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First UA: 30/23 Index: ASA 13/6628/2023 Bangladesh of March 31, 2023

## **BANGLADESH**

### **JOURNALIST ARRESTED FOR COVERING HIGH COST OF LIVING**

On March 29, Bangladeshi journalist Shamsuzzaman Shams was picked up from his residence by a group in civil clothes that identified as the Criminal Investigations Department. He was arrested in connection to an online article he wrote for newspaper Prothom Alo on March 26, Bangladesh's Independence Day, on the rising cost of living.

If convicted, Shamsuzzaman faces up to seven years in prison. His whereabouts were unknown for about 10 hours, after which the police stated that he was in custody and is being charged under Bangladesh's draconian Digital Security Act. This is a blatant violation of the right to freedom of expression, and Shamsuzzaman Shams must be immediately released.

#### **Write to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh urging him to:**

- Drop all charges against Shamsuzzaman Shams and release him immediately.
- Repeal the Digital Security Act 2018 or amend it in line with international human rights standards and release others arbitrarily detained under the Act.
- Uphold its obligations to protect the right to freedom of expression under its constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

#### **Write to:**

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina  
Prime Minister's Office  
Old Sangsad Bhaban  
Tejgaon, Dhaka-1215  
Bangladesh

Email: [ps1topm@pmo.gov.bd](mailto:ps1topm@pmo.gov.bd)

Cc: [gowher.rizvi@pmo.gov.bd](mailto:gowher.rizvi@pmo.gov.bd)

Salutation: Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina:

#### **And Copy**

His Excellency Dr Khalilur RAHMAN  
High Commissioner  
High Commission for the People's Republic of Bangladesh  
350 Sparks Street,, Suite 1100  
Ottawa, ON K1R 7S8  
Tel: (613) 236-0138 / 236-0139  
Email: [mission.ottawa@mofa.gov.bd](mailto:mission.ottawa@mofa.gov.bd)

Other targets to copy:

Mr. AK Abdul Momen

Minister

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Segunbagicha

Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh

[fm@mofa.gov.bd](mailto:fm@mofa.gov.bd)

Mr. Asaduzzaman Khan, MP

Minister

Ministry of Home Affairs

Bangladesh Secretariat

Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh

Email: [minister@mha.gov.bd](mailto:minister@mha.gov.bd)

Mr. Anisul Huq, MP

Minister

Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs

Bangladesh Secretariat

Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh

Email: [shourav052@yahoo.com](mailto:shourav052@yahoo.com)

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Shamsuzzaman Shams is a journalist working for the [Prothom Alo](#) newspaper in Bangladesh. When he was picked up from his home on March 29, 2023, the local police and the CID's Dhaka division denied any knowledge of his whereabouts. He was produced before court on March 30, but his bail was denied, and he was sent to jail.

Prothom Alo newspaper carried an [article](#) with eyewitness accounts that stated a group of around 15 people arrived at Shams's house in three vehicles at around 4 am. Some of them entered the house, while others stood outside, and searched Shams's room. They seized his laptop, two mobile phones and portable hard disk, and left with Shams in their custody. Around half an hour later, they returned with Shams to his house, made a list of items they seized, took photos of Shams standing in the room, and asked him to pack some clothes before leaving. Eyewitnesses believed a police officer to be amongst the group in plainclothes.

The [article](#) written by Shams on Bangladesh Independence Day, March 26, 2023, focused on the rising cost of living was titled 'We want independence of fish, meat and rice'. It pointed to the rising prices of essential commodities in Bangladesh. In Prothom Alo's Facebook page, a photo of a child holding flowers was published with a quote underneath it which was attributed to a laborer "What will I do with the independence if I don't have rice to eat? Going to the market causes me to break a sweat. We need independence of fish, meat and rice." Acknowledging the photo had been used incorrectly alongside the laborer's quote, Prothom Alo removed the post from its Facebook page within 17

minutes of its publication, removed the photo of the boy from its online report and issued a clarification.

In addition to Shams, a group of unnamed people including a photographer have been charged and the editor of Prothom Alo, Matiur Rahman, is also being sued under the Digital Security Act, named as the main accused in Shams's case. Since the law was introduced in 2018, the authorities have used it to suppress online dissent, and curtail freedom of expression in online spaces.

The UN Human Rights Committee has stated that the right to freedom of expression protects the expression of every form of idea and opinion including political discourse, commentary on public affairs and discussion of human rights under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a state party. The UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression and on the situation of human rights defenders have said that the sections in the Digital Security Act, including those used against Shamsuzzaman Shams, criminalize large categories of expression in vague and broad terms. They said that the Digital Security Act affords Bangladesh's "Government broad discretion to unduly penalize individuals for holding or sharing personal opinions, creating a chilling effect on the exercise of the right to freedom of expression." Individuals have been subjected to a wide range of human rights [violations](#) including enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture, simply for criticizing powerful people or the government on social media.

Despite Bangladesh's international commitment to protect the right to freedom of expression, journalists are being punished for their work, and as reported, according to the Center for Governance Studies, a total of 138 cases were filed against journalists under the DSA between January 2019 and August 2022, in which a total of 280 people were accused and 84 were arrested.

The Digital Security Act is a law consisting of vague and overbroad provisions that are increasingly being used to target people from all walks of life solely for expressing dissent and exercising their right to freedom of expression online. In February 2021, [Mushtaq Ahmed](#), a Bangladeshi writer died in prison after languishing there for 10 months in pretrial detention for criticizing on Facebook the Bangladeshi government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Recently, a government employee, [Sultana Jasmine](#), accused under the DSA, died in the custody of Rapid Action Battalion-5 after suffering bleeding in her brain.

**Please take action at your earliest convenience!**