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FIFA OFFICIAL WITH DEFAMATION FOR CHAMPIONING FOOTBALL Bangladesh

Bangladeshi authorities must immediately and unconditionally release the international foot-ball governing body FIFA's council member Mahfuza Akhter Kiron, who faces two years behind bars simply for exercising her right to freedom of expression, Amnesty International said today. Mahfuza Akhter Kiron, who is also chairperson of the women's wing of the Bangladesh Football Federation, was arrested from her home in Dhaka's Dhanmodi neighbourhood on 16 March 2019. She is facing defamation charges for accusing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of favouring cricket over football, and was denied bail by a Dhaka court.

"Championing football is not a crime. Mahfuza Akhter Kiron was merely exercising her right to freedom of expression by stating that the Prime Minister favoured cricket over football. If the implications of a defamation case were not so serious, it would be laughable. Mahfuza Akhter Kiron must be released immediately and unconditionally," said Saad Hammadi, South Asia Campaigner at Amnesty International. If she is found guilty, Mahfuza Akhter Kiron could be sentenced to a maximum of two years under Bangladesh's Penal Code.

The arrest of the FIFA official marks the latest attack on freedom of expression in Bangladesh. Following the enactment of the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) last year, there has been a chilling effect felt across civil society and the media, giving rise to self-censorship. Under the vaguely worded DSA, anyone can be imprisoned for up to 10 years and face heavy fines for sharing their legitimate views online. The punishment for a repeat offence can be life imprisonment.

Over the past five months, the Bangladeshi authorities have arrested more than 60 people under the DSA for online comments critical of the Prime Minister and her family. Last August, renowned photographer Shahidul Alam was arrested and imprisoned by the Bangladeshi police imprisoned for more than 100 days for comments he made in an interview with Al-Jazeera English, where he criticized the government's heavy-handed crackdown on student protests calling for safer roads. "The crackdown on freedom of expression is one of the main reasons why Bangladesh's image has been tainted globally. As long as these arrests continue, and as long as these repressive laws remain in force, Bangladesh will be unable to claim its place as a rising economy that upholds human rights," said Saad Hammadi.