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Stop weaponizing labour law to harass Nobel Laureate Mohammad Yunus

Bangladesh

Authorities in Bangladesh must stop weaponizing labour laws and immediately end their harassment and intimidation of the Nobel Peace Laureate Mohammad Yunus, Amnesty International said today. Mohammad Yunus, who is also the chairman of the board at Grameen Telecom, is accused of employment-related violations and faces a criminal case in Bangladesh under the Labour Act 2006. Three other board members, Ashraful Hasan, Nur Jahan Begum and Mohammad Shahjahan, face the same charges.

The ongoing trial is just one of more than 150 cases¹ filed against Mohammad Yunus after the ruling Awami League party came into power in 2008. Amnesty International believes that initiating criminal proceedings against Mohammad Yunus and his colleagues for issues that belong to the civil and administrative arena is a blatant abuse of labour laws and the justice system and a form of political retaliation for his work and dissent.

“Mohammad Yunus’ case is emblematic of the beleaguered state of human rights in Bangladesh, where the authorities have eroded freedoms and bulldozed critics into submission. The abuse of laws and misuse of the justice system to settle vendettas is inconsistent and incompatible with international human rights treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a state party,” said Agnès Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

“It is time for the Government to put an end to this travesty of justice.”

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has publicly attacked Mohammad Yunus on many occasions. In 2011, she accused him of “sucking blood from the poor” and in 2022 she suggested he should be dropped in the river Padma for “trying to block the funding” of the Padma bridge project. Most recently she said “many Nobel laureates are now in prison” and that “the law will take its course” suggesting that Yunus could also be imprisoned.

The unusual speed in which the trial against Mohammad Yunus is proceeding stands in stark contrast with other labour rights-related court cases in Bangladesh. This includes the fires at the BM Container Depot in 2022 and the Hashem Foods Factory in 2021 where almost 100 factory workers were killed due to the employer's alleged negligence and non-compliance with safety standards. In both cases, the company owners faced no known criminal liability and evaded accountability by paying paltry compensations. Occupational safety of workers remains a distant prospect with conservative estimates from the Safety and Rights Society, an NGO working to improve working conditions in Bangladesh, recording more than 4,700 worker deaths between 2013 and 2022.

"The Bangladesh government's relentless smear campaign against Mohammad Yunus shows the desperate lengths the current regime is willing to go to set an example through the hounding of an 83-year-old Nobel laureate," said Agnès Callamard.

"Those violating labour rights must undoubtedly be held accountable. However, rather than misusing labour laws and criminal justice to harass Mohammad Yunus, the authorities should focus on combatting extensive threats to labour rights such as unsafe factories which continue to claim the lives of thousands of workers in Bangladesh."

Background

In 2006, Mohammad Yunus and Grameen Bank were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work to "create economic and social development from below". In 1994, he established the Grameen Telecom (GTC) to extend information technology to rural populations in Bangladesh.

The ongoing trial of Mohammad Yunus and his colleagues is for a case filed by a Labour inspector primarily alleging three violations of Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (BLA) by Grameen Telecom pertaining to employees' classification, leaves, and profit-sharing schemes: Employees were not classified as permanent workers after probationary period in contravention of Section 4(7) of the BLA; employees were not granted annual leave with pay or money against earned leave in contravention of Section 117(7) of the BLA and that GTC failed to establish Workers Participatory Fund and Workers Welfare Fund by depositing 5 percent of its net profit in contravention of Section 234 of the BLA.

The company Grameen Telecom is not named as a party in the case and only the three directors who are most closely associated with him are mentioned, which suggests that the case is politically motivated and targeted at harassing and intimidating Yunus. None of the accused directors were actively engaged in controlling the daily activities of the company.

On 5 September 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a statement² expressing concern about the harassment and intimidation of Mohammad Yunus and other dissenting voices in Bangladesh.

Anmerkungen

1 <https://www.newagebd.net/article/211670/nobel-laureate-yunus-faces-174-cases-in-bangladesh>

2 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/09/bangladesh-legal-harassment-hrds-and-civil-society-leaders>