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BANGLADESH: DROP CHARGES AGAINST JOURNALIST

Bangladeshi authorities must immediately and unconditionally drop trumped-up charges against a prominent journalist who could be jailed for more than a decade for a Facebook post, Amnesty International said today.

Probir Sikder, editor of the daily newspaper Bangla 71, was arrested in August 2015 and has been out on bail since. He is due in court in Dhaka on 26 June, when the charges against him are expected to be formalized.

“Any charges against Probir Sikder must be dropped immediately and unconditionally. It is a sad state of affairs when a respected journalist could face more than a decade in prison simply for posting on social media,” said Champa Patel, Amnesty International’s South Asia Director.

After receiving death threats following articles he had written about a local property dispute, Probir Sikder fled his home in Faridpur province in 2015. On 10 August 2015, he posted a statement on Facebook saying a government minister – and others should be held responsible if he were to be killed, or harmed in any way. Probir Sikder says he posted the statement after police refused to take action over the death threats against him.

Probir Sikder has been accused of “tarnishing the image” of Khandker Mosharraf Hossain, Bangladesh’s Minister for Local Government, under Section 57 of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act. If found guilty, he could face between seven and 14 years in prison. The case has sparked outcry among many civil society and media organizations in Bangladesh, who see it as another attempt by the authorities to silence independent media and critical coverage by targeting independent journalists.

In 2001, Probir Sikder lost one of his legs in an attack following a series of articles he had written about Bangladesh’s 1971 War of Independence. Probir Sikder claims that the police blindfolded him and tried to make him confess by threatening to cut off his other leg when he was in their custody in August 2015. As far as Amnesty International is aware, no police officer has been investigated for the torture and other ill-treatment of Probir Sikder in detention.

“The police officers who allegedly threatened Probir Sikder must be promptly, thoroughly, impartially and transparently investigated and held to account. It is shocking that the

Bangladeshi police seem more interested in doing the authorities' bidding than in providing protection for a journalist who has been living under death threat for years," said Champa Patel.

The ICT Act, and in particular Section 57 which Probir Sikder has been charged under, is a highly problematic piece of legislation that the Bangladeshi authorities increasingly use to stifle dissent or independent voices. The Act is overly broad and vaguely formulated. It gives the authorities sweeping powers to target an individual who publishes online anything they find inconvenient.

Over recent years, the Bangladeshi authorities have stepped up a crackdown on independent media and have charged a number of high-profile journalists and editors solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression.

"Independent media is under siege in Bangladesh. Instead of trying to suppress the important work journalists are doing, the authorities should do more to hold to account those who threaten, intimidate and harass media workers," said Champa Patel.