

## Bangladesh: Release Shahidul Alam immediately, protect free press and people's right to freedom of expression

(Bangladesh/Kathmandu, 9 August 2018) – The Asian forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns the unlawful arrest of Shahidul Alam, a well-known photographer and social activist in Bangladesh. Alam, who founded the Drik Photo Gallery, was arrested shortly after he posted on Facebook about the ongoing protests for road safety in Dhaka. Alam had also recently appeared on Al Jazeera criticising the Government's handling of the protest.

Alam was picked up from his home on 5 August 2018 around 10.30 pm by at least 20 men, all in plain clothes, who claimed to be from the Detective Branch (DB) of the Bangladesh Police. They forced him into a car. According to a statement issued by the Drik Photo Gallery, the men 'took away the CCTV camera footage', and 'manhandled and locked up the security guards' of Alam's apartment.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, Alam is being interrogated for 'giving false information to different media' and 'giving provocative comments'.<sup>2</sup> He has been remanded in police custody for seven days under the Information Communication Technology Act, 2006 (ICT Act, amended in 2013).

When he was taken to Court, barefoot and supported by police officers as he was limping, Alam claimed he was tortured while in custody. He has been charged under Section 57 of the ICT Act, which considers that the online posts 'deteriorate law and order, prejudice the image of the state or person or hurt religious beliefs' and, therefore, constitute a non-bailable offence.<sup>3</sup> Alam was transferred to hospital on Wednesday following a High Court order on Tuesday. After the hospital declared they found no health issues requiring hospitalisation, he was sent back to the office of the DB.

Alam had posted pictures on his Facebook of assailants chasing unarmed protesting students in the presence of police.<sup>4</sup> This was to exemplify that the security of journalists and protestors has been under constant threat in the ongoing agitation, in which thousands of students demanded safer roads and justice for the killings of two students in road accident. The protest turned violent when hundreds of students and dozens of journalists were injured by the police's excessive use of force. Protestors have also been attacked by pro-government vigilantes in Dhaka, some of whom were armed with machetes. A number of journalists were beaten and had their cameras taken away, reportedly by ruling Awami league party members.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2018/08/05/photographer-shahidul-alam-picked-up-from-his-home>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/08/06/bangladeshi-photographer-shahidul-alam-arrested-over-provocative-comments/?utm\\_term=.c695a481e732](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/08/06/bangladeshi-photographer-shahidul-alam-arrested-over-provocative-comments/?utm_term=.c695a481e732)

<sup>3</sup> <https://thewire.in/south-asia/bangladesh-photographer-shahidul-alam-arrested-facebook-dhaka-protests>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10156668134030152&set=a.151066730151.141672.540020151&type=3&theater>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/bangladesh-officials-restrict-internet-student-protests-180805071428323.html>

The draconian section 57 of the ICT Act criminalises online dissent and criticism of public affairs in Bangladesh. Scores of journalists, human rights defenders, writers and bloggers have been charged with unlawful online expression. According to Odhikar, a FORUM-ASIA member organisation from Bangladesh, at least 59 people have been detained under the ICT Act between January 2014 and July 2016.<sup>6</sup>

Recalling international human rights standard to protect people's right to freedom of expression and assembly, FORUM ASIA urges the Government to immediately release Shahidul Alam, who was merely expressing his views. FORUM-ASIA also condemns the Government's violent crackdown on the student protest. It is high time for the Government of Bangladesh to address the agitation in a peaceful manner, avoiding further injuries and damages to journalists and protestors. FORUM-ASIA reiterates its earlier demand to the Government of Bangladesh to repeal the ICT Act, and release all people arbitrarily arrested under the act so far.

**About FORUM-ASIA:**

*FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.*

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/09/bangladesh-release-facebook-user-who-criticised-prime-minister/>