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Asia - Bangladesh

Journalists threatened

Authorities turn up the heat on journalists

19 March 2012

Reporters Without Borders deplores the persecution of [Ekushey Television \(ETV\)](#) by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission and regrets the government body's threats to shut down the commercial satellite station for allegedly broadcasting illegally. The organization condemns also the threats by local leaders of the ruling Awami League in the southern city of Pirojpur against 19 Pirojpur-based journalists on 13 March, and the suspension of broadcasting by three privately-owned TV stations the previous day to prevent live coverage of an opposition BNP rally in the capital.

"If *ETV* is ordered off the air, it would be the second television station to be closed down under this government since 2009," the press freedom organization said.

"The BTRC cannot threaten *ETV* with closure while a verdict by the Supreme Court on similar allegations is still pending. The station must be granted the right to present the required documentation and be given reasonable time in which to do so. In the event that the dispute drags on, the station must be allowed to appeal through the courts and be spared financial strangulation."

"The authorities must loosen their grip on the media at once and cease to constantly harass and threaten journalists, especially when they support the opposition," Reporters Without Borders said. "The authorities know who were responsible for these threats. They must be held accountable for their statements."

***ETV* persecuted**

On 11 March, *ETV* was given formal notice to explain the terms under which it was broadcasting, an action the BTRC termed illegal. The regulatory body said the station had no licence and had not been allocated the frequency it was using.

The BTRC gave the station seven days to respond. Under the law, *ETV* could be fined 3 billion taka (about 27 million euros) and its executives could face prison sentences of up to 10 years.

On 22 April 2007, the BTRC demanded a payment of more than 300 million taka (about 2.7 million euros) from the privately owned station for broadcasting illegally, on pain of losing its allocation of airtime. *ETV* asked for a ruling by the High Court which granted a stay of execution, putting the case on hold.

The station's CEO, Abdus Salam, indicated that he had documentation proving that it had paid all fees and costs up to 2012 and told a news conference on 15 March he was surprised to receive

such an order, since the station had been broadcasting since 2007.

Launched in April 2004, *ETV* was forced to stop broadcasting in August 2002 by the Supreme Court, which ruled that its licence was invalid. It resumed transmissions in December 2006.

Threats from Awami League

Fearing for their lives, 19 Pirojpur-based reporters went to the city's main police station on 14 March to make statements and request police protection from local Awami League leaders and supporters who had threatened to kill them at the previous day's rally because of recent critical coverage of two local Awami League parliamentarians, A.K.M.A. Awal (also known as Saidur Rahman) and Anwar Hossain.

The Awami League leaders and members had warned the journalists that if they dared to criticize the two parliamentarians again, they would be expelled from the city or they would be "chopped into pieces and buried."

The threats were prompted by coverage of claims by Awami League representatives in small towns in the Pirojpur area accusing the two parliamentarians of corruption, high-handedness and favouritism. The reports were carried by several Dhaka-based national dailies and privately-owned TV channels.

The 19 journalists who filed complaints are **Mahmud Hossain** of [United News of Bangladesh \(UNB\)](#), **Muniruzzaman Nasim Ali** of [Dainik Ittefaq](#), **S.M. Pervez** of [Dainik Jugantor](#), **A.K. Azad** of [Dainik Sangbad](#), **Fashiul Islam Bacchu** of [Dainik Samakal](#) and [Channel-i TV](#), **Khaled Abu** of [Dainik Amadher Shomoy](#), **Rezaul Islam Shamim** of [Dainik Amar Desh](#), **Shirina Afroz** of [Dainik Kaler Kantho](#) and [Ekushey TV](#), **Mizanur Rahman** of *Dainik Shakaler Khabar*, **Shafiqul Islam Milan** of [ATN Bangla TV](#), **Rashid Al Munan Shujan** of [NTV](#) and [Dainik Destiny](#), **Nahid Ahmed Reaz** of [RTV](#), **Abdur Razzak Chowdhury** of [Diganta TV](#), **Nure Alam Siddiqui** of *Independent TV*, **H.M. Jewel** of [Mohona TV](#), **Ziaul Haque** of [Shomoy TV](#), **Humayun Kabir** of [Islamic TV](#), **Sohel Billal Kajal** of [Dainik Janata](#) and **Mashiur Rahman Rahat** of the weekly *Baleshwar*.

Censored broadcasts

In a separate development, the government ordered the Cable Operators' Association of Bangladesh (COAB) to block transmission of three privately-owned TV stations – [Ekushey Television \(ETV\)](#), [Bangla Vision](#) and [Islamic TV](#) – on 12 March to prevent them from providing live coverage of a major rally by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in Dhaka.

The suspension lasted three and a half hours and was lifted at 6:30 p.m., an hour after BNP leader Khaleda Zia had finished addressing the rally. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission had urged the TV stations on 10 March not to broadcast the rally live.
