



REPORT
**MONITORING THE SCENARIO OF
MEDIA FREEDOM, 2020**

BANGLADESH

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House 67, Block-Ka, Pisciculture Housing Society, Shyamoli, Dhaka-1207
info@voicebd.org; www.voicebd.org, +88-02-58150588

MONITORING THE SCENARIO OF MEDIA FREEDOM, 2020, BANGLADESH

WRITERS	ABTAB KHAN SHAWON ZAYED AHMED SIDDIKI AHMED SWAPAN MAHMUD
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AL	Awami League
BTV	Bangladesh Television
BTRC	Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission
BGB	Border Guard Bangladesh
DNC	Department of Narcotics Control
DSA	Digital Security Act
DD	Deputy Director
ICC	International Criminal Court
OMS	Open Market Sales
OC	Officer in Charge
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNO	Upazila Nirbahi Officer
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VOICE	Voices for Interactive Choice and Empowerment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bangladesh government used this pandemic situation to minimize the freedom of expression from every community. Journalists are mostly targeted who are making report about mismanagement about government or system. Digital Security Act for their reporting on the pandemic and on other critical issues. There have also been reports of journalists allegedly being tortured or forcibly disappeared. Further, other critics are captured by law enforcement as well, opposition activists, academics, cartoonists and writers. We are deeply concerned by the continued assault on freedom of expression and free flow of information in the country. In its latest bid to tighten control of information, the administration has imposed restrictions on any kind of media engagement by government officials without prior approval of their department chiefs.

It's important to take note of the manner in which increasing restrictions are being imposed on the free flow of information. The coronavirus pandemic has, unfortunately, seen old rules being invoked and familiar repressive tools such as the Digital Security Act being used with greater enthusiasm than before, with devastating consequences. Making state officials inaccessible for comments or interviews during a pandemic could mean that you not only get inaccurate, unverified information, but also end up with dangerous claims such as the ones by ministers that the pandemic is "under control" in Bangladesh, which is far from the truth. There is usually a vested interest in centralising

communications like this. It enables politicians and policymakers to selectively "spin" data to control public opinion. This form of information control, at a time of dwindling access and resources for journalists in Bangladesh, could also mean a heavy blow to the news industry. According to a report by this daily, the public administration ministry has sent a letter to the secretaries in all ministries to this effect, invoking Section 22 of the Government Servant (Conduct) Rules, 1979. The blanket restriction comes after months of similar measures, if on a smaller scale, by several government and autonomous bodies. For example, on April 16, nurses of all public hospitals were instructed by the Directorate General of Nursing and Midwifery not to speak to the media. In 2019, nearly 18 cases of attacks against women journalists, including a disturbing number of cases of sexual harassment in their own newsrooms.

On other side during the first three months of COVID 19 crisis, at least 21 women journalists from various national print, radio and television have lost their jobs. As ongoing project on 'Strengthening and Monitoring the Scenario of Freedom of Expression for Promoting Human Rights in Bangladesh' which is supported by UNDP. To keep the track for following update we did this quarterly based media monitoring focus on some specific area and incidents of journalists.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The emergence of satellite television and the spread of the Internet in the last one and a half decades have changed the media landscape in Bangladesh. Thirty-four satellite television stations have reached viewers across the country, while faster Internet services are driving people, particularly the young generation, towards ever-increasing online news services and social media. The immensely popular Facebook has become a growing source of information for citizens. The availability of smart phones is acting as a catalyst in this new, fascinating trend.

The news-based television stations that came in quick succession bringing updates and live telecasts of events are now considered to be the dominant media. Two recent media surveys show a higher consumption (over 80 percent) of television in the country. However, the television stations can't do what print does. Some newspapers are publishing stories that challenge the establishment and in consequence face intimidation, a factor which is nearly absent among ruling party- and businessmen-controlled broadcasters. Radio is not lagging behind and is making its presence felt in the media landscape with the introduction of both commercial FM and community radio stations. A country that had only one state-run radio station before 1999 now boasts 35 radio stations. The

commercial radio stations are popular among youths in the major cities. These stations are airing more entertainment programmes than news, considering the fact that the listeners are interested in enjoying music and the stories related to celebrities.

Prior to the expansion of television stations and the Internet, people used to rely on newspapers to access authentic news. Now the country has numerous newspapers, TV stations and online news portals.

Unfortunately though, the standard of journalism is very low. Media is seen to be less credible, mainly because of the political affiliation of the owners, editors and journalists. Some owners are not directly involved in politics or inclined towards the government, but they don't go against the establishment in order to protect their business interests. Some corporate houses have introduced both print and broadcast media that safeguard corporate houses and their proprietors. Journalists are sharply divided into two camps—one group supporting the government and the other group against it. All of these are damaging professionalism and the dignity of the journalist community.

There is a growing concern among journalists about the government's attempt to dictate many media outlets. Nowadays owners and editors, particularly the

television stations, are complaining about receiving phone calls from the authorities, asking them "not to telecast certain issues" that may hurt the government image or help its political rivals. Wiretapping and digital interception have also been increased alarmingly in the name of security while more and more journalists are facing defamation and criminal cases. The freedom of the press, guaranteed in the country's constitution, is shaken and journalists now work in a more hostile climate.

Freedom of Expression is a fundamental human right recognized in Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Press Freedom and access to information feed into the wider development objective of empowering people by giving them the information that can help them gain control over their own lives. This empowerment supports participatory democracy by giving citizens the capacity to engage in public

debate and to hold governments and others accountable. But this flow of communication does not happen automatically. Bangladesh is facing difficulty about freedom of expression of citizens and journalist as well. So we are doing this media monitoring to represent the scenario of freedom of expression.

VOICE, a human rights-based research and advocacy organization expressed deep concerns over the arrests of journalists, online activists, teachers, students, writers, cartoonists, women and netizens under Digital Security Act (DSA). It urged to government to show respect to the Constitutional obligations and international human rights principles and to comply with its commitments to different human rights and development frameworks including Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) upholding the spirit of protecting and promoting human rights.

MEDIA-SCAPE IN BANGALDESH

PRINT MEDIA

Newspapers played a historic role in the politics and struggle of Bangladesh's liberation war and democracy. Although print is dying in US and Europe with the closure of many well-established newspapers, in Asia, the picture is not as bleak as in the West. Bangladesh is one of the few countries where newspapers industry may survive for many years despite the fact that some old newspapers closed down while some reduced their circulation drastically in the last two decades. *Daily Ittefaq* is the country's oldest newspaper which maintained a good circulation (over 425,000 copies) till the mid-1990s. The circulation of this daily has dropped to as below as 50,000 copies. On the other hand, the circulation of one of the new Bengali newspapers *Bangladesh Protidin*, founded in 2010, is several times higher than *Daily Ittefaq*.

Newspaper circulation was always low and that's mainly due to low literacy rate and poverty. The 24-hour television stations, faster Internet service and social media have further made it difficult for the press to maintain circulation. The younger generations have little interest in reading print versions; they are opting for the digital news services.

According to the 2016 National Media Survey (NMS), print is the second most

widespread media in the country with 23.8 percent readership. The readership dropped slightly, 1.4 percent since 2014. One interesting feature is that print readership hasn't actually gone down that much even after the rise of TV and Internet. The 2002 NMS found 25.8 percent of the population read newspapers, which was higher than 12 percent in 1995 and 15 percent in 1998. Nielsen Bangladesh 2017 National Media and Demographic Survey also showed a similar trend with 26.9 percent readership in 2011 and 25.68 percent in 2015 but a sudden decline in readership (13.45 percent) in 2017. Against this backdrop, leading newspapers are adopting new initiatives that include multimedia presentation of news, features, live telecast of events and interviews on Facebook pages. In some newspapers like the Bengali dailies—*ProthomAlo* and *Samakal*—and English daily, *The Daily Star* are investing more on their web outlets to compete with the broadcasters, online news portals and social media.

As per the disclosure of the Information Minister at the National Parliament in January 2018, there are 3,025 registered print media in Bangladesh and 1,191 of them are daily newspapers. Of the dailies, 470 are based in the capital city, Dhaka. As many as 1,175 registered weeklies are being published from different places of the

country. There are also several fortnightly and monthly print media. Nobody can say

RADIO

Radio is considered as a potentially strong media in Bangladesh but it did not grow much even after the arrival of commercial and community radio stations. The history of radio is older than that of television. Radio came in the Indian subcontinent during British rule and its network spread during the Pakistan regime (1947-1971) when Bangladesh was part of Pakistan and called East Pakistan. Unlike television, radio had a glorious role during the nine-month War of Independence of Bangladesh in 1971. When war broke out, Pakistan Radio was renamed as *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* (Independent Bangladesh Radio Station) and started airing speeches and songs to keep the morale of the people strong and inspire freedom fighters. It eventually became the voice of the people and the government in exile during the war.

After independence, the radio continued broadcasting as *Bangladesh Betar*, airing both news and entertaining programmes. Radio was more available than television and people in both urban and rural areas were listeners. The radio had also a countrywide network and yet it did not flourish. Rather, it was increasingly becoming a tool for propaganda for successive regimes. Thus, the popularity of

how many of them are actually bringing out today.

the radio station on which people depended for daily news and entertainment, dropped.

NMS (2002) shows radio reached 42 percent in 1998 but dipped to 24.1 percent in 2002. The rapid increase in the opportunity to watch television from the late 1990s and the subsequent years was a major reason behind the fall of radio listenership. According to NMS (2016), 12.4 percent of the population listens to radio with 16.7 percent in urban area. This equation puts radio operators in difficulty and they are now considering going for new initiatives to increase the popularity of the media.

Radio Metrowave was the first private station to begin airing in 1999, using the spectrum of Bangladesh Betar but the radio did not sustain. It was ended from operations for not renewing the license. However, more radios were in the pipeline and the country got two dozen stations in the next decade. *Radio Today*, *Radio Foorti*, *Radio Amar*, and *ABC Radio* are the stations that came one after another. As many as 35 commercial and community radio stations are now operating and a dozen more are expected to start functioning soon. Of the operational stations, 17 are commercial and the remaining 18 are community radios.

TELEVISION

Television was introduced in 1964 in what was then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. After the independence in 1971, the state-owned single broadcaster, *Bangladesh Television* or *BTV*, had limited viewers in some urban areas and was airing news, music, dramas, movies, games, and documentaries. Some Bengali and English drama serials were popular. However, TV was an expensive media for people at that time. Even in the 1990s, a small number of people had television sets in rural areas. Those who could afford it used to watch weekly movies and dramas, and evening news bulletins. Absence of power supply was also a reason that held people back from availing of television up until the 2000s.

BTV was the only television channel in Bangladesh till the legalisation of the Television Receive Only Dish (TVRO) in 1992, which created scope for urban elites and the rich to watch other channels. Initially, *BTV* began to telecast *CNN* news bullets for a couple of hours in the morning. The scope widened as cable operators spread satellite dish networks among the middle class. The state-run *BTV* had a reputation of being the mouthpiece of the ruling party. So, there was a growing demand for independent broadcasters that would serve the public, not only the political masters.

Then the commercial satellite televisions came with the launching of *ATN Bangla* in

1997, followed by another commercial TV, *Channel i*, in 1999. But the introduction of *Ekushey Television* in 2000 revolutionised television as a media in the country. This third commercial channel got access to the *BTV*'s unused second terrestrial channel, using which *Ekhusy Television* reached half the country's population. Its quality news bulletins and programmes run by trained staff won the hearts of the viewers and people were then seen glued to the station. The journey did not last long as a new government took over and revoked the license of the TV in 2002 over irregularities in the issuing of the license by the previous government. The new government awarded more television licenses, mostly 24-hour news and entertainment channels.

In mid-1990s Bangladesh has witnessed a proliferation of television broadcasters with terrestrial, satellite, and transnational broadcasting companies, all jostling for the attention of the Bangladeshi audiences. Both NMS and Nielsen Bangladesh surveys showed a persistent increase in TV consumption. As revealed by NMS in 2016, the viewership almost doubled in just two decades—from 42 percent in 1998 to 82.9 percent in 2016. The urban-rural viewership gap has also been narrowed down as revealed in the survey. Nielsen 2017 survey also revealed TV is the most viewed media in Bangladesh as viewership rose to 84 percent in 2016 from 74 percent in 2011.

However, it saw a little decrease 80 percent in 2017.

In Bangladesh, 34 television stations, 30 of them private, are in operation with the latest ones, *Nagorik TV* a mixed content channel came to the market in February 2018 while *Duranto TV*, the only children content channel came around the same time; and most recent *T Sports*, only sports channel in Bangladesh came in broadcast in 2020. A dozen more persons got TV license while licences of four stations were revoked while in operation.

DIGITAL MEDIA

Increased Internet accessibility has brought another dimension to Bangladesh's media landscape and that is an increasing digitalisation. Most leading newspapers have web portals, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts and presence on Youtube. Some newspapers outside of the capital have their online news portals. Most television stations have their separate digital news services. For example, the digital versions of *Channel i* and *NTV* are constantly coming up with news, views and interviews. They are in a good competition with the newspapers' online services.

Prothom Alo is the most circulated and influential Bengali daily that provides news from two separate dimensions—print and online portals in Bengali and English. The online portal of *Prothom Alo* is the number one Bangladeshi website in the world. This portal is accessed by an average 1.2 million

A significant feature in having so many TV stations is that the two main political parties—the incumbent Awami League and its archrival Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—that ruled the country alternatively since 1991, awarded TV licenses without due diligence to people (politicians and businessmen) mostly loyal to them, with an expectation to get their support. This is one of the major reasons behind shutting down of the channels on the ground of “violating licensing conditions.”

visitors from different countries and territories across the globe with over 7 million page-views every month. The newspaper has more than 13 million Facebook followers, nearly double of what was three years ago. A large number of people, around 1.3 million, are following it in Twitter. The English version of *Prothom Alo* has 382,000 followers on Facebook. The amount of revenue the newspaper earns from digital version has crossed US\$10m and the amount is going up, according to the newspaper.

The Daily Star went online in 2006 and was developing slowly. However, it got a good lift in the last five years as the digital section has been growing significantly by engaging more staff and generating diversified content, including interactive and multimedia to attract both local and international readers. According to the

newspaper, its website had over one million active users till January 2018 with over 70,000 daily active users. Most of the readers remain connected through their mobile. The daily has around 2.7 million followers on Facebook, 460,000 Twitter followers and 50,000 subscribers on Youtube. The addition of local-language stories has attracted readers too. Prominent

and interesting stories are being translated in Bengali and are being read by a good number of people. This helped the daily to generate more revenue, with around 53 percent growth in 2017 than the previous year. In addition, there are numerous news portals on the web. According to the Ministry of Information, some 2,018 such portals have so far applied for registration.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Bangladesh is one of the countries where Internet is growing at a good pace. The number of Internet users has in fact shot up sharply in recent years due to powerful mobile technology. According to the Bangladesh Telephone Regulatory Commission (BTRC), as of August 2020, 108.188 million citizens have Internet access, two fold more than the number one decade ago, and a staggering 93 percent of them use Internet through their mobile network, while 6.17 percent through the Internet service providers and only 0.14 percent through WiMAX. Internet penetration data from BTRC, which regulates telephone and mobile networks, show more than half of the total Internet connections were activated in the last four years after the country entered into third generation (3G) mobile technology in 2014. Three years before the introduction of 3G, the number of Internet users was around 10 million. The rapid growth of Internet use is regarded as a technological revolution in Bangladesh, which is shaping the country's media landscape.

The Internet growth can also be assessed by the increased use of bandwidth. As of January 2018, the use of bandwidth was 557mpps, which was 380mpps a year ago. The use of bandwidth is taking off as more and more people are accessing to the gateways and websites, as per Bangladesh Submarine Cable Company Limited. The NMS (2016) shows 8 percent growth of Internet in the country and an astonishing 148 percent growth in rural areas over 2014.

A significant of those with active Internet connections have Facebook accounts. The latest data of the Information Communication Technology (ICT) Division under the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology puts the number around 30.8 million. Facebook is the most used social network in Bangladesh and it will remain so for many years. Users frequently scroll pages and read and share newsfeeds. Interactions in this social platform have been increasing with the rise of Internet users among people of all ages. People with

little education are willing to open their Facebook accounts to get into the information hub and be updated about what is going on around them. Other social networks are not even in the closer distance. Although not popular yet, Twitter is the second most used social network as growing numbers of different professional reads and share news, not regularly though. A small number of people also use Google+, Instagram and LinkedIn. The country entered into the fourth generation (4G) era in February 2018 and this faster data service will further bolster the current trend, bringing more citizens in the digital space.

BTRC has the authority to block or shut down any apps and websites. On various grounds, it has previously blocked Viber, WhatsApp, Youtube and Facebook. Currently, it operates upon getting instructions by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Since the usage of digital platforms is increasing, their surveillance by various government agencies has also heightened, often with censoring or blocking of digital contents. Like other countries, search engines and websites are the two main gateways that are used to access content.

SCENARIO OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN BANGLADESH

TORTURE AND HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS

Bangladesh is passing an unprecedented difficult time. The Bangladesh government appears to be cracking down on free speech as COVID-19 hits the country, silencing those who express concern over the government's handling of the epidemic.

Persistent suppression of freedom of expression and censorship under the government has continued amid the pandemic. Journalists are being prosecuted under the Digital Security Act and arrested, harassed for reporting on government's corruption. It seems criticism of the government in social media under the current regime is a 'crime'. Writers, cartoonists, artists, teachers, students, political activists, journalists, social activists none are excluded from this list of arrestee. The Digital Security Act is being used as a tool to repress all dissents and criticisms. They are being prosecuted, arrested and even made disappeared. Numbers of doctors have raised serious doubts about the quality of PPEs, especially masks,

provided by the authorities concerned and their voices being repressed, intimidated and show-caused for speaking out. Agents from intelligence agencies are visiting hospitals to intimidate authorities and directing healthcare professionals not to talk to the media. The Bangladesh government has taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to ramp up its assault on civic freedoms. Journalists have been systematically targeted since March 2020 under the draconian Digital Security Act for their reporting on the pandemic and on other critical issues. There have also been reports of journalists allegedly being tortured or forcibly disappeared. The below graph shows a growing trend of journalists harassment in various forms including harassment using DSA, treats from ruling party members and law enforcing agencies over one year (November 2019-December 2020).

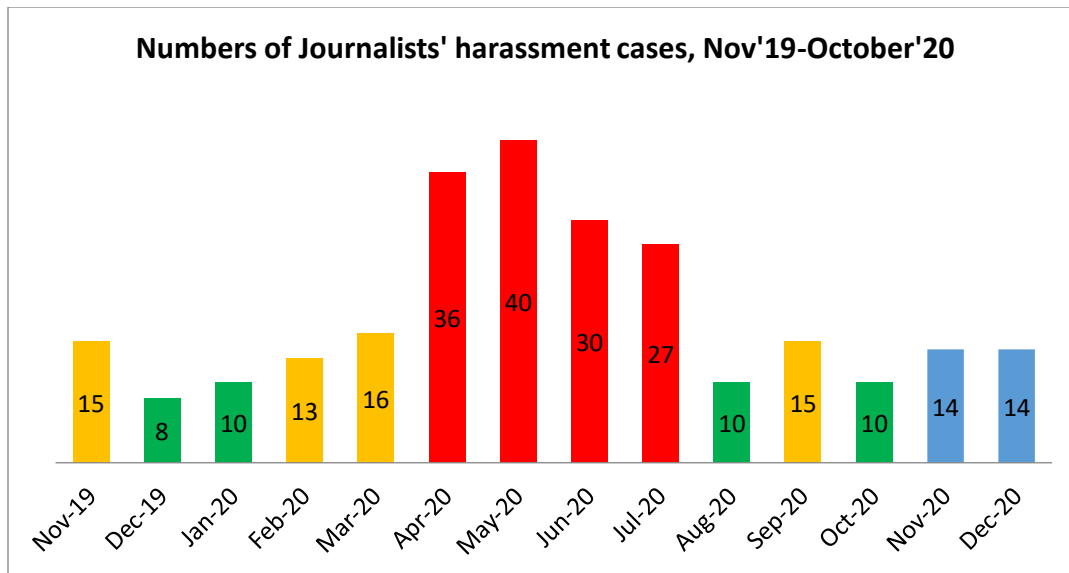


Figure 4: Numbers of Journalists' harassment cases, Nov'19-October'20

DIGITAL SECURITY ACT (DSA)

Nearly 2000 cases have been filed under the DSA since its enactment on 8 October 2018, according to data from the Bangladeshi government's Cyber Crime Tribunal. This includes more than 800 cases filed in the first nine months of 2020 alone, with many of the country's most prominent editors and senior journalists being increasingly targeted. Covid-19 has put a halt on almost everything but cases lodged under the Digital Security Act saw a manifold increase recently against people voicing any criticism,

particularly people raising their voice against the corruption and mismanagement in the health sector. Moreover, some were even charged for communicating through social media. Analysts and human rights bodies have expressed their concerns over this sudden rise in case under the Digital Security Act and accused the government of using the law for silencing journalists and citizens to cover up its own failures even during this coronavirus crisis.

QUATERLY SITUATION OF MEDIA FREEDOM

JANUARY TO MARCH 2020

Human Chain: The journalist community of Narayanganj has given an ultimatum to arrest Soad, who attacked the journalist. The

ultimatum was given by the journalist leaders while addressing a human chain organized in protest of the attack on January

15. The speakers accused the police of negligence in arresting the main accused Soad and warned that he should be arrested within the next 48 hours. Otherwise a larger movement will be formed.

DSA: AFM Azizul Islam Pikul, former mayor of Mymensingh's Nandail municipality and president of the municipal BNP, has been arrested for allegedly giving a status to Mujibbarsha and the prime minister on Facebook ID. He was arrested from his home in the municipal area of the upazila.

A leading Bangladesh publisher has been charged under controversial digital security laws for associating with someone suspected of spreading fake news about the prime minister and her son. Nur Mohammad, the owner of Guardian Publications, was arrested by police at his office in the capital. He has been charged under the country's Digital Security Act.

A case has been filed against journalist Mahbub Alam Lavlu on the allegation of spreading false and defamatory news through his YouTube channel. Ashiqur Rahman, a resident of Hosni Dalan Road in Dhaka, filed the case against him with Chawk Bazar police station under the Digital Security Act 2018. Lavlu, who worked at Independent Television as a senior reporter, uploaded news-related videos on his personal youtube channel, which included reports on expelled Jubo Mohila League leader Shamima Noor Papia, coronavirus, and Nagad, the digital financial service of Bangladesh Post Office.

Harassment & Injury: A young man has been arrested in Mymensingh for allegedly posting status on social media Facebook, mocking Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Awami League general secretary Obaidul Quader. Police arrested the youth named Emdadul Haque Milon under the Information and Technology Act from Atanibazar area of Muktagachha Upazila. He is the owner of Maisha Medicine Corner at Atanibazar Junction.

A mobile court under a taskforce of Kurigram district administration sentenced a journalist to one-year imprisonment early yesterday after he was arrested from his home on charges of possessing narcotics. The mobile court sent the journalist Ariful Islam, Kurigram correspondent of Bangla. Ariful's wife Mansarina Mitu, said her husband was innocent and that he became "a victim of vindictiveness by the district's deputy commissioner for writing against irregularities and corruption".

COVID-19 related incidents: The Bangladesh government appears to be cracking down on free speech as COVID-19 hits the country, silencing those who express concern over the government's handling of the epidemic. The authorities should stop targeting academics and arresting people for speaking out about the coronavirus epidemic, and ensure that accurate and timely information about the virus is accessible and available to all. Since mid-March 2020, the authorities have apparently arrested at least a dozen people, including a doctor, opposition activists, and students, for their comments

about coronavirus, most of them under the draconian Digital Security Act. The Information Ministry announced that it has formed a unit to monitor social media and various television outlets for “rumors” about COVID-19 cases.

Nabil Haider was accused of attacking journalist Sagar Chowdhury in a medieval manner after he accused Jasim Uddin, chairman of Bara Manika Union Parishad, of stealing rice for fishermen. The journalist was beaten with mobile phone thieves and snatchers to quell the anger. A video of the incident later went viral on Facebook. Then a video of the journalist's speech went viral on Facebook.

APRIL TO JUNE 2020

Digital Security Act: -Editor-in-Chief of bdnews24.com Toufiqueel Mrose Khalidi, Jagonews24.com acting editor Mohiuddin Sarker and two others have been sued under digital security act for running reports containing "misinformation" on misappropriation of OMS rice in Thakurgaon's Baliadangi upazila.

Harassment & Injury: -The detainees Shahjahan Ali Babu, and Mazed Rahman, district correspondents of Ekattor Television and Somoy Television were going towards Chelopara on a motorcycle. The police officer made them stop at the spot for unknown reasons, and detained them misusing his power. At some point of the dispute, SI Nirajan verbally harassed them

Shah Sultan Ahmed, Nabiganj Upazila correspondent of the Doinik Prtoidiner Sangbad in Habiganj, came under attack. He was sent to the Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital after being given first aid at the Nabiganj Upazila Health Complex. Aushkandi Union Council Chairman Muhibur Rahman Harun had recently distributed rice among the poor under a government scheme. Sultan took to the Facebook and revealed in a live post that Harun was giving each of the families 5kg of rice instead of the allocation of 10kg. It angers Harun and 20 to 25 of his men, led by the chairman himself, attacked Sultan. They also beat up journalists Mujibur Rahman and Bulbul Ahmed when the two tried to save Sultan.

and forcefully took them to the police station with handcuffs on.

Employees of Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) assaulted a journalist while they were selling locally-brewed alcohol at its Barishal office, defying the ongoing shutdown. Video journalist Kamal Hossain of private TV channel Bangla Vision said seeing a crowd; he entered the DNC divisional office and attempted to record the scene."At that time, DNC employees started beating him and damaged his camera and phone. Hearing about the incident, journalists from different media outlets rushed to the spot and demanded punishment for the assaulters.

COVID-19 related incidents: -A journalist has been threatened by an Awami League leader (AL) and Union Parishad Chairman for publishing reports over Upazila Nirbahi Officer's extortion (UNO) in Savar. The journalist said he has an audio recording of the conversation with two leaders of Awami League Savar Unit that can prove his point in the court. A case has been filed with Savar Model police station. Motiur Rahman Bhandary, Savar correspondent of Daily Jugantor alleging the UP Chairman, Monjurul Alam Rajib—who is also a general secretary of Savar Awami League upazila unit— threatened him, and as such he along with his family is living in fear following the incident.

After being severely beaten up, journalist AH BhuiyanSajal, district correspondent of SA Television, was taken to Narsingdi District Hospital and he was undergoing treatment. A correspondent of a private television channel came under attack and two of his colleagues were intimidated when they were collecting information about misappropriation of rice intended for distribution among the poor at Raipura in Narsingdi. Baten went there also to look into the allegations concerning misappropriation of public rice, meant for the poor people, against Amirganj union parishad chairman Nasir Uddin Khan.

A number of businessmen have been accused of attacking Sujon Mohant, a journalist of an online news portal in Kurigram. A report was published in Barta

Bazar newspaper which shows the real picture of keeping the shops of Kurigram open. Due to this, some people led by Manik, a shopkeeper in Saddir area of the city, came and threatened him. Then at around 8:30 pm, another shopkeeper from the same area, led by Mamun, along with his brother, called some people from home and attacked them openly. Later his family members came and rescued me and take him home.

Three journalists have been arrested in Narsingdi in a case filed under the Digital Security Act for publishing a quote of a police official without talking to him. The quote was over a death in the district's Ghorashal. The accused are: Ramjan Ali Pramanik (45), news editor of Dainik Grameen Darpon published in Narsingdi; Shanto Banik (35), a reporter of the same newspaper; and Khandaker Shahin (32), publisher and editor of online portal Narsingdi Pratidin. The three were arrested from their houses. They were sent to jail by a district court on Saturday, the police official said. Inspector Johirul Alam, officer-in-charge of Ghorashal Police Station, filed the case under the Digital Security Act with Palash Police Station on Thursday night. According to the case statement, the Dainik Grameen Darpon published a report with the headline "Youth beaten dead by police on charge of stealing" and Narsingdi Pratidin published the report with the headline "Man dies in Ghorashal Police Custody after police allegedly beat him" on the same incident.

JULY TO SEPTEMBER 2020

Digital Security Act: - Police arrested an imam from local mosque from Sherpur upazila of Bogura under the Digital Security Act (DSA) for making "defamatory remarks against the prime minister, spreading anti-state propaganda and communal statements through Facebook." Maolana Abdur Rahman Didari, is the imam of Bagra Colony Jame Mosque under Kusumbi union. He is a supporter of Jamaat-e-Islami and its leader Delwar Hossain Sayeedi.

Three teachers of Farakkabad Degree Collage in Chandpur's Sadar upazila were arrested for allegedly spreading propaganda against the education minister and some others on social media. A team from Chandpur Model Police Station arrested them from the college in Farakka bad area, Jahid Parvez Chawdhury. The laptops and mobiles they used to spread propaganda material were seized during the raids. The teachers are Jahangir Alam, 40, Noman Siddique, 35 and ABM Anisur Rahman, 40. Statement is the trios were operating a Facebook page and spreading propaganda against education minister Dipu Moni, Sadar upazila UNO Kaniz Fatima, headmaster of Farakkabad High School Md Hannan Miji and some Awami League leaders. Hannan filed a case in this regard with Chandpur Model Police Station. The court issued an arrest warrant after Sub-Inspector Rezaul Karim brought charges against them after investigation.

Harassment & Injury: -Photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, the editor of The Daily Pokkhokal, went missing after leaving his office on the evening of March 10. Fifty-three restless nights and days his family spent searching for him. Fifty-three days the media wondered aloud whether one of their own would return alive. Yet, for 53 days, the authorities showed little interest in finding what happened to Kajol. This, despite the coincidental fact that the day before he disappeared (March 9), almost close to midnight (at 11:30 pm), a case was registered against Kajol under the infamous Digital Security Act, along with 31 others. As well as the presence of a CCTV footage from outside his office showing several unidentified men snooping around his motorbike—and at one point meddling with it—for at least three hours before he was to be last seen. It wasn't until a month and a half later that Kajol was suddenly "discovered" near the India-Bangladesh border by a BGB patrol—as the authorities claimed—in what appears to be a bizarre stroke of luck. Instead of finding what happened to Kajol during those 53 days, the authorities immediately put all their effort to go after him. In fact, if one didn't know any better, one might think that Kajol had committed a violent crime judging by the way he has been treated since being "discovered" near the border, beginning with him being dragged into a local court in Jashore with his hands cuffed behind his

back—in violation of a High Court directive in this regard.

Ansar members at Mugda General Hospital allegedly assaulted a photojournalist of a Bangla daily newspaper when he was taking photos during a clash that broke out between Ansar men and suspected Covid-19 patients at the hospital premises.

Photojournalist Rubel Rashid of daily Desh Rupantor said he was assaulted while taking pictures as the Ansar men were allegedly beating up a youth who was waiting in queue to have his sample collected for Covid-19 test. Rubel Rashid and Joyeeta Roy, a photojournalist of daily Bangladesh Protidin, were taking photos at that time. Noticing Rubel Rashid taking photos of the incident, the Ansar members physically assaulted him.

Shahjahan Mia, chairman of Darera Union Parishad in Muradnagar upazila was angry that Shariful Alam Chowdhury had published report on his corruption and nepotism, and in this connection he launched the attack and left him injured. They also attacked his parents and his sister as they tried to save him. His father Abdul Matin, a freedom fighter. The patient sustained several critical injuries. Both his hands and legs are broken. There was at least seven fractures in his limbs. His condition was also deteriorating. Yet UP chairmen get bail while from court following next day.

A local journalist name Habib was injured when he was attacked by some youths in

Habiganj town. Victim Tarek Habib is the chief reporter of Daily Amar Habiganj, a local newspaper, our Moulvibazar correspondent reports. He came under attack when he was returning to his office by rickshaw after attending an event yesterday afternoon. Wielding rods, hockey sticks and wooden sticks, some five to seven youths suddenly stopped him at Shanir Akhra and beat him indiscriminately. The attackers also snatched away his mobile phone and money.

The editor of the Cox's Bazar Bani daily and the Janatar Bani news website, Faridul Mostafa was finally released on bail from Cox's Bazar prison on 27 August after being held for 11 months and five days for covering local government corruption linked to the region's drug trafficking with neighbouring Myanmar. In stories published in May and June 2019, Faridul focused on cases of extortion and death threats in connection with alleged links between local drug cartels and Pradeep Kumar Das, the Officer-in-Charge (OC) at the police station in Teknaf, a border town 75 km south of Cox's Bazar. After Faridul himself began being the target of threats, he wrote letters to the prime minister, home affairs minister and police inspector general in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka, on 28 June 2019 requesting protection against OC Pradeep.

COVID-19 related incidents: - An assistant surgeon, Dr Tipu Sultan, of Dapdapia Union Health Centre under Jhalakathi district was given a show cause letter, over some Facebook status he wrote. The 'show cause'

letter signed by his superior, Dr Shiuly Parvin, the health and family planning officer of Nalchity upazila, stated, "You often mock and post unfavourable representations of the operations of the government's health division on Facebook." It added that his Facebook post was a violation of "civility" and the code of

conduct of government officers, and is a punishable offence. The possible post in question (which has since been removed) spoke of the authorities' mismanagement in supplying authentic N95 masks that contributed to doctors and nurses being infected. He claimed that he himself was infected.

OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 2020

Human chain: - A human chain has been held in Jhenaidah's Kaliganj to protest the filing of a case against two journalists for allegedly embezzling money in the name of loan from bank employees. The human chain program was organized by the Upazila Press Club on the Jhenaidah-Jessore Highway at the main bus stand of Kaliganj on Tuesday (November 18) at 12 noon. Speakers at the human chain demanded the withdrawal of 'false cases' filed against journalists and the punishment of leading bank employees Abdus Salam and Azizur Rahman for harassing journalists.

Recently, there were human chains in Dinajpur to protest against the attacks, lawsuits and torture of journalists across the country, including DBC TV correspondent Abu Akter Karan in Meherpur and Independent TV cameraman Limon Mia in Rangpur. The Human chain lasted for hours on the road in front of the district press club. The speakers said that those involved in the attack should be given exemplary punishment. No one will have the courage to commit such incidents in the future only

if the perpetrators of the incident are not transferred but punished.

Journalists in Bogra have staged a human chain and protest against the attack on two TV journalists. Meherul Sujan, general secretary of the Bogra Television Reporters' Unity, said, "Journalists in many parts of the country are currently being attacked for reporting on corruption and irregularities." In addition, journalists are being harassed in various ways. Journalists now enjoy security when they go to work, but the government has not taken any initiative in this regard. If the attackers are not arrested within 48 hours, a team of journalists from Bogra will go to Dhaka to present a memorandum to the Prime Minister.

Digital Security Act: - A professor at Dhaka University has been sued under the Digital Security Act for making "derogatory" comments on religion during a talk show on a private television channel. According to the case documents, Ziaur made anti-Islamic remarks during a talk show of private TV channel DBC News, hurting people's

religious sentiment. Video clips of the talk show went viral on Facebook and YouTube.

A case has been filed against four journalists in Lakshmipur under the Digital Security Act (DSA) for publishing a report in a local daily and sharing it on social media. The accused are AKM Mizanur Rahman, editor and publisher of Daily Banglar Mukul, its Executive Editor Afroza Akter Ranga, SN Uddin Riad, Raipur (Lakshmipur) correspondent of Mohona TV, and Jahirul Islam Titu, Raipur (Lakshmipur) correspondent of Asian TV. According to the case statement, a report published in the newspaper on October 28 involving the mayor is false and fabricated. But the editor of the daily said: "There was a typo in the report and we corrected it the next day. We also apologized for it. Even then the case was filed intentionally."

The Detective Branch (DB) of police arrested a journalist in connection with a harassment case filed by a pro-Awami League councillor candidate in Chatmohar upazila of Pabna. The arrestee is KM Belal Hossain Shopon, editor of weekly Somoy Asomoy, and also the president of Chatmohar Upazila Reporters Unity. Raj Ali, pro-AL councillor candidate of Chatmohar municipality's ward-4, filed the case against the journalist under the Digital Security Act.

Police have arrested a journalist named Iftekhar Ahmed Khan Babu under the Digital Security Act in Ghoraghat. Police raided his home on Wednesday night (December 30th) and arrested him. Meanwhile, a live video from journalist Iftekhar's Facebook went

viral when police raided his house at 10:30 pm. On Facebook Live, he repeatedly asked the police to show the warrant. Police were hitting the grill and breaking down the door if he did not want to leave the house without a warrant. With a loud noise, his wife Kohinoor Begum and 3 children woke up and started shouting. Clearly this is not the way or procedure to arrest someone.

Harassment & Injury: - Pinaki Bhattacharya is an online human rights and political activist who writes critically about the current Bangladesh Awami League government. He was forced to leave Bangladesh in 2018 fearing detention by the military intelligence agency Directorate General Forces Intelligence and he now lives in France where he is a refugee. He has written an article for Netra News about the censorship of a book he wrote critical of the country's independence leader. He expressed his recent situation through Facebook status some of his saying is given below 'A group of policemen went to my father's residence in Bogura and interrogated my old mother and uncle. In Dhaka, another group of police, who said that they were from Mirpur Model Police Station, landed in our residence. After they failed to find my wife at home, one police officer called her up on her mobile yesterday and interrogated her'.

This is another one of those stories that reflects the worst of contemporary Bangladesh — and the climate of fear surrounding freedom of the media. A journalist, missing for four days, is found unconscious on the bank of a canal in

Chittagong. When he revives, he is curled up repeatedly saying, in a clear state of trauma: "Please let me go. I will not write news anymore! I will quit journalism."

Two journalists were assaulted at the Meherpur District Social Service Office where they had gone to interview the deputy director of the district's social services on various allegations against him. The two were beaten up and their cameras were snatched and broken. The victims are Abu Akter Karan, Meherpur district correspondent of news channel DBC and Zakir Hossain, district correspondent of Reuters (Bangladesh), reports our Kushtia correspondent. Journalist Abu Akter Karan said various allegations had been raised against Deputy Director (DD) of the District Social Services Department Abdul Quader. The allegations include misuse of government vehicles, smoking at the office in front of everyone and sleeping in the office during work hours.

A journalist was assaulted, allegedly by a presiding officer, when he went to cover municipality elections at a centre in Dhamrai today. Presiding Officer of Collegiate School Centre AzizulHaque snatched the mobile phone of Zohir Raihan, a staff reporter of the Bangla daily Prothom Alo, and also hurled abusive words towards him.

An editor of an online newspaper was allegedly abducted from his home in Sreepur, Gazipur. The man named Sadrul Ain Ashiq is the editor of an online

newspaper called Daily Gazipur Journal. He was rescued two and a half hours after the abduction. His home is in the village of Bairagirchala in Sreepur.

Two journalists of a private TV news channel were allegedly beaten up by miscreants while they were collecting information on a report covering the irregularities in a state-run rehabilitation project in Bogura Sadar upazila. The victims are: Majedur Rahman, Somoy TV reporter in Bogura, and cameraperson Rabiul Islam. The incident occurred at Dashtika area under the upazila when they were working on a report on irregularities in the Asroyon Prokolpo. On information, police rescued the injured journalists and admitted them to the Bogura Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital.

Death: - Eliash Mia, a 52 year old journalist, was stabbed with a sharp weapon in the Geodhara area of Bandar whilst returning home. Despite the best efforts of passers-by, who took the journalist to Narayanganj General Hospital immediately after the incident, Mia died of his injuries around 9:00pm on October 12. The Daily Bijoy editor Sabbir Ahmed argues that there is a strong connection between the murder of Mia and his past reporting. Investigators said one suspect's family had previously accused Mia of providing information that led to Tusher's earlier arrest and detainment for drug possession. Tusher was also allegedly involved in managing illegal gas connections.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Bangladesh authorities should accept that criticism, however unpleasant and hurtful, is part of public life and can serve to correct mistakes and provide redress,” said Adams. “The government should work with domestic and international experts to draft a new law that fully upholds the principles of free speech and internet freedom. And incorporate below recommendations.

- The international community including the United Nations must urgently cooperate in restoring (transparent, fair, and participatory) electoral democracy in Bangladesh.
- Justice to the victims of enforced disappearances must be ensured at the International Criminal Court (ICC), as the domestic courts and government here are unwilling to give justice. The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance must be ratified immediately.
- Members of the law enforcement and intelligence agencies who are involved in extreme human rights violations and crimes against humanity, with impunity, must be brought to justice, punished as per criminal laws and dismissed from employment. We need to create a democratic environment to implement the recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture and the Human Rights Committee.
- An environment needs to be created where the flow of financial resources to independent human rights organisations continues, allowing them to work independently in compliance with the international standards.
- The government must refrain from repressive, unconstitutional, and undemocratic activities. Freedom of expression and media must be ensured.



CELEBRATING
20
YEARS