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**Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental organisation with
special consultative status) about press freedom in BANGLADESH**

Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation

There was a sharp decrease in the number of journalists physically attacked or receiving death threats from political militants and criminals in 2007 and 2008. But arrests increased markedly, with almost 40 cases in 2007. And the army, the real power in the country, committed serious press freedom violations aimed at silencing independent journalists. The government constantly said the media had a role to play in the fight against corruption and social injustice, but these good intentions came to nothing and, in a new development, self-censorship began gradually to be applied to political issues.

The government and the army control the media firmly in times of crisis. When a state of emergency was declared on 11 January 2007, for example, the country's TV and radio stations were ordered to stop broadcasting news programmes for two days. And when the government faced student demonstrations at the end of August 2007, it banned stations from broadcasting talk shows and political programmes. Army intelligence officers summoned editorial heads and threatened them with draconian criminal proceedings, including under Article 5 of the State of Emergency Regulations. CSB News and Ekushey TV were ordered by the Press Information Department not to broadcast "provocative" reports and commentaries.

Privately-owned television stations, which enjoy growing popularity in the country, have also been a target of crackdowns. For example, the police closed down CSB News at the government's behest in September 2007 on the grounds that its management had allegedly forged a document to obtain a frequency in October 2006. In fact its closure was probably prompted by the broadcast of footage of opposition demonstrations, in defiance of warnings from the authorities. According to the Daily Star, members of the government even accused the station of inciting students to demonstrate in Dhaka.

The written press is also under strong pressure from the authorities. In September 2007, for example, the management of Prothom Alo was forced to apologise and fire the deputy editor of its humour supplement, Aalpin, under pressure from conservative clergy, after cartoonist Arifur Rahman drew a sketch that included wordplay on the name Mohammed. Police arrested him and seized all copies of the magazine, which was accused of “hurting the people’s religious sentiment”. Many privately-owned dailies are also the victims of judicial harassment in the form of defamation suits, and have to employ many lawyers to keep their editors and journalist out of prison.

Journalists are sometimes tortured by the military for investigating the security forces. Journalist and blogger Tasneem Khalil (tasneemkhalil.com), for example, was detained and tortured in May 2007 after openly criticising the army for the spread of extra-judicial killings.

Even though no journalist was killed because of their work in 2007 and 2008, the authorities have not shed full light on the circumstances of the deaths of several journalists in preceding years. Most of the investigations are blocked.

1. Online freedom

The Internet suffers the same fate as the rest of the media. There is no organised censorship but the intelligence services intercept email as routinely as they tap phones. The government never stops trying to tighten email surveillance and find ways to legalise invasions of privacy and violations of freedom of expression. The intelligence authorities and justice ministry requested the cooperation of the Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (BTRC) on the grounds of national security and the fight against terrorism.

A law passed in 2003 enabled the authorities to have access to personal customer data and allowed data previously obtained illegally through email interception to be used as court evidence. Free speech campaigners feared that such legislation would allow the intelligence agencies to turn the country into a police state.

2. Government steps to improve the situation

The authorities of Bangladesh have taken some steps to improve respect for press freedom:

There has been a marked decrease in the number of journalists physically attacked or receiving death threats from political militants and criminals since 2007, and Reporters Without Borders encourages the authorities to pursue this improvement.

3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

There are many NGOs in Bangladesh. Some human rights NGOs, including press freedom ones, have experienced hostility from the authorities, including attempts to control their financial resources.

4. Recommendations

1. Create a task force to revive the investigations into the murders of journalists since 2000.
2. Decriminalize defamation and liberalize the various laws that restrict freedom of speech.
3. Put a stop to intervention in the media by the military and civilian authorities.

The information in this report was gathered and checked by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in about 20.

There are countries where journalists can spend years in prison because of a word or a photo that offends. Reporters Without Borders has been working tirelessly to defend press freedom since 1985 because it believes that imprisoning or killing a journalist eliminates a vital witness and threatens everyone's right to be kept informed.

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