

IPI Press Freedom Mission to Bangladesh & IPI Seminar on Threats to Quality Journalism in Bangladesh and the World

February 25 – 29, 2012

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Overview:

From Feb. 25 to 29, 2012, the International Press Institute (IPI) carried out a press freedom mission to Bangladesh, where IPI delegates met with high-level members of the country's government and opposition as well as numerous journalists and media institution representatives, to discuss concerns related to

press freedom and journalistic practices in the country.



IPI Executive Director Alison Bethel McKenzie meets with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during the IPI press freedom mission to Bangladesh on Feb. 28, 2012 in Dhaka (Photo: Habibur Rahman Habib, Official Photographer of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina)

Mission delegates - including IPI board member, Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, executive director Alison Bethel McKenzie, and press freedom manager Barbara Trionfi - urged authorities to address the impunity related to attacks on, and killings of, journalists in the past 15 years, and to improve the legal framework affecting the media in the country.

According to Bulbul, who is also Chairman of the IPI Bangladesh

National Committee, at least 24 journalists have been killed in Bangladesh since 1998. In not a single case have the perpetrators been brought to justice.

Most recently, on Feb. 11, Sagar Sarwar, news editor of the private TV station Massranga and his wife Mehrun Runi, senior reporter with ATN Bangla television, were stabbed to death in their home in the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka.

Police said they were investigating the crime but had yet to identify the perpetrators and determine the motive behind the killing. Journalists in Bangladesh have been vehemently calling for justice and an end to the violence. On Feb. 27, IPI members in the country joined hundreds of journalists in a one-hour protest in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka to call for justice for their two colleagues. Similar protests also took place across Bangladesh.

Journalists, who also held a countrywide mass hunger strike on March 1 from 10 am to 4 pm, have called for a grand rally in Dhaka on March 18 to press for the arrest of the killers.

In a meeting with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Feb. 28, IPI stressed the importance of prosecuting the killers of Sagar Sarwar and Mehrun Runi, as well as those behind the murders of the other 22 journalists killed between 1998 and 2010. Hasina stated that she was extremely saddened by the brutal murder of the journalists and had already called for swift investigations. Referring to earlier killings, the prime minister said that a great deal of time had passed, which made it difficult to carry out new investigations.

IPI delegates welcomed the current administration's decision to repeal the Emergency Powers Rules (2007), which allowed police to arrest journalists in their newsrooms without a court warrant, as an important step toward greater press freedom and respect for the rule of law.

"We are very pleased at the advancements that have been made in Bangladesh in terms of press freedom and are looking forward to continuing our work in the country," IPI's executive director said. "We do however remain concerned about the recent murder of Sagar Sarwar and Mehrun Runi and the failure, after ten years, to capture any of those who have committed crimes against the nation's media."

Stating that her administration was committed to a free press in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Hasina suggested that a lack of professionalism may at times have been the cause of attacks against journalists. "There should be freedom of the press but side by side with responsibility," the prime minister told IPI.

The IPI mission delegates also met with Information Minister Abul Kalam Azad, and Chief Information Commissioner Ambassador Zamir to look at the ongoing implementation of the Right to Information Act (2009) and the urgent need to adopt a broadcasting policy that would allow the setting up of an independent body in charge of regulating the airwaves, assigning licenses, and supervising the broadcasting sector.

Bethel McKenzie noted the importance of ensuring consultation with the media sector throughout the process of drafting the broadcasting law. IPI offered to provide advice to ensure that laws affecting broadcasters are in line with international standards of press freedom and ensure broad access to information from different sources.

Impunity was also discussed in a meeting with Barrister Shafique Ahmed, Minister of Law & Parliamentary Affairs, who told IPI that “the government is eager to catch the perpetrators of the latest killing of journalists [...] because we want to get out of this culture of impunity.”

Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), also told IPI that her party stands for press freedom.

A seminar on "Major Threats to Quality Journalism: Global and Bangladesh Context" organised by IPI's Bangladesh National Committee and Dhaka's Journalism Training & Research Initiative (JATRI) during the IPI mission saw the participation of professional journalists.

Commenting on the IPI mission, IPI Board Member Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, CEO of Boishakhi private television, noted that "in order to fight attacks, threats, killings and harassment journalists need to be well-prepared through training on ethical, responsible and professional journalism, as well as be united. We welcome the IPI mission to Bangladesh and call on IPI to support efforts by journalists in the country to improve their professional skills."

Mission Meetings:

Prime Minister HE Sheikh Hasina. PM Office. PM was supported by her Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad, Special Assistant Ambassador Zia Uddin, Chief Secretary Mollah Wahiduzzaman

Begum Khaleda Zia, leader of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

Abul Kalam Azad, Information Minister.

Barrister Shafique Ahmed, Minister – Law & Parliamentary Affairs.

Ambassador Zamir, Chief Information Commissioner.

Mahfuj Anam, Editor, *The Daily Star*.

Members of the Press Club, presided by Kamal Uddin Sabuj, President of the club, address by Syed Abdal Ahmed, General Secretary, National Press Club; Reaz Uddin Ahmed, Former President of the Club; Hasan Sahriar, Former President of the Club

Members of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists. Presided by Abdul Jalil Bhuyia, Secretary General of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists

IPI Seminar at the Journalism Training and Research Initiative (JATRI): “Major Threats to Quality Journalism: Global and Bangladesh Context”.

Moderator: Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, chairman of the IPI Bangladesh National Committee

Speakers: Alison Bethel McKenzie, IPI executive director; Jaglul Ahmed Chowdhury, Senior Journalist; Barbara Trionfi, pIPI press freedom manager.

08.30 pm: Farewell dinner : Hosted by IPI National Committee

Mission Report:

In line with the findings of the IPI Bangladesh Free Media Centre and previous IPI missions to Bangladesh in 2010, 2009 and earlier, the IPI Press Freedom Mission to Bangladesh in February 2012 addressed the following concerns:

- Attacks, harassments and intimidation of journalists carried out by various political and other actors
- Impunity in the attacks and even the killings of journalists
- Laws criminalizing defamation through the media
- The need to develop, pass and implement a broadcasting policy to regulate the flourishing broadcasting sector in line with international standards in press freedom

The IPI delegation included:

IPI Executive Director Alison Bethel McKenzie

IPI Board Member Bulbul Monjurul Ashan, Chairman of IPI Bangladesh National Committee

IPI Press Freedom Manager Barbara Trionfi.

The IPI delegates met with key representatives of the government, the opposition, state institutions as well as journalists and media experts to discuss possible solutions to key challenges facing Bangladesh's media.

The IPI delegation also met with high lever representatives of the journalistic community, including the president and secretary general of the national press club, executive members of the journalist union, and various editors and publishers of key media outlets

The IPI mission was followed by a workshop on “Challenges to Quality Journalism in Bangladesh and Worldwide”, organized in cooperation with the Journalism Training and Research Initiative (JATRI), which saw the participation of over 50 professional journalists.

Outcome of the Meetings:

Meeting with Begum Khaleda Zia, Leader of the Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

The leader of the opposition noted that self-censorship and irresponsible journalism are great problems affecting the media in Bangladesh.

Discussing concerns related to impunity, Begum Khaled Zia said that the justice department lacks independence as it is directly appointed by the government. In order to bring an end to impunity, the country’s judiciary needs to be reformed, so to ensure its independence.

IPI delegates mentioned concerns about attacks against and harassment of journalists around the country. In some cases, there were allegations that such attacks were carried out by supporters or even members of the BNP party.

Begum Khaleda Zia noted that the more attacks appeared to have been carried out against journalists and media outlets that favour the BNP, rather than media closer to the Awami League.

Answering to concerns about criminal defamation provisions, Begum Khaleda Zia said if anybody writes anything critical about the government, several people across the country immediately file defamation claims against the journalist.

The leader of the BNP reiterated that the BNP stands for press freedom

Meeting with Abul Kalam Azad, Minister of Information

Abul Kalam Azad told IPI delegates that the current government of Bangladesh led by the Awami League believes in complete press freedom. He noted that a lot has changed since 2009 including a legal review that scrapped a law allowing authorities to arrest journalists directly from their workplace, without a warrant.

“Since 2009, we have been looking after the journalists’ interests,” Abul Kalam Azad told IPI delegates, explaining that the government is currently in the process of setting up a welfare fund for journalists in need.

During the meeting IPI called on the Minister to dedicated greater resources to the implementation of the right of information law and scrap criminal defamation clauses from Bangladesh's penal code. IPI also stressed the importance of drafting and implementing a broadcasting law that would set up an independent body to regulate the airwaves.

Abul Kalam Azad stressed the need to improve the standards of journalism in Bangladesh and called on IPI to continue its training efforts, in particular in the field of journalistic ethics, in order to stop the practice of partisan journalism which is currently common in Bangladesh.

Meeting with Barrister Shafique Ahmed, Minister – Law & Parliamentary Affairs

Barrister Shafique Ahmed told IPI that the press is completely free in Bangladesh.

In response to concerns expressed by the IPI delegates about violence against journalists and impunity in the murders of journalists Barrister Shafique Ahmed told IPI that the government is eager to catch the perpetrators of the murder of two journalists killed earlier in 2012. However, it takes time to carry out the investigations.

With regard to journalists killed in previous years, Barrister Shafique Ahmed said that there is no statute of limitation in the killing of journalists “because we want to get over this culture of impunity.”

Meeting at the National Press Club

The General Secretary of the National Press Club said he hoped that IPI will speak up on concerns related to impunity in the attacks against journalists.

The president of the Press Club said that defending press freedom is one of the core activities of the National Press Club. He said that IPI and the Press Club should intensify cooperation in the field of press freedom in Bangladesh.

IPI representatives mentioned that cooperation with local Press Clubs outside of Dhaka has been a core activity of the IPI Free Media Center and hopes that the IPI National Committee in Bangladesh could follow up on such cooperation to encourage nationwide exchange of information about press freedom violations, including in rural areas.

Meeting with Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina

IPI delegates urged the Prime Minister to do everything in her power to:

- Ensure that criminal defamation laws are abolished
- Draft and implement a broadcasting law to regulate the airwaves
- End impunity in attacks against journalists

Prime Minister Hasina noted that she has always valued press freedom greatly and that during her last tenure, she opened up the airwaves to private broadcasters. “That brought a big change,” Hasina said, adding that today there are 14 private TV channels and 7 private FM radios.

Hasina also said that she initiated the practice of broadcasting all parliamentary proceedings.

Nevertheless, Hasina also stressed the importance of quality journalism and criticized the media coverage of two recent killings of journalists as being too sensationalistic and not focus on key issues of public interest.

In response to IPI’s call to bring the perpetrators of the attacks against journalists to justice, the prime minister responded that the government has already started investigations.

In talks about the need to implement a broadcasting law that is in line with international standards on press freedom, Prime Minister Hasina said she would welcome IPI’s submission of a model broadcasting law.

Finally, in response to IPI’s concerns about allegations that attacks against journalists are carried out also by representatives of the Awami League, the Prime Minister denied that any representative of her party has put any pressure on journalists.

Seminar at the Journalism Training & Research Initiative (JATRI):

“Major Threats to Quality Journalism: Global and Bangladesh Context”

IPI and its National Committee in Bangladesh have worked together with the Journalism Training and Research Initiative (JATRI) in an effort to improve the standards of journalism in Bangladesh.

As part of this cooperation, during the IPI Press Freedom Mission to Bangladesh, JATRI and the IPI National Committee organized a half-day workshop to discuss “Major Threats to Quality Journalism: Global and Bangladesh Context”

The workshop saw the participation of over 50 young and mid career journalists.

The discussion was introduced by Jamil Ahmed, Chief Executive of JATRI and IPI National Committee Chairman, Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul.

Speakers included well respected senior Bangladeshi journalist, Jaglul Ahmed Chowdhury; IPI Executive Director, Alison Bethel McKenzie; and IPI Senior Press Freedom Adviser for Asia, Barbara Trionfi.

The discussion that followed highlighted concerns related not only to access to professional training for journalists but also to external pressures on journalists and editors that affects media content. The reason for such pressure was identifies in a too close relationship between media owners and political parties as well as owners' economic interests that go beyond the media sphere.

The audio file of the seminar on “Major Threats to Quality Journalism: Global and Bangladesh Context” is available here:

<http://www.fileden.com/files/2012/4/25/3296690/IPI%2028-02-2012.MP3>