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Bangladesh: Arrest of human rights defender Didar Bhuiyan

On 5 May 2020, law enforcement officials took human rights defender Didar Bhuiyan from his office in Badda, Dhaka. They raided it and seized several of his possessions. The following day, on 6 May 2020, the defender was transferred to the Ramna police station and on 7 May was transferred to Dhaka prison. He has been accused of "spreading rumours and carrying out anti-government activities" for allegedly posting anti-government content online.

[Didar Bhuiyan](#) is a human rights defender and a member of Rastrochinta, a platform that hosts discussion on political reform, rule of law and constitutional rights, among others. Didar Bhuiyan is an information technology professional who is instrumental in Rashtrochinta's social media campaigns and online discussion forums. The human rights defender was an active member of a voluntary group called Partiban Chai (which translates to 'We demand Change') and in this capacity, had organised and participated in several activities calling for reforms on corruption.

On the evening of 5 May 2020, eight to nine plain clothed individuals claiming to be members of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) 3, picked up Didar Bhuiyan, without a warrant of arrest, from his office in Badda. The human rights defender's office was raided and two of his computers, a laptop and mobile phone were seized. However, no list of seized items was prepared, nor were any signatures taken to keep account of the items. When the defender and his colleagues standing by asked the reason for the raid and why he was being detained, the individuals responded that he was being brought for interrogation regarding a crime committed by one of Didar Bhuiyan's "friends".

Later the same day, when the defender's family contacted RAB officials to inquire about his whereabouts, they were told that they had no information of the arrest and denied it had happened. However, on the evening of 6 May 2020, Didar Bhuiyan's family was informed that he had been handed over to the Ramna police by the RAB 3 officials.

Didar Bhuiyan is a core member of the 'Humanitarian assistance monitoring committee' set up by Rastrochinta to monitor the government's humanitarian activities in response to COVID-19. On 30 March 2020, the committee published a report analysing government data, showing how the most marginalized groups and areas have received the least amount of government support. Didar Bhuiyan had shared the findings of this report on his social media account, however the content was later taken down by authorities.

Those critical of the government's response to COVID-19 have been increasingly targeted with arrests and threats. Didar Bhuiyan, along with ten others, is being charged with "spreading rumours and carrying out anti-government activities" under the Digital Security Act of 2018, for allegedly posting anti-government content. All those named in the case have been critical about the government's mismanagement in tackling the pandemic. At the time of writing, Ramna police have taken three of the eleven accused into custody, including Didar Bhuiyan.

The Digital Security Act of 2018 has been increasingly invoked to suppress any form of online dissent or criticism of the government. The language of the Act is overly broad and vague and is being used to intimidate and arrest those critical of the government. The Act also allows for invasive forms of surveillance and imposes heavy fines and jail terms for legitimate forms of dissent. In addition to this, the Act includes penalties for many offences which are not entitled to

bail.

Front Line Defenders is concerned about the arrest of human rights defender Didar Bhuiyan. It condemns the judicial harassment of the defender and those who are simply exercising their fundamental right to freedom of expression. Front Line Defenders believes that the human rights defender is being targeted solely as a result of his peaceful work in defence of human rights.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Bangladesh to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release human rights defenders Didar Bhuiyan, as he is being arrested solely for his work in defence of human rights;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Didar Bhuiyan, while he is in custody;
3. Make amendments to the Digital Security Act 2018 to bring it in accordance with the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a party;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Bangladesh are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, including judicial harassment.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw your attention to Article 6 (b and c): *“Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others: (b) As provided for in human rights and other applicable international instruments, freely to publish, impart or disseminate to others views, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms; (c) To study, discuss, form and hold opinions on the observance, both in law and in practice, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and, through these and other appropriate means, to draw public attention to those matters”,* and to Article 12 (2): *“The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.”*

Please inform us of any actions that may be taken with regard to the above case.

Yours sincerely,



Andrew Anderson

Executive Director