

URGENT ACTION

HINDU FISHERMAN KEPT IN UNLAWFUL DETENTION

Hindu fisherman Rasraj Das has been detained in Bangladesh since October 2016. He was arrested for allegedly posting an “offensive” image on Facebook and charged with “hurting religious sentiment”. He could face up to 14 years in prison if convicted. Even though police have recently stated that he was not responsible for posting the image, the charge has not been dropped and he was denied bail on 3 January. His next bail hearing is scheduled for 16 January.

Rasraj Das, 25, is a fisherman and member of the Hindu ethnic minority in Brahmanbaria district in eastern Bangladesh. On 30 October 2016, hundreds of people gathered in the district to protest a Facebook post allegedly made by Rasraj Das which they claimed insulted Islam. The mob, which allegedly had links to the groups Hefajat-e-Islam and Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, went on a rampage through Hindu villages in the area, vandalising at least 100 homes and several temples.

Rasraj Das was arrested on 30 October and charged by police in Brahmanbaria for violating Section 57 of the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Act for “hurting religious sentiment”. Under this draconian law, an individual can face up to 14 years in jail for “publishing fake, obscene or defaming information in electronic form” or information which “prejudices the image of the State or person.” The ICT Act is often used by the Bangladeshi authorities to target, harass and imprison government critics.

On 28 November, a public report by the district police stated that the image had not been uploaded by Rasraj Das, but that someone else had used his Facebook account. A separate report by the National Human Rights Commission also cleared Rasraj Das of posting the image. Despite this, the charge against Rasraj Das has not been dropped and he remains detained in Brahmanbaria District Jail. His application for bail was rejected by a Brahmanbaria court on 3 January. His next bail hearing is scheduled for 16 January.

Rasraj Das’s family is seriously concerned about his well-being in prison, although according to his lawyer he has not suffered torture or other ill-treatment. The family received threats after Rasraj Das’s arrest and were initially forced into hiding, but they were able to return to their home in mid-December.

Please write immediately in English, Bengali or your own language:

- Calling on the Bangladeshi authorities to immediately and unconditionally release Rasraj Das;
- Urging them to promptly investigate the attacks on the Hindu community and bring those suspected of responsibility to account in fair trials and without recourse to the death penalty;
- Urging them to repeal Section 57 of the ICT Act and repeal or amend other laws that are not compatible with Bangladesh’s international human rights obligations.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 23 FEBRUARY 2017 TO:

Minister of Law

Anisul Huq
Law and Justice Division
Building 4,
Bangladesh Secretariat Dhaka - 1000
Bangladesh
Email: secretary@lawjusticediv.gov.bd
Salutation: Honourable Minister

Prime Minister

Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister’s Office
Old Sangshad Bhaban, Tejgaon, Dhaka
1215, Bangladesh
Fax: +880 2 9133722
Email: info@pmo.gov.bd
Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

State Minister

Ministry of Home Affairs
Bangladesh Secretariat, Building-8 (1st
& 3rd Floor),
Dhaka, Bangladesh
Fax: +880 2 9573711
Email: secretary@mha.gov.bd
Salutation: Dear Minister

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. HIS EXCELLENCY MR MD. ABDUL HANNAN , 28 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.

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Bangladesh's Hindu minority has historically been subjected to discriminatory practices and attacks by violent groups in the Muslim-majority country. In 2013, for example, the Hindu minority was subjected to a wave of violent attacks during which 40 temples were vandalised and scores of shops and houses were burned down, leaving hundreds of people homeless.

Although several people have been arrested following the October attacks on Hindus in Brahmanbaria, no one has yet been charged or held to account through the judiciary, as far as Amnesty International is aware. After his arrest Rasraj Das was initially remanded in police custody and then, since 7 November, in Brahmanbaria District Jail.

The ICT Act – first passed in 2006 and amended in 2013 – has for years been used by the authorities in Bangladesh to curtail the right to freedom of expression. Section 57 of the ICT Act is of particular concern, as it is vaguely formulated and imposes restrictions on freedom of expression beyond those allowed under international law. Anyone found guilty of violating Section 57 faces a prison sentence of minimum seven years and maximum 14 years. Amnesty International has for years urged the Bangladeshi authorities to repeal Section 57.

According to the human rights organisation Odhikar, at least 35 people were arrested under the ICT Act in 2016, a significant increase from 14 in 2014. Those charged often include those who have criticised the Prime Minister, her family or the ruling party online, including journalists and other human rights activists. The law has also been described as a “de facto blasphemy law” in Bangladesh, as religious minorities and secular activists found to publish “offensive” remarks about Islam online have often been targeted.

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