

# Amnesty UK South Asia

**May 2023**



## South Asia Coordinator Team

You have been sent this Newsletter because you or your local group opted in to receive Actions, Campaigns and Updates on South Asia. You can opt out at any time by contacting one of us.

Please let us know if you have taken any actions or need further information.

Thank you for your support.

Cherry, Nigina, Lucja & Jerry

## INDIA

### BK-16



This year will mark five years since the first arrests of the activists detained in Maharashtra under this case. The first nine were arrested in summer 2018, as part of a series of crackdowns on human rights defenders under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. In March 2020, a further two activists were arrested under the same law, and in October a further five were detained, making the total of 16. Since then, one of their number, Father Stan Swamy has died in jail and a further four have been released to house arrest on serious medical grounds. None of the activists has been granted a proper trial with legal representation, and conditions in the jails are poor. This is hardly a good record for a democracy! During the year we need to really highlight this injustice, so, if you haven't done so

already, please take action as indicated in the recent Real Lives, by writing to the Indian High Commission in London (*His Excellency Mr Vikram Kumar Doraiswami, Office of the High Commissioner for India, India House, Aldwych, London WC2B 4NA*) and to Prime Minister Narendra Modi (*Prime Minister's Office, South Block, Raisina Hill, New Delhi 11011*) to demand their release and the dropping of all charges.

I have developed a selection of posters for use at local events. Please contact me if you would like electronic copies to print ([cherry.bird@amnesty.org.uk](mailto:cherry.bird@amnesty.org.uk)).

## Observer Editorial: The growing threat to democracy in India



As India overtakes China as the world's most populous country, Narendra Modi's Hindu Nationalist government is escalating its attack on democracy. The Indian economy has rebounded from Covid faster than most, but the growing authoritarianism of the BJP government poses a fundamental threat to democratic governance based on the rule of law, civil rights and freedom of speech, key pillars for economic and social progress.

Modi's abandonment of the secular legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, and his redefinition of India as a Hindu nation has intensified discrimination against minorities, especially Muslims. Now, school books are doctored to remove references to Mahatma Gandhi's opposition to Hindu nationalism or to pre-Raj (Muslim) Mughal rulers. The latest suggestion is also to remove the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution!

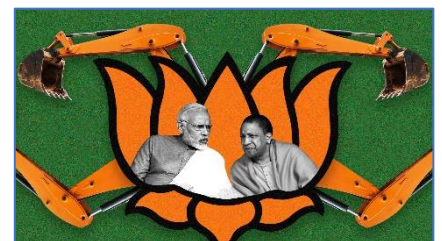
"For most Indians," the author Arundhati Roy wrote recently, religious persecution is "the texture of our daily lives: sword-wielding mobs, saffron-clad god-men routinely calling for the genocide of Muslims and the mass rape of Muslim women, the impunity with which Hindus can lynch Muslims on the street... [and be] congratulated for it by senior ministers."

Gross human rights abuses in Kashmir, corruption allegations around the Gautam Adani business empire and "state capture" by industrial conglomerates are other aspects of a growing democratic deficit. The Modi machine appears unstoppable. When India votes next year, Modi and the BJP look set to win again. India's friends have a duty to speak up. The US and Britain, like other western democracies, have been too ready to overlook Modi's authoritarian trajectory as they seek his backing in their battles with Russia and China. This is short-sighted. They should be braver. Democracy in India is a global asset. Its loss would be a global tragedy.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/23/the-observer-view-on-narendra-modi-growing-threat-to-democracy>

## The demolition of dissent in India

Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in northern India, is known as the "Bulldozer Baba" because of his extensive use of punitive demolition. He is so popular among Hindu nationalists that he is tipped by some to become PM after Modi steps down. On the campaign trail for the Uttar Pradesh elections in 2022, Adityanath held the bulldozer up as an exemplar of stern action and swift justice in the face of a slow legal system, declaring that if he were voted back into office, he would use the bulldozer against "criminals," "mafias" and "rioters." The bulldozer was, supposedly, evidence of Adityanath's zero-tolerance approach to crime, which struck a chord with the people in Uttar Pradesh. But the bulldozer is not simply a neutral symbol of a strong state reclaiming land from encroachers or taking on hardened criminals. Adityanath's election speeches were replete with anti-Muslim rhetoric, with the Muslim community associated with "rioters" and referred to as "Taliban" supporters. As the bulldozer emerged as



an unofficial election mascot for BJP-style tough governance, the subtext was clear: The criminals Adityanath wanted to go after would primarily be found outside the middle-class Hindu majority.

Read more: <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/india-bulldozers-muslim-neighborhoods/>

*Note: Coda media is a New York based news website headed by former correspondents from the BBC and Wall Street journal.*

## Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) report

A key point noted in this review is that in recent years the UK has not engaged with growing challenges in human rights and civic space in India and it recommends that the UK government should look for opportunities to support coalitions of NGOs working on social issues and championing democratic standards. This is important as the UK provides a substantial amount of aid to India, although it has changed from traditional development projects focused on poverty/ health etc. towards “investments”, i.e. loans to private sector organisations.

This recommendation has been accepted by the UK government - they say “we intend to continue to support research institutions, think tanks and civil society organisations, and we are collaborating with key government ministries such as justice, civil service, sharing knowledge and expertise, and discussing policy and implementation.” So, we await action.

See the report <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/html-version/uk-aid-to-india-review/>

## India now the biggest buyer of Russian oil

India was the biggest buyer of Russia’s benchmark Urals grade crude in March 2023, amounting to more than 50% of all seaborne Urals exports. China was in second place. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said Russian oil sales to India jumped 22-fold last year. He also said Russia’s energy industry was sustainable, despite the challenge of Western sanctions as Russia would focus on boosting energy exports to “friendly” countries.

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/russia-says-it-has-rerouted-all-oil-exports-india-the-biggest-buyer/>

# BANGLADESH

## End crackdown on journalists and protect freedom of expression

On World Press Freedom Day 2023, Amnesty International and five other civil society organisations expressed their alarm at the increasing attacks against Bangladeshi journalists and online critics exercising their right to freedom of expression. Fifty-six journalists have been targeted by the government and its supporters in the first three months of 2023. Journalists in Bangladesh are at risk of arrest under the Digital Security Act (DSA) and being subjected to harassment, surveillance, and physical attacks by government supporters.

In April, a group of armed assailants attacked journalist Ayub Meahzi by throwing him off the roof of a two-story building. Meahzi survived. The attack was in retaliation for his reporting on the involvement of local government officials in illegal land grabbing and hill cutting.

In March, authorities arrested Shamsuzzaman Shams, a correspondent for the newspaper *Prothom Alo*, under the DSA, in relation to his article about cost of living in the country. He was detained in the middle of the night and, accused of publishing content “tarnishing the image of the nation,”. In a speech in parliament, Prime Minister Sheikh

Hasina called *Prothom Alo* the “enemy” of the ruling party, democracy, and the people of the country. Following Prime Minister’s statement, a group of people broke into the *Prothom Alo* office and the office.

Amnesty is disturbed by the continued use of the Digital Security Act against journalists for their work on topics including governmental policies, alleged corruption, and illicit business practices in Bangladesh. At least 339 DSA cases have been filed against journalists since its inception in 2018.

The increasing repression and curtailment of the right to freedom of expression is having a chilling effect on journalists and civil society, and seriously stifling journalistic freedoms. The 2022 World Press Freedom Index compiled by **Reporters Without Borders ranked Bangladesh at 162 out of 180**, the worst performing country in South Asia.

The Bangladesh government’s suppression of free speech and media freedom is inconsistent with the country’s constitution and Bangladesh’s obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

See the full report: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/6740/2023/en/>



See page 9 of the latest Amnesty magazine for a piece highlighting recent intimidation of Bangladesh’s largest daily newspaper, *Prothom Alo*.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/bangladesh-increasing-intimidation-and-harassment-of-prothom-alo-signals-deepening-crisis-of-press-freedom-in-the->

[country/#:~:text=Prothom%20Alo%2C%20Bangladesh's%20largest%20daily,country%2C%20said%20Amnesty%20International%20today.](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/04/bangladesh-increasing-intimidation-and-harassment-of-prothom-alo-signals-deepening-crisis-of-press-freedom-in-the-country/#:~:text=Prothom%20Alo%2C%20Bangladesh's%20largest%20daily,country%2C%20said%20Amnesty%20International%20today.)

## Continuing problems for the Rohingya refugees

Bangladesh has been hosting nearly one million Rohingya refugees for six years. They continue to live in appalling conditions. Any repatriation plans continue to be delayed. Please remember the Rohingya when campaigning for refugees. [Please see this article on their situation.](#)

“The troubled question for Bangladesh, then, would be how to deal with this refugee crisis for potentially years more to come, involving funding, administration, inclusive and equitable treatment of the refugees and host populations, and national security issues, among others.”



## Cyclone causes further misery for Rohingya

As of Sunday (14 May) Cyclone Mocha was hitting the Rohingya in the world’s largest refugee camp. The Bangladesh government refused to allow the refugees to move, even though it had evacuated half a million Bangladeshi citizens from the area and even though the refugees have inadequate shelter. Please remember the Rohingya.

Read more: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-65581169>



## Heatwave in Bangladesh

Temperatures in Bangladesh have recently been exceeding 40C. Marta Schaaf, Director of Climate, Economic and Social Justice, and Corporate Accountability Programme, Amnesty International, identified Bangladesh as a country facing serious problems in a [recent report](#). “The impacts of climate change are not borne equally – many countries that contributed little to carbon emissions face near existential threats, and overall, there are severe health and other human rights consequences experienced mostly by racialized and marginalized people. The more attention and public support that is mobilized, the better the chances we have of limiting and reversing damage. The effects of the climate crisis are increasingly evident.”

## SRI LANKA

As part of Amnesty International USA's campaign on Sri Lanka, a mobile billboard with the campaign message “Peaceful Protest Is Not a Crime” was placed outside the Sri Lankan Embassy in Washington, D.C.

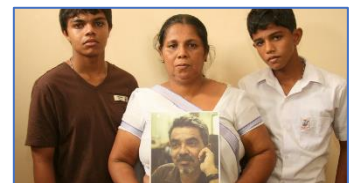


## Sandya's 13-year campaign. Where is Prageeth?



Sandya Eknaligoda has been campaigning for 13 years. Her husband, journalist Prageeth, was forcibly disappeared in January 2010. A police investigation in 2015 revealed that Prageeth was seen alive in a military camp, shortly after being abducted by a military intelligence unit. The Sri Lankan Army has repeatedly failed to support any investigations and has instead cited national security concerns as a reason to withhold information. Prageeth was targeted not only in relation to his work as a journalist and cartoonist, but also because he publicly criticized politicians in the country, who he deemed to be corrupt and fraudulent.

Sandya continues to campaign to advocate on behalf of his case. Earlier in May the case was again postponed because the prosecutors from the Attorney General's department were absent. In January, the Amnesty South Asia office produced a report on her [13 years of a struggle for justice](#) so we can continue to understand her campaign.



# NEPAL

## Progress: Court orders recognition of same-sex spouses



The Supreme Court of Nepal has ordered recognition of same-sex foreign spouses of Nepali citizens and a broader recognition of same sex relationships in Nepal. It notes that the government's failure to fully comply with rulings from 2007 and 2017 recognising the rights of LGBT people violates Nepal's constitution and international obligations.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/02/nepal-court-orders-recognition-same-sex-spouse>

## Not so good: New police chief implicated in torture

The Nepal government has shown a disregard for accountability for human rights abuses by appointing someone implicated in a torture case in 2012 as the new inspector general of police. As inspector general, the most senior position in the police, he will be responsible for overseeing investigations into police abuses.

In 2011, Basanta Bahadur Kunwar, now Nepal's most senior police officer, was sent home from his posting on a United Nations peacekeeping mission in Liberia after the UN was made aware that he faced a lawsuit in Nepal where he was alleged to have tortured a person accused of theft. He was found guilty under civil proceedings and ordered to pay a fine, though no further action was taken.

Of further concern, the current multiple coalition government, led by Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoist party, and including the Nepali Congress as well as other smaller parties, is attempting to pass a bill that would protect people accused of some human rights violations from prosecution, if their alleged crimes – including murder – were committed during Nepal's 1996-2006 armed conflict.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/29/new-nepal-police-chief-has-questions-answer-torture>



# AFGHANISTAN

## Afghanistan: UK resettlement of Afghan refugees falls short of targets

According to recent reports, the UK government's programme for urgently relocating Afghan refugees has resettled only a few individuals. As of December 2022, more than 24,000 people from Afghanistan arrived in the UK, including British nationals. Out of this total, over 21,000 individuals were resettled under Afghan refugee schemes. Most of these refugees were part of Operation Pitting, a military operation initiated in August 2021 to evacuate British nationals and Afghans from Kabul. Approximately 2,000 individuals arrived before Operation Pitting, while 15,000 arrived during the process, and 7,000 have come since then. Estimates provided to the Foreign Affairs Committee suggest that 75,000 and 150,000 people had applied for evacuation in August 2021, with only 5% receiving assistance.

The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP) scheme, launched in April 2021, aimed to grant permanent settlement in the UK to Afghans who had worked for the British military and the UK government. The Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme (ACRS), launched in January 2022, focused on women, children, and religious and other minorities at risk from the Taliban. Immediate family members of those eligible under these schemes were also granted the opportunity for resettlement.



However, the number of Afghans being resettled in the UK through official channels has been lower than anticipated. Only 22 individuals, including eight children, have been relocated through pathway two of the ACRS after being referred by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Pathway one, intended for those notified by the government but could not board a flight, has remained open but has seen limited usage.

Due to the lack of a viable operational route to the UK, desperate Afghans have resorted to dangerous crossings via the English Channel. The number of Afghan nationals making this perilous journey increased significantly, with 8,633 individuals undertaking the voyage in the past year. Refugee organisations have urged the UK government to expand access to refugee visas and develop a more compassionate and competent asylum system.

See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-58245684>

### Education activist arbitrarily arrested: Urgent action

Matiullah Wesa was arbitrarily arrested for his work in promoting the right to education. He was arrested by the Taliban's General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) on 27 March 2023, while returning from evening prayer at the mosque. The next day the GDI raided his house and confiscated his personal mobile and laptop. On 29 March, the Taliban spokesperson confirmed his arrest, accusing him of illegal activities. His family have not been allowed to visit him and there has been no avenue to challenge the legality of his detention. *Please take action by 1 June.*

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa11/6656/2023/en/>

## PAKISTAN

Pakistan has been in the news for all the wrong reasons recently, following the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan on 9 May and the massive protests that followed. Charged with various instances of corruption, he appeared at the Islamabad High Court and was detained. Thousands of his supporters travelled many miles to express their solidarity in street protests outside his home in Lahore, as well as at locations around the country. Two days later Pakistan's Supreme Court ruled the arrest to be illegal and ordered his release. His return to his home in Lahore has calmed the situation to some extent but things remain tense and there were clashes between celebrating supporters of Khan and police near the Supreme Court building. The evolving situation has gripped the country, as many feel the case is intended to prevent Imran Khan from contesting the upcoming elections. Rights groups, including Amnesty International, called for restraint by the authorities in dealing with the protests, which have at times been violently put down.



### Authorities must show restraint and lift internet restrictions immediately

When Imran Khan was arrested at the Islamabad High Court by the Pakistan Rangers, a paramilitary force, his supporters held nationwide demonstrations, many of which turned violent. In response, the army was called in, with 1,400 reported arrests.



In response to the escalating tensions, violent protests, multiple deaths, mass arrests and 'indefinite' ban on mobile internet since the arrest Rimmel Mohyidin, regional campaigner at Amnesty International, said: "There is an urgent need to de-escalate the situation in Pakistan as it threatens further severe violations of rights of the people and risks more fatalities. The authorities should be aiming to defuse the situation and the

use of force by the state must go no further than is necessary and proportionate. Amnesty International strongly urges Pakistani authorities to exercise restraint and use minimum force without resorting to the use of firearms to disperse protestors. The authorities must also ensure no arbitrary arrests are made and that there is evidence of reasonable suspicion of criminality for each arrest.

Alarmingly, the government has announced that the mobile internet shutdown is 'indefinite' which is a clear violation of people's right to access information and free expression. The ban on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube also creates a permissive environment for other human rights violations under the darkness of the internet shutdown. The restrictions must be lifted immediately."

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/pakistan-authorities-must-show-restraint-and-lift-internet-restrictions-immediately/>

## Civilians must not be tried under military laws

Following Imran Khan's arrest, there were nationwide protests by his supporters with incidents of violence. Some groups breached military headquarters whilst others set fire to military commanders' official residences'. At least 8 eight people have died and thousands have been reported arrested.

Responding to the press release published by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) indicating the Pakistan military's intention to bring 'arsonists' during violent protests to trial under the Pakistan Army Act and Official Secret Act, Dinushika Dissanayake, Deputy Regional Director for South Asia at Amnesty International, said "Trying civilians in military courts is contrary to international law. Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Pakistan has ratified, guarantees the right to a trial before a 'competent, independent, and impartial tribunal established by law.' Military courts in Pakistan are not independent courts and are specialized, purely functional, and designed to maintain discipline within the armed forces. Amnesty International has documented a catalogue of human right violations stemming from trying civilians in military courts in Pakistan, including flagrant disregard for due process, lack of transparency, coerced confessions, and executions after grossly unfair trials. Therefore, any indication that the trial of civilians could be held in military courts is incompatible with Pakistan's obligations under international human rights law.



<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/pakistan-civilians-must-not-be-tried-under-military-laws/>