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Bangladesh: Escalating death threats and legal persecution against human rights defender Sazzadur Rahman

On 3 March 2025, human rights defender **Sazzadur Rahman**, also known as Rakhal Raha, was sued under the Cyber Security Act of 2023 for allegedly inciting violence and insulting religious sentiments through his satirical and hypothetical writings posted on social media. The Cyber Security Act invoked is often used in Bangladesh to criminalise online activities deemed harmful to national security or religious sentiments, and to target individuals seen as critical of religion or the government.

Sazzadur Rahman is a human rights defender and an active voice in education reform, literature, and socio-political movements in Bangladesh. He is also known by his alias Rakhal Raha. As a writer, his novels and short story collections, *Amavati* and *Chashadhe Golpo*, were recognized as significant literary works of their time. Rakhal Raha founded the "Education and Child Protection Movement (Shishir)" to combat corruption in children's education, and was subsequently repressed by the state for his human rights work. In response to violence against intellectuals, he also founded the "Bangladesh Writers' Unity" and served as its founding president. His activism has spanned several movements, including protests against the Digital Security Act, education reform and labor rights, reflecting his commitment to the defence of human rights.

On 17 February 2025, Sazzadur Rahman wrote a satirical and hypothetical piece using a poem by Sohel Hasan Galib, for which the poet is currently in pre-trial detention under the Cyber Security Act. The human rights defender posted it on Facebook and asked for feedback. Between 18 and 20 February 2025, a widespread campaign on Facebook and YouTube targeted Sazzadur Rahman, calling for his assassination, arrest and the offering of a bounty on his head. After receiving violent and offensive comments, he deleted the post and issued an apology and explanation.

The week between 22 and 28 February 2025 saw an escalation of death threats against Sazzadur Rahman, both online and in public spaces, including with circulation of calls for his execution. Efforts to bring charges against him also continued during this period. On 21 February 2025, following Jumma prayers in mosques across the country, particularly in Dhaka's Baitul Mukarram Mosque, announcements were made that anyone could execute Sazzadur Rahman wherever he was found. On 26 February 2025, the Detective Branch visited his office at the National Curriculum & Textbook Board (NCTB) and went to his house at night in search of him. They spoke to the landlord but were unable to find him.

Between 1 and 2 March 2025, different police stations continued to attempt to file cases against human rights defender Sajjadur Rahman, and on 3 March 2025, he was sued under the Cyber Security Act of 2023, with the court directing the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the police to submit an investigation report by 22 May 2025.

The ongoing persecution of Sazzadur Rahman must be seen within the context of the broader crackdown on human rights defenders, journalists, and activists in Bangladesh, and it is imperative that the government uphold its obligations to protect individuals exercising their fundamental rights to freedom of expression and association. The Cyber Security Act, often invoked in Bangladesh to criminalize online activities perceived as harmful to national security or religious sentiments, has become a tool to target individuals critical of religion, the state, or dominant political narratives.

Front Line Defenders is extremely concerned for the safety of Sazzadur Rahman, a human rights defender who is facing legal persecution, death threats, and an escalating campaign of online harassment due to his exercise of freedom of expression. The legal action against Rahman under the Cyber Security Act of 2023 is part of a broader pattern of state-led efforts to silence dissenting voices and suppress critical thought in Bangladesh. This not only jeopardizes Rahman's personal safety but also threatens the broader human rights landscape in the country.

Front Line Defender urges the relevant authorities in Bangladesh to:

1. Immediately provide protection mechanisms to Sazzadur Rahman, including measures to ensure his physical safety and prevent any form of violence or harassment directed towards him.
2. Immediately withdraw all charges against Sazzadur Rahman under the Cyber Security Act and end all legal action that violates his right to freedom of expression.
3. Conduct an immediate and thorough investigation into the online campaigns and death threats against Sazzadur Rahman, and hold accountable those responsible for inciting violence and hate speech against him, with the aim of publishing the findings and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards
4. Ensure that human rights defenders in Bangladesh are protected from reprisal from State and non-state groups and end the persecution and punishment of human rights defenders in the State, including for exercising their right to free expression and peaceful dissent.

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