

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Bangladesh: Ban on Political Activities Condemned - Government Urged to Refrain from Restricting Freedoms of Assembly, Association and Expression**

(Bangkok, 20 May 2013) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), a regional human rights group with 47 member organisations from 16 countries across Asia including Bangladesh, expressed serious concern over the decision of the Government to ban all political activities in the country. The decision has come not through an official announcement following due procedure, but through the contradictory and confusing statements by two Ministers. The human rights group condemned the ban as arbitrary and a serious violation of freedoms of assembly, association and expression.

On 19 May 2013, the Home Minister reportedly said that no political party will be allowed to hold any kind of rally or procession across the country for the next one month in the greater interest of maintaining law and order. However, the Local Government and Rural Development Minister and Secretary General of the ruling party, while addressing a press briefing at the party office on the same day, claimed that this ban is aimed at ensuring smooth and uninterrupted relief work in the aftermath of cyclone Mahasen which hit the coastal areas of Bangladesh late last week.

“The authorities have been expressing contradictory views on whether the ban is on all sorts of political activities or only on public meetings and rallies, and on whether this ban will be applicable throughout Bangladesh or only in Dhaka, the capital city. Inconsistent statements are also being made by the authorities with regards to the period of the ban. It is also pertinent to note that only the coastal regions were significantly affected by the cyclone,” said Giyoum Kim, the Acting Executive Director of FORUM-ASIA.

Under the law, the authority to permit any rally in the capital is the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) and any such decision has to come in the form of an official circular from the Home Ministry. However, the DMP and even its highest ranking officers appeared to be unaware of such a decision. The Home Secretary, the top bureaucrat of the Home Ministry while addressing the media has also expressed that he was unaware of this decision.

“The discrepancies in the statements of the Ministers, the press note issued by the Home Ministry on 19 May afternoon and the lack of awareness of the Home Secretary and the Police Chief dispel any claims that the ban is to ensure uninterrupted relief to the areas affected by the recent cyclone. Instead, the ban appears to be a deliberate attempt to curb the reach of political opponents in the country,” said Giyoum.

“The last few months has seen a steady decline in the climate of freedoms of expression and assembly in Bangladesh. The recent killing and arrest of bloggers, as well as the arrest of a newspaper editor which has resulted in the discontinuation of the newspaper’s publication, the shutting down of two TV channels, and the blocking of websites, are all indicative of the shrinking space of these freedoms in Bangladesh”, added Giyoum.

Bangladesh has just undergone its second cycle of the Universal Periodic Review on 29 April 2013 and is scheduled to submit its final response to the UN Human Rights Council in September 2013. The country will also have its next general election at the end of this year. “Such intensification of restrictions at this crucial time will surely be viewed as an undemocratic effort to eliminate the voices of dissent. FORUM-ASIA thus call on the Government of Bangladesh to immediately lift the ban and stop all initiatives aimed towards restricting freedoms of assembly, association and expression,” said Giyoum.

For further inquiries, please contact:

1. Gayatri Khandhadai, South Asia Programme Officer, gayatri@forum-asia.org, +66 906538263
2. Sayeed Ahmed, Country Programme Manager, sayeed@forum-asia.org +66 842176150

