



Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances

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AFAD strongly condemns the decision of the Prime Minister's Office to uphold its former decision to deregister Odhikar.

Manila: The Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances strongly condemns the decision of the Prime Minister's office in Bangladesh to uphold its decision to deregister Odhikar, one of the most credible human rights organisations in the South Asian region.

The NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) in Bangladesh rejected Odhikar's application for renewal of the registration through a letter issued on the 5th of June 2022, stating that the information/documents required for the renewal of registration of the Organisation were not properly furnished. Odhikar's registration had been pending since it applied for renewal in 2014, six months prior to expiration in 2015, and it was arbitrarily cancelled even though the matter was sub-judice. On September 1st, the Prime Minister's office upheld this decision of the NGOAB (which is under the Prime Minister's Office).

Odhikar has been producing credible data and reports on the evolving human rights situation in the country since 1994. As an active member of the AFAD network, Odhikar has been documenting the on-going cases of enforced disappearances in the country and has been supporting the victim families in their quest for truth and justice.

This decision to de-register Odhikar is part of the harassment against Odhikar and a punitive action for its credible work. The staff members at Odhikar have been persecuted and repeatedly attacked for their work of exposing the widespread human rights violations by the State. The State has criminalized the work of Odhikar, putting the staff under tremendous pressure. There are on-going cases against Adilur Rahman Khan and ASM Nasiruddin Elan, Odhikar's Secretary and Director, respectively.

It is pertinent to note that the current regime in Bangladesh has been cracking down on civil society actors, journalists, activists and political opponents. There has been a rise in extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances by its security forces and any form of criticism of the government is criminalized. The Digital Security Act, 2018 has been used to curb online dissent.

Amid this persistently deteriorating situation of human rights in the country, the decision to deregister Odhikar is worrisome as it points to the lack of willingness of the Bangladesh government to prioritize the protection of human rights. This is an effort to further limit the freedom of association and expression and limit spaces for civil society engagement in the country.

AFAD advocates for the ending of persecution of human rights defenders and organisations. For democracies to flourish, human rights organisations must be allowed to exist and to contribute to the promotion of rights and justice. AFAD demands that the Bangladesh government take this opportunity to prove its claims that, indeed, it respects human rights. Allow Odhikar to continue its important contribution in local and international human rights work. Revoke the deregistration order and restore Odhikar's status as a legitimate human rights organization.

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Secretary-General