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## ONE YEAR AFTER THE MURDERS OF XULHAZ MANNAN AND MAHBUB RABBI TONO

By Ta\*, an LGBT activist in Bangladesh

*“I might not come any longer. I’m afraid. You had to flee from one place to another out of fear of being slaughtered by the extremists. If something like that happens again, I don’t have the strength or ability to do things like you.” I have received many messages like this from fellow LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) activists in Bangladesh over the past year. On 25 April 2016, Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy were killed mercilessly by extremists for promoting LGBT rights in Bangladesh – nothing has been the same since.*

*It was an ordinary lazy afternoon in Dhaka and my friend Xulhaz had just returned from work. He was sitting with Tonoy and another friend in their flat, talking about threats and things they needed to do to protect themselves, when they heard the doorbell ring. A man said there was a parcel waiting for them. At that moment a group of men armed with machetes stormed into the flat and viciously murdered Xulhaz and Tonoy. From the outside, eyewitnesses later said that you could hear screaming and shouts of “Nara e takbeer - Allahu akbar [God is great]”. Everywhere in the flat, which had been a breeding ground for our creative ideas and thoughts, there was thick red blood and the murderers’ footprints. Since I heard this description from another friend, a dark and ugly animal called “fear” with sharp shiny claws has been sitting on my torso permanently.*

*I could not sleep the night after the murders, nor did I feel safe enough to go back home. Everything was dark, and you could hear a pin drop. I hid somewhere that night, and could hear cats walking on the corrugated iron roof. The sound of their soft paws felt like a machete-wielding extremist coming for me. Many of us had to go into hiding immediately. In the past year, we have had to move from place to place - from creepy hotels to unknown apartments, to mutual friends, or to another country. With and without my partner, I have had to change location eight times in the past year. To me, the definition of home and homeland has changed much over the past 12 months – I have started feeling as though I don’t have a home anymore.*

*Police often harass LGBT people in Bangladesh, and I realized soon that I could not approach them for protection. Indeed, I knew I could be detained by police at any point as part of the “investigation”.*

*And as soon as I am inside their office... (Let's not talk about that. Let the rest of the world not know the horrifying details of a so-called police interrogation). I felt I needed to escape as soon as possible.*

*We LGBT activists have lived with threats for a long time, but these became more sinister after the murders. More threatening letters started immediately. We had to escape. Many wanted to escape from their own lives. In one year, fear made many of my friends leave their homeland, probably for the rest of their lives. When I talk to them, I always want to ask them when they think they will come home – I want to see them in person like I used to. But I don't ask, and I never will. They won't return.*

*Some of us more high-profile activists took shelter in two safe houses immediately after the murders. For obvious reasons we could not go out. We were not supposed to open the windows, or even go near them. Living there for two months in extreme uncertainty and with little to keep my mind occupied drove me crazy. It was a very strange feeling – too strange to express in words.*

*Four days after the murders, Ansar al-Islam (a Bangladeshi armed group which claims it is linked to al-Qa'ida in the Indian subcontinent) released a statement claiming responsibility. Soon after, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said: “[o]ur society does not allow any movement that promotes unnatural sex.” Just like in the cases of the secular bloggers who have been killed since 2013, government officials seemed to imply that we had brought our situation on ourselves.*

*Foolishly, I thought that the murderers would be arrested within six months. Instead, very little has happened. On 10 January 2017, police missed their ninth deadline for filing an investigation report into the killings.*

*As a community, our activities have all but stopped. The few of us who haven't left the country are too afraid to get organized. It's frustrating that all the progress achieved by the LGBT community in Bangladesh has been set back several years. When I now try to cope with my regular life here in Dhaka, the biggest challenge I face is self-censorship. I had to remove my interviews, blogs, articles and all the traces of my activism. I had to change my mobile phone number. I have been advised not to use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or other platforms that could reveal my location.*

*Sometimes sitting on my couch I stroke my cat. It closes its eyes in comfort and pretends to sleep. The whole world is changing very fast but, like my cat, we act like we don't see these changes.*

*What keeps me motivated is our superpower to cope with this new reality. I still think of plans for us, which give me hope: start-ups, crowd funding, citizen journalism, audio blogs and whatnot. But we need support to get there. On the anniversary of the murders, a small step the authorities could take to honour Xulhaz Mannan and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy is to do everything they can to bring their killers to justice.*

***\*Ta is a pseudonym – the name has been changed to protect the author.***

***The views and opinions expressed here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Amnesty International.***