



Bangladesh - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on Friday 8 February 2019

Information on NGO's including: Ashar Alo's involvement with social issues; & targeting of NGOs/Rotary clubs for their social activism amongst disadvantaged communities (for example assisting with AIDS awareness/opposing child marriage/anti drug protest)

A publication released in January 2019 by the *International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law* notes that:

"Today in Bangladesh, mainstream civil society organizations (CSOs) are mostly philanthropic groups, citizen coalitions, and private voluntary agencies. Many CSOs seek to serve under-served or neglected populations, to expand the freedom of or to empower people, to engage in advocacy for social change, and to provide services. The exact number of CSOs in Bangladesh is unknown. According to one estimate, the number of CSOs registered with various governmental authorities totals 250,000. Among these, it is estimated that less than 50,000 organizations are active" (International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (3 January 2019) *Civic Freedom Monitor: Bangladesh*, p.1).

This document also states that:

"The government tends to see itself as the sole organ responsible for development and often makes stringent rules and regulations for CSOs in the field of development that burden their operational activities. CSOs are often under attack by the government bureaucracy and are criticized for the "privatization of development." CSOs that are critical of government policies are sometimes branded as anti-state and are harassed in many ways, including the blocking of disbursement of foreign funds, delays of project approval, and even cancellation of registration. While the facilitating role of the government was manifested with the creation of the NGOAB for one-stop service and easing of regulatory measures, the general attitude of some in the bureaucracy toward the voluntary sector remains largely passive and hostile. The government often perceives CSOs as a competitor for scarce overseas development assistance (ODA). The government can suspend activities of a CSO or even cancel its registration for the non-submission of reports to its respective registration authority. So far, the NGOAB has cancelled the registration of 334 CSOs for alleged "unlawful activities" and cancellation for another 90 CSOs is being processed. Punitive measures can also be taken if the CSO is accused of a criminal offence. The wide scope of crimes punishable by death under the Anti-Terrorism Act, including "financing terrorist activities," carries a tremendous risk of irreversible miscarriage of justice, which may chill CSO members from engaging in certain economic activities" (ibid, p.8).

This document also notes that:

"CSOs are sometimes subject to government harassment (e.g., frequent inspections, requests for documents, etc.) for political reasons (for example, where the government feels threatened by the advocacy work of a CSO). The affected CSO

may find it difficult to access legal remedies, since the justice system is cumbersome, time consuming, and expensive” (ibid, p.9).

It is also pointed out in this document that:

“While there are no legal barriers limiting expressive or advocacy activities, CSOs are sometimes subject to government harassment in the form of frequent inspections or requests for documents (for example, where the government feels threatened by the advocacy work of a CSO). The affected CSO may find it difficult to access legal remedies, since the justice system is cumbersome, time consuming, and expensive. In other cases, the government may brand certain CSOs as “partisan” where these CSOs are critical of governmental actions and practices, such as ethnic discrimination, anti-poor labor law and wage policy, commercial extraction of natural resources, degradation of environment, or corruption” (ibid, p.9).

In January 2019 *Human Rights Watch* issued a report reviewing events of 2018 including noting that:

“Bangladesh continued a harsh crackdown to suppress those that disagree or are critical of the ruling Awami League. These included members and supporters of the political opposition, journalists, prominent members of civil society, as well as students, and even school children” (Human Rights Watch (17 January 2019) *World Report 2019: Bangladesh*, p.1).

A report issued in December 2018 by *Human Rights Watch* notes that:

“Human rights defenders and NGOs, which are already constrained by restrictive legislation, are now under severe pressure, often being labelled “anti-state” and “antigovernment.” “ (Human Rights Watch (22 December 2018) “*Creating Panic*”, *Bangladesh Election Crackdown on Political Opponents and Critics*, p.7).

In December 2018 the *Independent* states that:

“At least 66 new patients have been tested HIV positive in the district till November this year, says a report released by a local voluntary organisation on Sunday. Among the affected, a total of 902 people were detected as carrying the lethal virus while the number was 836 in last year, according to Ashar Alo Society, the voluntary organisation that works on AIDS-related issues” (Independent (2 December 2018) *66 found HIV positive in Sylhet*).

In November 2018 the *Asian Human Rights Commission* notes in a report that:

“...pro-government media has been maligning Dr. Badul Alam Majumdar, head of the Hunger Project and Citizen for Good Governance” (Asian Human Rights Commission (23 November 2018) *AHRC TV: Bangladesh crackdown on civil society ahead of December elections and other stories in JUST ASIA, Episode 242*).

A report published in October 2018 the *World Alliance for Citizen Participation* states in a report that:

“...some prominent Bangladeshi human rights NGOs continue to face harassment and restrictions” (World Alliance for Citizen Participation (26 October 2018)

Repressive laws and tactics used to silence critics as Bangladesh elected to UN Human Rights body).

In September 2018 the *International Federation for Human Rights* states that:

“FIDH notes that the NGO Affairs Bureau, which falls under the control of the Office of the Prime Minister, has frequently abused its powers to curtail the activities of NGOs, including through the denial of certain NGOs’ requests for registration or the failure to approve their proposed projects” (International Federation for Human Rights (20 September 2018) *Bangladesh: Government gives lame excuses for its failed commitment to human rights at UN review*).

A report published in April 2018 by the *United States Department of State* commenting on events of 2017 states that:

“The government's NGO Affairs Bureau sometimes withheld its approval for foreign funding to NGOs working in areas the bureau deemed sensitive such as human rights, labor rights, indigenous rights, or humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees” (United States Department of State (20 April 2018) *2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh*, pp.12-13).

This document also states that:

“A number of domestic and international human rights groups generally operated with some government restrictions, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases. Government officials rarely were cooperative and responsive to their views. Although human rights groups often sharply criticized the government, they also practiced some self-censorship. Observers noted that a "culture of fear" had diminished the strength of civil society, exacerbated by threats from extremists and an increasingly entrenched leading political party. Even civil society members affiliated with the ruling party reported receiving threats of arrest from the security forces for their public criticism of government policies” (ibid, p.18).

It is also pointed out in this report that:

“The government required all NGOs, including religious organizations, to register with the Ministry of Social Welfare. Local and international NGOs working on sensitive topics or groups, such as religious issues, human rights, indigenous peoples, LGBTI communities, Rohingya refugees, or worker rights, faced both formal and informal governmental restrictions. Some of these groups claimed intelligence agencies monitored them. The government sometimes restricted international NGOs' ability to operate through delays in project registration, cease-and-desist letters, and visa refusals. Some civil society members reported repeated audits by the National Board of Revenue in contrast with most citizens, who were almost never audited” (ibid, p.18).

In September 2017 the *Daily Star* notes:

“...one Rohingya refugee was diagnosed with HIV, and development organisation Ashar Alo is taking care of the refugee, said the director” (Daily Star (26 September 2017) *Two more HIV-positive refugees found*).

No further information on these issues could be found among sources available to the RDC.

References

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

Sources Consulted

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European Country of Origin Information Network
Freedom House
Google
Human Rights Watch
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