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OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Press briefing notes on Bangladesh

We are concerned by the Government of Bangladesh’s decision not to approve the renewal of registration for Odhikar, a prominent and respected human rights organisation in the country. The decision follows repeated accusations by the authorities against Odhikar for “spreading propaganda” and “publishing misleading information” about extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. We urge the Government to immediately reconsider this decision, and to ensure that Odhikar has the ability to seek full judicial review of any such determination. We are further concerned that this decision will have a chilling effect on the ability of civil society organisations to report serious human rights violations to UN human rights mechanisms.

Odhikar has documented and reported on human rights violations in Bangladesh over many years, including to UN Special Procedures mandate holders, human rights treaty bodies and our Office. Intimidation and reprisals against Odhikar have been documented since as far back as 2013, and appear to have intensified, with accusations levelled against the organisation for “anti-State” and “anti-Government” activities. There has been increased surveillance of its activities in recent months. The UN Secretary-General has also raised concerns about reprisals against Odhikar over the past decade for cooperating with the UN.

Odhikar’s application for renewal of its registration with the NGO Affairs Bureau has been pending since 2014, severely hindering its ability to carry out its work. In 2014, Odhikar’s bank account was also frozen. In view of its practical impact on Odhikar’s ability to operate, we call for Odhikar to be permitted access to its banked funds pending reconsideration of the renewal application.

Restrictions to the right of freedom of association which do not respect the principles of necessity, proportionality and non-discrimination contravene international law.

Bangladesh has the tradition of a strong and diverse civil society. We call on the Government to foster an enabling environment for civil society to undertake their work without fear of reprisals, particularly in the lead up to the next elections. Furthermore, civil society actors must not be deterred from cooperating with the UN, its representatives and mechanisms.

ecoi.net summary:

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the registration of the human rights
organisation Odhikar

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Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum
Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien
[T \(Telefon\)](tel:+43158900583) +43 1 589 00 583
[F \(Fax\)](tel:+43158900589) +43 1 589 00 589
info@ecoi.net

Contact
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