

Repeal Official Secrets Act, ensure press freedom, journalists demand at SAFMA conference

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Leading journalists at a media conference yesterday demanded repeal of the Official Secrets Act and enactment of a new law ensuring freedom of the press and access to information.

They also observed that the newsmen are often subject to torture and harassment due to lack of press freedom and access to information. A free media is essential for strengthening democracy and journalists should be aware of any attempt to seize power by forces not representing the people, they pointed out.

The South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA), Bangladesh chapter, organised the National Conference 2006 at Brac Centre Inn in the city.

Speaking as the chief guest, former chief justice and chairman of Law Commission Mostafa Kamal underscored the need for freedom of journalists, instead of freedom of newspaper owners. He observed that the owners often do not allow journalists to write freely.

Justice Kamal urged the newspaper owners not to be dependent on government advertisement. "If a newspaper depends on the government advertisement, it loses the moral right to criticise the government." Responding to the demands of journalists, he said that the law for press freedom and access to information in Bangladesh should be different from India and Pakistan as the situations are not the same. Justice Kamal said the law commission has recommended a comprehensive contempt of court law, but it would be ineffective if people become educated and conscious. He spoke against giving any definition of contempt of court as it depends on case-to-case basis and situation to situation.

Eminent journalists Kuldip Nayar of India and Imtiaz Alam of Pakistan also spoke at the inaugural session of the conference chaired by Reazuddin Ahmed, president of SAFMA Bangladesh. Shawkat Mahmood, general secretary of the National Press Club, moderated the session. "We demand repeal of the Official Secrets Act and enactment of a law ensuring freedom of the press and access to information," said Reazuddin Ahmed.

The act, which was promulgated by the British colonial government for its own interest, should no longer continue in an independent country, he added.

Reazuddin also demanded repeal of clauses in existing laws, which create obstacles to freedom of the press and access to information. He vowed to compel the government to repeal all black laws and enact new laws ensuring access to information.

Kuldip Nayar called on the journalists to uphold their dignity as newsmen, saying that they do something beyond their designated work, which no other professionals do in a society. Press freedom is very essential for strengthening democracy in a society, he said. Kuldip urged the journalists to be alert to any attempt of anybody not representing the people to capture power. He also called on them to be courageous and stand up for the rights of the people braving all odds.

Imtiaz Alam said journalists played a historic role in establishing democracy in many countries. Access to information is a fundamental right of the citizens, he said adding that

some countries in South Asia, including India, have already amended the law regarding access to information. Alam also pointed out that journalists were attacked in different countries in South Asia.

Journalist union leaders Mozammel Huq, Manjurul Ahsan Bulbul, Abdul Jalil Bhuyian and Ruhul Amin Gazi took part in the discussion in two working sessions of the conference. Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, editor of The Bangladesh Observer, read out the recommendations of the conference while Zahiduzzaman Faruque, general secretary SAFMA Bangladesh, gave a vote of thanks. Representatives of journalists from across the country attended the conference and shared their experiences regarding collection of information and publication of news.

Eminent Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar speaks at the national conference of South Asian Free Media Association, Bangladesh chapter, in the city yesterday. Sitting from right are Shawkat Mahmood, Zahiduzzaman Faruque, Reazuddin Ahmed, Justice Mostafa Kamal, Imtiaz Alam and Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury.

See: <http://www.thedailystar.net/2006/06/25/d60625060189.htm>

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