

Open Letter

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ASA 13/8683/2024
23. Oktober 2024

Follow-up on International Human Rights CSO Meeting during UNGA 2024

Bangladesh



Bangladeschische Sicherheitskräfte im Einsatz. Foto: Bernhard Hertlein © Amnesty International

Amnesty International and 5 other organizations have submitted a Joint Open Letter to the Interim Government of Bangladesh as a follow-up to the positive International Human Rights CSO Meeting during UNGA 2024.

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL Sektion der Bundesrepublik Deutschland
Spendenkonto 80 90 100,
Bank für Sozialwirtschaft BLZ 370 205 00

Dear Prof. Yunus,

We are writing to express our gratitude to you for meeting with our group of international human rights organizations during UNGA 2024. After past conversations with you under difficult circumstances, it was remarkable to speak at a time of great hope for the future of human rights and democracy in Bangladesh. While there are many challenges facing the Interim Government, it was inspiring to hear your vision for leading the country through this transition, deeply rooted in core human rights principles.

At this moment of promise, we urge the Interim Government to continue to prioritize action to restore basic freedoms, expand civic space, pursue accountability for victims of gross violations, and establish safeguards against future abuse. As leading international human rights organizations, we believe it is critical during this window of opportunity to take the following actions to protect the rights and freedoms of the people of Bangladesh:

- Disband the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and hold commanders accountable for past abuses. The RAB's track record of committing extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture with impunity not only demands accountability but also underscores that the institution is beyond reform. It must be fully disbanded to guard against the serious risk of future abuses and to demonstrate commitment to building a rights-respecting security force.
- Repeal repressive cyber legislation and dismiss retaliatory cases against journalists, human rights defenders, and activists. We urge the Interim Government to take key steps towards restoring freedom of expression including: (1) repeal or amend the Cyber Security Act (CSA) and the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act following a robust consultative process to prevent politically motivated crackdowns on critics and dissent; (2) review all cases lodged under the CSA, Section 57 of the ICT Act, and the Digital Security Act, as well as criminal and civil defamation cases, to dismiss politically motivated cases brought in reprisal for the exercise of freedom of expression; (3) quash convictions in trumped-up cases against human rights defenders, journalists, and those who engaged in peaceful criticism on social media; and (4) bring new laws to strengthen digital freedom of expression, prevent arbitrary internet shutdowns, and protect journalists, human rights defenders, and activists.
- Conduct independent, impartial, and credible investigations into all killings in July and August 2024. The investigations must meet international standards and lead to fair prosecutions of all perpetrators regardless of their institutional or political affiliation in Bangladesh's pursuit of ending impunity.
- Declare a moratorium on the death penalty, including for cases under the jurisdiction of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) and enact a law to abolish capital punishment. Individuals are subject to the death penalty notwithstanding serious concerns about arbitrary arrests and fair trial violations. As the country seeks accountability for prior abuses, a moratorium on the death penalty that applies to the ICT is necessary to break with past fair trial violations, meet minimum international standards, and secure meaningful justice.
- Ensure unfettered access to all detention centers in Bangladesh, including clandestine detention facilities, for the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances and other key actors, including the National Human Rights Commission, which should have ongoing, unrestricted, and unannounced access to all places of detention. Shining a light on black sites is critical not only for truth and accountability about past violations but also as an essential safeguard against future abuses. The Interim Government should order security forces to release all those forcibly disappeared, and anyone in unlawful or arbitrary custody or detained in inhuman or degrading conditions, and provide answers about those that were extrajudicially executed.
- Guarantee access to the country for international human rights monitors, especially through the establishment of a permanent office of the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in

Bangladesh, to support transparent investigations into past abuses, effective reforms, and compliance with human rights obligations. Human rights monitors should be free to carry out their work without harassment in all areas of the country, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Interim Government should invite the U.N. Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, and the Special Rapporteur on torture to support its efforts to reform laws and rebuild criminal justice institutions.

- End restrictions on civil society funding and operations. The operation of civil society organizations has been inhibited by the NGO Affairs Bureau's practices of delaying and denying approval of projects and international funding. We urge the review and reform of the NGO Affairs Bureau and the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act to end restrictions on international funding and other forms of burdensome oversight. An invitation could be extended to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in this regard.

- Ensure the protection, access to aid, and rights of Rohingya refugees. We urge the Interim Government to allow new refugees fleeing Myanmar to enter the refugee camps in Bangladesh and provide them humanitarian assistance by registering them in partnership with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. All Rohingya refugees should be guaranteed access to aid, livelihoods, education, and freedom of movement, and should not be subjected to forcible relocations to Bhasan Char.

We stand ready to support your efforts as you take these critical steps to restore rights and freedoms and repair the foundations of democracy in Bangladesh.

Sincerely,

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

Human Rights First

Amnesty International

Human Rights Watch

CIVICUS

Committee to Protect Journalists

Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman, Visiting International Scholar, Ohio University, USA