

URGENT ACTION

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER THREATENED WITH VIOLENCE

Prominent human rights defender Sultana Kamal has received threats of violence from the Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam, following comments she made on a TV talk show. The authorities must take immediate steps to ensure Sultana Kamal's protection, investigate the threats made against her and hold those responsible to account.

Sultana Kamal is a lawyer and prominent human rights activist in Bangladesh who used to serve as the Executive Director of the human rights NGO, Ain O Salish Kendra. Since 2 June, she has received numerous threats of violence from supporters of the Islamist group Hefazet-e-Islam (Hefazat). The threats against her relate to a recent controversy around the removal of a statue of the Lady of Justice outside the Supreme Court in Dhaka on 26 May 2017. Although the government claims that the removal was a decision made by the Court, and not the government, critics say that it was a move by the government to win favour with conservative Islamist groups. Such groups have for months campaigned for the statue to be taken down, arguing that it is an "idol" and anti-Islamic.

On 28 May, Sultana Kamal appeared on a debate show, on private TV channel News 24, together with Mufti Shakhawat Hossain, a member of Hefazat. During the debate, Mufti Shakhawat Hossain argued that the statue was a religious structure and that no religious structures should be on the Supreme Court's premises. Sultana Kamal responded hypothetically that if that was the case, then logically "no mosques should be on the premises either". There was no adverse reaction from Mufti Shakhawat Hossain to her comments on the programme or over the next few days. However, on 2 June, during Friday Prayer at the country's largest mosque Baitul Mukarram in Dhaka, her comments were distorted. The Hefazat Vice President Junayed Al-Habib said: "How dare Sultana Kamal! She said that if the statue is not in the country then mosques should not be in the country. If you [Sultana Kamal] come out to the streets, we will break every bone in your body." Hefazat also demanded that she be arrested within 24 hours or forced to leave the country. Numerous YouTube videos have been posted by Hefazat supporters since 2 June threatening or inciting violence against her.

On 6 June, police in Dhaka announced that they had taken unspecified measures to provide protection to Sultana Kamal. As far as Amnesty International is aware, however, no senior government official has publicly condemned the threats against her, nor has a police investigation been launched into the threats.

Please write immediately in Bengali, English or your own language urging the Bangladeshi authorities to:

- Take immediate action to ensure the safety of Sultana Kamal, in coordination with her wishes;
- Conduct a thorough, impartial, independent and effective investigation into the threats made against Sultana Kamal and bring those against whom sufficient admissible evidence of criminal wrongdoing exists to justice in trials which meet international standards of fairness;
- Ensure that human rights defenders are able to carry out peaceful activities without fear of surveillance, intimidation, harassment, arrest, prosecution or retribution, and guarantee the integrity of human rights defenders, including against attacks or threats coming from non-state groups.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 19 JULY 2017 TO:

Inspector General of Police
AKM Shahidul Hoque
Police Headquarters
Phoenix Road
Fulbaria 1000 Dhaka
Email: ig@police.gov.bd
Fax: +880 2 9563 362

Salutation: Dear Inspector General

And copies to:

Ministry of Home Affairs
Asaduzzaman Khan
Bangladesh Secretariat, Building-8
Dhaka, Bangladesh
Fax: +880 957 3711
Email: stateminister@mha.gov.bd

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. HIS EXCELLENCY MR MOHAMMED NAZMUL QUAUNINE, High Commission for the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 26 Queen's Gate London SW7 5JA, 020 7584 0081, Fax 020 7581 7477, info@bhclondon.org.uk, www.bhclondon.org.uk
Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Hefazat-e-Islam are a coalition of Islamist groups with close links to Bangladesh's *qami* madrasa system, the system of privately owned madrasas which operate without government oversight.

The statue in question depicted the Lady of Justice, a blindfolded woman holding a sword in one hand and a pair of scales in the other, wearing a traditional Bangladeshi *sari*. Conservative Islamist groups, including Hefazat-e-Islam, have for months campaigned for its removal, arguing that it is "idolatory" and therefore anti-Islamic. On 26 May, the statue was moved from outside the Supreme Court to a new location a few hundred metres away. Although the government claimed that the removal was a Supreme Court decision, it has been widely criticised by human rights organisations and others as a way for the government to placate conservative groups. After the removal, Hefazat representatives publicly demanded the removal of all statues in Bangladesh.

The human right to freedom of expression is provided in human rights treaties to which Bangladesh is a party, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). As such, Bangladesh state officials must not impose excessive or arbitrary restrictions on the exercise of these rights. Sultana Kamal has clearly done nothing but peacefully exercised her right to freedom of expression, and should not be subjected to threats of violence.

The Bangladeshi authorities have a poor track record of protecting human rights defenders and holding to account those who make threats against them. In a recent report, Amnesty International documented how human rights activists have often been ignored or harassed when approaching police for protection after receiving threats, or even sometimes threatened with criminal charges; for more information see Amnesty International's recent report, *Caught between fear and repression: Attacks on freedom of expression in Bangladesh*, available [here](#). It is also extremely rare for perpetrators of threats or violent attacks against activists to be brought to justice. For example, although at least seven secular activists have been killed by armed groups in Bangladesh since 2013, in only one of the cases have the alleged perpetrators been convicted and sentenced.

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