

# **Bangladesh: Danger Zone for Journalists**

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## **Bangladesh : danger zone for journalists**

### **Background**

Bangladesh is a country where journalist murders go unpunished. According to a report by the Committee to Protect Journalists published in 2011, more than 251 journalists in 13 countries were killed with impunity in the past decade. Bangladesh is one of those dangerous countries for journalists.<sup>1</sup> Recently the murder incident of a journalist couple has drawn attention of the world. On February 11, 2012 two well-known Bangladeshi television journalists namely Sagar Sarwar and his wife, Meherun Runi, have brutally been killed in the capital, Dhaka. Both in their late 30s, were stabbed to death at their apartment. Their bodies were found by their five-year-old son Mahir Sarowar Megh, who then called relatives living nearby.<sup>2</sup>

### **Short Profile of the Journalist Couple**



Both Sagor and Runi were broadcast journalists but they started their career as newsmen with the print media. Runi, who was a senior reporter of ATN Bangla, and Sagor, news editor of Massranga television, also worked for German Bangla radio Deutsche Welle.

They returned from Germany in May last year and admitted their only child Megh in an English medium school on Indira Road.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-us-canada-13611500>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16997187>

## The Brutality



The killers stabbed Sagar 28 times. According to morgue sources, six were in his chest, two in the abdomen, three in the throat, 15 in the back and one on a thigh.

During autopsy, a small knife (which had roughly a four-inch blade) was found jammed in the right side of his chest. Almost the whole of the blade was stuck in his body. This stab penetrated Sagar's lungs deeply, according to morgue sources, who added that the knife did not have its handle.

They noted that all the stabs in Sagar's body were very much straight and some of the stabs penetrated his lungs and liver. The stabs in the throat partially cut his oesophagus (the passage down which food moves between the throat and the stomach) but left his carotid arteries (which supply blood to the head) intact. The sources also said Sagar's hands were tied at the back with a scarf and his legs were bound with another scarf.

The morgue sources suspect that three types of knives were used in the attack on Sagar. The width of some stabs was found to be around two-and-half inches while the width of the others was around two inches and one inch. The killers made two close stabs in Meherun Runi's abdomen. They also stabbed her under the eyebrows, said the morgue sources.

Sohel Mahmud, Lecturer of the Forensic Department of Dhaka Medical College, conducted the autopsies. He told that it appeared to him that the killers were “unprofessional”. “If the killers were professional, they would not have made so many stabs,” he commented.<sup>3</sup>

## Demonstration of Journalists

On 12th February 2012, The journalists' community throughout the country strongly condemn the gruesome killing of journalist couple Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi, demanding immediate arrest of the killers.

Various journalist organisations, including some backed by the ruling Awami League, rallied across the country on Wednesday criticising the government's failure in arresting the killers of the journalist couple even after 10 days of the incident.



<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=222110>

The journalist community also announced a one-hour pen down and hunger strike on Mar 1 to press home their demand for immediate arrest and trial of the killers.

### **Fake Assurance and Reassurance by Home Minister**

Home Minister Sahara Khatun said after incident that, “The investigation into journalist couple killing has already begun. **The mastermind of the incident will be arrested within 48 hours.**” In line with her comments, inspector general of police (IGP) Hassan Mahmood Khandaker also expressed his hope to unravel the mystery surrounding the murders very soon.<sup>4</sup>

On April 8, Journalists called upon a sit-in program in front of the Home Ministry. But the program had been postponed after Minister Sahara Khatun assured them of looking into their three key demands namely immediate arrest of the killers of journalist couple Sagar and Runi, reinvestigation into all the murder cases of journalists and put an end to assault and harassment of journalists while performing their professional duties.

The Home Minister informed the journalists’ leaders that there had been a good progress in the journalist couple murder saying that the killers will be hunted down at shortest possible time.<sup>5</sup>

### **Bare Confidence of Police**

On 26 February, Police claimed that, they finally came to know the motive of the killing of journalist couple Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Nahar Runi.

Deputy Commissioner (South) of Metropolitan Detective Branch Monirul Islam told the journalist that they have got much information from various sources and the investigation is going on the basis of the information.

The details could not be disclosed for sake of investigation and to ensure the exact reason of the murder, he added.<sup>6</sup>

### **Government’s voice changed about Sagar-Runi Case**

At 3rd April, Tuesday, the Home Minister Advocate Shahara Khatun said that, it is not possible to say when the investigation into the murder of journalist couple Sagar-Runi will be completed. She said, “Investigation is continuing... it’ll need more time”.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news\\_id=98418](http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news_id=98418)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news\\_id=126051](http://www.thefinancialexpress-bd.com/more.php?news_id=126051)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.banglanews24.com/English/detailsnews.php?nssl=564ed2dbdd6f0567500e8a1b7981f28b&nttl=2012022734319>

In her words, It is very difficult to maintain law and order in the country with 140,000-member police force, she said, adding the law and order situation is good in the country compared to last 10 years.<sup>7</sup>

### **‘Govt. can't guard one's bedroom’, says PM**



Amid criticism over the government's failure to identify and arrest the killers of journalist couple Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi, prime minister Sheikh Hasina, on February 24, has said it is not possible for the government to guard anyone's bedroom. She also criticised journalists for their demonstrations and other protest programmes since the killing of the couple.

"You (the journalist community) didn't go for such a movement when the BNP was in power. It seems that you feel safe during our regime to launch such movement," she added.

"Media is now open and free. They're writing many things independently. But at the same time, they're also dishing out false information," she observed. The prime minister also alleged that the presence of a large number of journalists at the house of the couple destroyed evidence of the killing.<sup>8</sup>

### **Assurance of Subsistence Allowance To Megh is Politics**

On 13 February, the prime minister assured the family that she will bear the living and educational expenses of Mahir Sarowar Megh, the only son of Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi, as long as Megh lives.<sup>9</sup> But, it's unfortunate that, no single step has been taken to fulfill PM's promise.<sup>10</sup>

### **Writ Petition Showing No Confidence To Police Investigation**

A rights body named 'Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh' had filed a petition. Following this, the High Court on Feb 28 issued a rule asking the government to explain within two weeks why the court should not order authorities to take steps to unveil the motive behind the killings

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bengalnewz.com/bangladesh/dhaka/04038847.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bdnews24.com/details.php?id=218894&cid=2>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/news-details.php?nid=222351>

<sup>10</sup> BBC Bangla

and bring the killers to justice. However, Govt. failed to respond within the deadline which ended on Mar 13.

The High Court on Tuesday summoned deputy attorney general A B M Altaf Hossain and asked him why the respondents had not complied with the rule. Altaf replied, "I have been told that the office of the IGP has not received written copy of the court order." The High Court then asked the authorities to submit a probe progress report in the court by Thursday (Mar 22). Police on Wednesday submitted a progress report to the High Court Division of the Supreme Court.<sup>11</sup>

### **HC unhappy over poor progress in Sagar-Runi case**

Upon submission of the investigation report, HC expressed dissatisfaction for poor progress into the investigation process and on April 17 summoned two DB police to give an update on the investigation over the incident.

The HC comprising Justice AHM Shamsuddin Chowdhury and Justice Jahangir Hossain asked Deputy Commissioner Monirul Islam and Investigation Officer (IO) of the case Md Rabiul Alam to appear before it on Wednesday morning with all documents, including First Information Report (FIR) of the sensational double murder.

The HC assessed that, the police failed to submit progress report even after more than two months. "There was no visible progress in the investigation," it observed.

### **HC orders transfer of Sagar-Runi case to RAB**

The High Court has ordered the Inspector General of Police Hassan Mahmood Khandker to hand over responsibility of probing the murders of journalist couple Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi to the Rapid Action Battalion.

The bench of justices A H M Shamsuddin Chowdhury and Jahangir Hossain gave the order at 18 April after Detective Branch officials admitted that they have failed to make any progress in murder investigation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://bdnews24.com/details.php?id=220775&cid=2>

<sup>12</sup> <http://bdnews24.com/details.php?id=222690&cid=2>

## Recommendation

1. Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person.<sup>13</sup> The Republic is bound to ensure security and safety of life and property of every citizen.<sup>14</sup> State is an organization that must try its best to ensure the maximum security and safety of its people. The ambit of state responsibility extends to the security of its people both from external and internal threats. Therefore, Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry said that, “It is the state’s responsibility to establish peace and security in the country. Times have changed. We need to redefine our national security policy. It should include not only defence from external aggression but also security of citizens’ lives.”

So, when the Prime Minister of Bangladesh ignores state responsibility towards public lives and property, it sounds very alarming for people. She must stop delivering such imprudent speeches.

2. *Freedom of opinion and expression* is an inalienable human right which is recognized by the Constitution of Bangladesh and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948. So the Govt. of Bangladesh should stop itself from exercising the arbitrary action harmful to freedom of media and expression. All restrictions and restrictive outlooks towards media must be changed. To prove that, govt. must stop violence and suppression against media and media personalities.
3. The Home Minister and Police frequently provides fake information regarding the advancement of this case. Finally, it has been proved before the court of law that, all their speeches and statements regarding this issue was nothing but exaggeration and over-expression of real fact only to convince the people and media. Such kind of attitude is destructive for democracy and rule of law that must undermine people’s faith on the Govt.
4. It’s said that, ‘*Justice delayed, justice denied*’. Probably this proverb is going to be true in Sagar-Runi murder case. Two months have already been passed away, but no significant advancement of investigation can be viewed rather the police officers has admitted their complete failure before the court of law. The forensic test shows that, the murder has been committed by non-professional and unskilled persons. But, police that has shown its

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<sup>13</sup> Article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

extra-ordinary excellence in the finding out and arresting the government's opposition leaders, have totally been failed to know even a single clue of this murder case. This is not trustworthy and hence conscious people are now thinking even the involvement of Govt.-backed groups in this murder incident.

5. The Supreme Court has recently ordered the Police to transfer the case for investigation to RAB. Obviously this is a shame for police. Now, Govt. should provide all kinds of logistic support towards RAB and ensure offenders' arrest and punishment as soon as possible.
6. Bangladesh has already been marked as a danger zone for journalists as the freedom of expression is existing here under serious threat of torture. So, Govt. must develop this unacceptable situation and provides all kinds of support towards journalists. Otherwise, democracy will be wrecked.
7. Prime Minister should fulfill her promise to Megh by providing all of his subsistence allowance and educational cost.