

United Nations Human Rights Council, 39th Session (10-28 September 2018)
Universal periodic review: Bangladesh
Speaker: Humanists UK¹ representative, Dr David Harvey

We welcome the recommendations from multiple member states that Bangladesh take measures to combat religious intolerance and protect freedom of belief. Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right as laid out in Article 18 of the UDHR.²

It is concerning that religious intolerance is on the rise in Bangladesh. Since 2013, there has been a large number of attacks against humanist bloggers and other activists, with Islamists murdering them, often with machetes, on the streets, and with impunity. Most recently, Shahzahan Bachchu, a publisher of humanist texts and poetry, was shot dead in June this year.³ Mr Bachchu was a well-known secularist whose life had been under threat for some time.

At the same time, the law of Bangladesh criminalises blasphemy, and the Government has jailed a number of humanists on this basis. At an event we held in the UK Parliament this summer we heard from one Bangladeshi blogger called Asif Mohiuddin who was stabbed by Islamists only to then be jailed by the Government for blasphemy, and find himself in the same jail cell as one of his attackers.

Any attempt to limit freedom of expression with respect to religion or belief must be resisted and Bangladesh must remain steadfast in maintaining its secular constitutional character. Bangladesh must repeal its laws that criminalise blasphemy, and instead recognise people's rights to peaceful freedom of expression.

We also urge Bangladesh to prosecute those who murder humanist bloggers. We are concerned by reports that authorities repeatedly delayed pressing charges against those suspected of committing the murder of humanist blogger Avijit Roy.⁴ Anyone suspected of murder must be brought to trial as soon as possible to ensure the timely carriage of justice.

Thank you.

¹ Humanists UK recently changed its name from the British Humanist Association.

² <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

³ <https://humanism.org.uk/2018/06/12/humanist-writer-murdered-in-bangladesh/>

⁴ <https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladesh-criticized-for-slow-progress-blogger-murders/3744833.html>