



ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

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A Joint Statement by the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances, Asian Human Rights Commission, International Federation for Human Rights and Odhikar on the occasion of International Week of the Disappeared 2020

BANGLADESH: Government must stop enforced disappearances and provide special care to families of the disappeared during COVID-19

Dhaka/Manila/Hong Kong/Paris, 25 May 2020: To commemorate International Week of the Disappeared (the last week of May), the Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), and Odhikar remember and pay tribute to victims of enforced disappearance and stand in solidarity with the families of the disappeared during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Enforced disappearance is qualified as a crime against humanity “when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack,” under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Enforced disappearance is an extreme violation of fundamental human rights. It violates the rights to life, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of association. It is considered as an ongoing crime, because it continues for as long as the victim’s fate or whereabouts remain unknown. Enforced disappearance is a tool of state repression, which has frequently been used by state actors to silence dissenting voices by spreading terror among society.

In Bangladesh, enforced disappearances continue to take place even during the COVID-19 pandemic, targeting opposition political activists and individuals who are critical of the government’s response to the pandemic. According to information documented by Odhikar, 10 people disappeared from January to April 2020. Disappeared persons are often victims of torture and extrajudicial killings and many have been missing for years.

The Bangladeshi government consistently denies the existence of enforced disappearances in the country. Bangladesh submitted an initial report to the United Nations (UN) Committee against Torture for the first time in 2019. During the review of Bangladesh’s report by the Committee against Torture on 30-31 July 2019, representatives of the Bangladeshi government denied the occurrence of acts of disappearances in the country. In its Concluding Observations, the Committee against Torture expressed concern over the government’s failure to disclose information regarding arbitrary and unidentified arrests and disappearances.

The families of the disappeared persons are deprived of their rights and suffer financially and socially. They also face various threats and harassment by the state. In many cases, victims of enforced disappearances have been released after being detained for a long time and then handed over to the police and being shown as “arrested” or produced before a court after being falsely charged with criminal offenses. The families and relatives of the disappeared persons have come out on the streets in anger and frustration, as a result of not getting any remedy due to lack of accountability.

The Bangladeshi government submitted voluntary pledges towards the promotion and protection of human rights, prior to the election for membership to the UN Human Rights Council (HRC). The government also reaffirmed its promise to cooperate with the HRC in order to implement accepted recommendations made by UN member states during the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). In contrast, the government is responsible for gross human rights violations, despite international scrutiny and criticism.

We urge the HRC to engage with the authorities in Bangladesh - a member of the HRC - to stop acts of enforced disappearance, and to take effective measures to determine the fate or whereabouts of all victims of enforced disappearances. We also urge the government to make special arrangements to support the families of the victims of enforced disappearances during COVID-19. Lastly, we call on the Bangladeshi government to accede to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) without delay and implement recommendations on enforced disappearances made by UN member states during the UPR and by the Committee against Torture in August 2019.

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The Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) is a federation of human rights organizations working directly on the issue of involuntary disappearances in Asia. Envisioning a world without desaparecidos, AFAD was founded on 4 June 1998 in Manila, Philippines. AFAD was the recipient of the 2016 Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award conferred by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) works towards the radical rethinking and fundamental redesigning of justice institutions in order to protect and promote human rights in Asia. Established in 1984, the Hong Kong based organization is a Laureate of the Right Livelihood Award, 2014.

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) is the world's oldest non-governmental human rights organization. Founded in 1922, FIDH federates 192 member organizations from 117 countries. Its core mandate is to promote respect for all the rights set out in the UDHR.

Odhikar, meaning 'rights' in Bangla, is a registered human rights organization based in Dhaka, Bangladesh established on October 10, 1994 by a group of human rights defenders, to monitor human rights violations and create wider awareness. It holds special consultative status with the ECOSOC of the United Nations.