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literature.

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December 21, 2015

Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write on behalf of several leading organizations that represent writers and publishers and defend freedom of expression to convey our deep concern regarding a group of targeted Bangladeshi writers, bloggers, and publishers who are in urgent danger due to their secular beliefs and writings. Five among them have been killed by Islamist extremist groups this year alone, and dozens more have been publicly threatened. The government of Bangladesh has not provided adequate protection to those at risk and, in some cases, has promoted the idea that these bloggers should self-censor in order to deter attacks against them—or that they should leave the country. In what appears to be a concession to appease Islamist groups, Bangladeshi officials have also arrested secular bloggers on charges of insulting religious sentiments in the past.

We write to urge the U.S. government to provide humanitarian parole for a limited number of high-profile Bangladeshi secularists at imminent risk of attack. The dire situation that these writers face fits the criteria and high threshold applicable to the granting of humanitarian parole.

We understand that these visas are designated for emergency circumstances in which there is no other recourse for the individuals at risk. This situation applies here. These writers are unable to seek protection from their own government and are under threat of deadly attack from identifiable non-state groups who have acted on their threats and rhetoric repeatedly in the past. Humanitarian parole is these writers' only option, as they are otherwise unable to leave the country. As they are still in their own country, they do not qualify for assistance from UNHCR and are not displaced. These visas would provide the only form of relief in this situation. If the United States is unable to grant humanitarian parole to all writers facing these circumstances, we would urge you to mobilize likeminded governments so that other international placements can be secured, including in countries that can offer expedited refugee determinations.

As human rights and free expression organizations, we have received numerous requests from Bangladeshi bloggers, who have written to us in the hope that we can help by providing them with avenues for relocation. The State Department is deeply committed to securing internet freedom, and a visible effort to protect these individuals—many of whom do their principal work online—would be a powerful gesture of support to a community that is paying the highest price for the exercise of their freedom online. As non-governmental organizations, we do not provide legal advice or representation, and cannot secure visas for these

individuals. Due to these constraints, we are writing to you to highlight the extremely dangerous nature of their situation and to ask for humanitarian parole that will prevent their deaths. Parole determinations would be made on a case-by-case basis, following an individual assessment. Should parole be secured, we stand ready to mobilize our networks to assist these writers once they arrive in the United States.

Established Pattern of Killings Proving a Compelling Emergency

The fears of these bloggers are well-founded and substantiated by the regular pattern of killings and attacks on other bloggers and publishers of secular works in Bangladesh this year:

- On February 26, 2015, Avijit Roy, a dual Bangladeshi-American citizen, writer, and founder of the *Mukto Mona* blog, was murdered by a group of men wielding machetes as he was leaving a book fair during a visit to Dhaka. His widow, Rafida Bonya Ahmed, was also injured in the attack as she tried to help him.
- On March 30, 2015, secular blogger Washiqur Rahman was killed by a group of men armed with machetes when he was leaving his house for work in Dhaka.
- On May 12, 2015, secular blogger Ananta Bijoy Das was murdered by masked men with machetes in the town of Sylhet on his way to his work. Das had applied for a Swedish visitors' visa, but the government had turned down his visa request in April.
- On August 7, 2015, secular blogger Niloy Neel was hacked to death in his home in Dhaka.
- On October 31, 2015, Faisal Arefin Dipan, a publisher of books including those written by Roy, was murdered by machete-wielding assailants in Dhaka. On the same day, another publisher, Ahmedur Rashid Tutul, and two other writers were attacked and seriously wounded.

Atmosphere of Impunity and Hostility in Bangladesh

Islamist extremist groups like Ansar al-Islam, the Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) have claimed responsibility for these killings. ABT and other Islamist groups have published multiple "hit lists" consisting of the names of secular bloggers, writers, and publishers that they have vowed to kill. The lists, which originally started out as a published list of names of individuals that the group wanted to have arrested for their writings and beliefs, contain the names of those killed thus far. Additionally, some of the individuals who have contacted our organizations directly have been named in these lists and/or have received death threats via mobile phone or social media, and fear for their lives. Despite the arrests of several alleged perpetrators, the violent extremists who have targeted religious groups, foreigners, and these secular bloggers remain at large, leading to an atmosphere of impunity and contributing to a hostile environment in which many secular bloggers and publishers are self-censoring and living in hiding in fear for their lives.

Up to this point, the government of Bangladesh has proved unable to stop these attacks and provide the necessary security to prevent future attacks, leaving these bloggers and publishers with no recourse to guarantee their safety within the country. The United States can help safeguard these bloggers and publishers' lives through a recommendation that the Department of Homeland Security grant humanitarian parole to enable relocation to the United States. A number of our organizations are trying to provide emergency financial and other assistance, but our efforts are being hindered by the difficulty of securing visas for the individuals affected.

We understand that humanitarian parole is a highly discretionary authority that the U.S. government is able to provide in limited circumstances. As demonstrated above, this relief is applicable here. Freedom of speech is a fiercely protected American right, and indeed holds an elevated level of constitutional protection in our country. These extremist groups pose a threat not only to writers in Bangladesh, but have proven that they are willing to

attack and kill American citizens, and to threaten writers outside of Bangladesh's own borders. Providing this tangible and essential support for the right to free expression worldwide strengthens our own democracy and upholds our commitment to prevent human rights abuses. We respectfully urge you to provide humanitarian parole for these writers as soon as possible so they may live and work free of intimidation and fear of death.

We thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

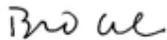
Respectfully,



Suzanne Nossel
Executive Director
PEN American Center



Delphine Halgand
U.S. Director
Reporters Without Borders



Brad Adams
Executive Director of Asia Division
Human Rights Watch



Elisa Massimino
President and CEO
Human Rights First



Daniel Calingaert
Executive Vice President
Freedom House



Henry Reese
Co-founder
City of Asylum Pittsburgh



Michael De Dora
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Geoff Shandler
Chair, International Freedom to Publish
Committee
Association of American Publishers

Cc: Marcia Bernicat, U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh
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Nisha Desai Biswal, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs
Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor