

SOUTH ASIA MEDIA DEFENDERS NETWORK (SAMDEN)

PRESS STATEMENT

SAMDEN condemns arrest of Bangladeshi and Manipuri Journalists

May 21, 2021, New Delhi – Prominent editors and media professionals of South Asia called for the release of senior Bangladeshi reporter Rozina Islam of Prothom Alo, who was charged under a century-old colonial law - the Official Secrets Act, 1923 - and the Penal Code of Bangladesh for highlighting alleged irregularities in Bangladesh's health sector.

Professional journalists provide a public service by ensuring that credible information, analysis and views reach large audiences – online, offline and broadcast – even during the ongoing devastating pandemic and health emergency, said SAMDEN. This needs to be encouraged as part of an open and free ecosystem.

“In the absence of concrete evidence of a recognisable criminal offence, Rozina's arrest for reporting that apparently revealed the corruption and mismanagement in Bangladesh's health sector is reflective of a new normal in South Asia where authorities seek to suppress accounts which go against the official versions,” it said. Authorities detained the Prothom Alo journalist for hours at the Ministry of Health in Bangladesh before arresting her on charges of stealing confidential official documents.

Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has called the arrest “regrettable”: “Sheikh Hasina's government is friendly to the media. We do not inhibit you. We have nothing to hide. What has happened is very unfortunate.”

“We stress that in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an extensive and corresponding parallel crisis of disinformation and fake news. Media which tries to present the facts and is constitutionally protected in different geographies, finds itself at the receiving end of harassment, intimidation and detention under British-designed laws when it speaks independently,” SAMDEN said today.

SAMDEN is anchored by co-convenors from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Last year, the United Nations had declared widespread misinformation and damaging disinformation campaigns as the second invisible pandemic that was severely effecting COVID19 response. Yet, several journalists in South Asia have been harassed, detained, arrested or physically assaulted in an increasingly restrictive media environment.

In India, SAMDEN urged the Manipur state Government to drop the charges under the National Security Act (NSA) against journalist Kishorchandra Wangkhem and activist Erendro Leichombam

over their Facebook posts over the deaths of two prominent figures in the state . In these posts, Wangkhem and Leichombam made fun of the use of cow urine as a cure for COVID-19. This is the second arrest for both within a span of two years. Earlier, the police in 2018 had charged Wangkhem under the NSA for criticism of the government, while Leichombam was charged with sedition.

“We believe that the situation in an extraordinary pandemic does not warrant the unchecked use of arbitrary powers,” said the group calling for an end to what the Times of India described as the “absurd” use of laws like the NSA and sedition to silence and hound media.

Founded in 2017 and anchored in the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), SAMDEN has several co-conveners and a membership of over 60 media professionals across South Asia. It seeks to support media workers by helping them work securely, monitoring intimidation and attacks against freedom of expression, and pressing for greater openness and accountability.

SAMDEN co-conveners include **Sanjoy Hazarika**, journalist, commentator and International Director of Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), **Kanak Mani Dixit**, founding editor, Himal South Asian; **Mahfuz Anam**, editor, The Daily Star, Dhaka; **Salil Tripathi**, Chair, PEN International’s Writers in Prison Committee; **Beena Sarwar**, Boston-based journalist, film maker and media teacher and **Kalpana Sharma**, senior journalist and author.

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