from television as her picture flashes on the screen that she too is on the government's list of wanted persons. The next day, this list is published in the daily Bangladeshi newspapers. Sigma gets a court order directing authorities not to harass or arrest her without invoking due process of law. The same day, the government sets up Special Task Forces to arrest persons without warrant and to seize any property they target without any prior court order, as required by law. No charges against Sigma have been spelled out.

March 8 – High Court of the Bangladesh Supreme Court declares detention of Nazmul illegal.

March 11 – Appellate Division of Bangladesh Supreme Court stays Nazmul's detention, and he stays in prison. Accretion of charges are filed by the government from that of stealing one mobile phone from a 19 year old voter in his constituency during his tenure as Minister to money laundering.

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March 28 – Sigma is hospitalized for a heart condition.

April – Sigma is made to appear before several courts for a bail hearing. She is granted bail of 6 months. No evidence is brought forth at the hearing to charge Sigma. Sigma goes into hiding.

May – Bangladeshi government obtains a restraining order from the highest court preventing Sigma Huda from leaving the country to perform her duties as UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons. The government says that she is a security risk if she leaves the country since charges are in the process of being drawn up against her.

May – Bangladeshi government instructs donors to Bangladeshi organizations, which Sigma founded and in which she has membership such as the Acid Survivors Foundation and the Bangladeshi National Women’s Lawyers’ Association, not to release funds to these organizations.

May – Government arrests and tortures Sigma’s brother-in-law. He remains in jail.

May – Government continues to monitor all of Sigma’s activities.

May 27 – Government lists Antara Huda, Sigma’s daughter, as a co-conspirator in an “unlawful eviction” case. Police begin harassment of Antara Huda asking her to appear at the police station.

Notes:

The Law Ministry has called upon all of the top lawyers in the country NOT to appear or plead on behalf of those who have been arrested or put on lists.

B. Both parties with their respective Prime Ministers, Begum Zia and Seikh Hasina, are undoubtedly responsible for the present situation. The Asian Centre for Human Rights has stated that both allowed looting of the country, harassment and terrorism by religious and political extremists, and their personal acrimony virtually has prevented consolidation of democracy for over 15 years.

C. Although the international community disapproved of the direct military takeover, it seems also to indirectly approve of the takeover because of: 1) the smoothness with which the takeover was effected; 2) the exhaustion with the corruption of former

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governments, Bangladesh being reputed to be the No. 1 corrupt country according to Transparency International; 3) the relative calm and order of the country at this point after the massive public disorder of past years.

However, between January 12 and March 12, reportedly, 95,825 persons have been arrested and 50 persons have been killed by the military government. Scores of human rights activists have been tortured. Indigenous peoples' organizations have also been accused of anti-state and anti-peoples' activities, and the army has forcibly evicted indigenous people from their land in 62 villages.

Sooner or later, lots more Bangladeshi could be targeted, given the military ban not only on outdoor political meetings, but on indoor political meetings, no matter how small.

D. Our quarrel is not with the cleansing of corrupt officials in the country. Our quarrel is with how this is allowed to be carried out, with the current military government acting as a law unto itself. With no signs of holding elections in the near future, they seem to be clinging to power and prolonging quasi-military dictatorship. The ills of Bangladeshi democracy and the corruption of the political parties cannot be resolved by supporting a military backed government that sets itself above judicial scrutiny.

Illegal detentions, torture and disregard for the rule of law are the order of the day. If Nazmul is guilty of corruption as alleged, this should be proved through legal means, not through illegal detention, confiscation of family property and deprivation of legal and human rights.

The more recent prohibitions against Sigma Huda, including the restraining order against her leaving the country to perform her UN duties, is an outrage and a violation of her right to freedom of movement and freedom of speech. The government's illegal actions are now being imposed on more and more members of Sigma's family, including her older daughter.

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