

16 February 2022

## **Bangladesh: Physical assault and ongoing threats against woman human rights defender Mariyam Akhter Pakhi and her family members**

On 10 February 2022, a [press conference](#) was organised by leaders of the *Subornogram Foundation*, a civil society organization in Bangladesh. The press conference was aimed at demanding the security and well-being of woman human rights defender **Mariyam Akhtar Pakhi** and her family, who were physically assaulted in their home in Narayanganj district by local leaders of Awami League, the ruling party of Bangladesh. Since then, Mariyam Akhter Pakhi and her family have been forced to live in a rented house and have been unable to return to their residence due to persistent threats by the assailants.

[Mariyam Akhtar Pakhi](#) is a woman human rights defender and headmistress of Mayadwip Shishu Patshala, a school for children belonging to low-income households, in particular those coming from the fishing communities in Mayaswip island in Nunertek village. The school was founded by the local social organization *Subornogram Foundation* in 2007 with the intention of providing free education to vulnerable children.

On 22 January 2022, woman human rights defender Mariyam Akhter Pakhi, was [attacked](#) by a local leader of the ruling party of Bangladesh Awami League. The local leader, Mohammad Hashem, along with at least 20 men armed with knives, hockey sticks and other weapons, forcefully entered Mariyam Akhter Pakhi's residence around 8:45 pm, and physically assaulted her and her family members. She and her elderly mother, two brothers and her infant daughter were severely injured in the attack. The men also looted the household and took away gold ornaments and 50,000 Bangladeshi Taka in cash, and set fire to the house. The woman human rights defender filed a complaint regarding the incident at Sonargaon Police Station and it was registered under Case no. 32, dated 23 January 2022. A charge-sheet filed by the police was also sent to the Narayanganj Court on 31 January 2022.

Following the attack, due to the persistent threats by local leaders of Awami League, the woman human rights defender is living in a rented house in Sonargaon since 28 January 2022. Her relatives and neighbours from Mayadwip Shishu Patshala have informed her that the attackers have threatened to kill the family if they return to their residence. Witnesses have also observed some men standing guard outside the woman human rights defender's original residence. The woman human rights defender said that the school had been receiving various threats from the local leaders to shut it down. She believes that the attack on her and her family is a result of continuing the school's operations despite the threats.

This is not the first time that human rights members associated with Mayadwip Shishu Patshala have come under attack. The school building faces the threat of collapsing due to erosion by the River Meghna, in Sonargaon, Narayanganj, which is directly linked to the sand mining. It has been reported that Mohammad Hashem is involved in illegal sand mining on Mayadwip island, putting the school building at further risk of destruction. Due to the school's continues operations, it has become very difficult for Mohammad Hashem and his accomplices to carry out illegal mining in the area. From 2010 to 2013, residents of Mayadwip had participated in a movement to save their

island against illegal sand mining, led by [Shahed Kayes](#), founder of the school, poet and human rights defender. The movement was successful in obtaining a Supreme Court order against sand mining in the area that threatens the lives of the inhabitants of Mayadwip. Since then, Shahed Kayes has faced multiple threats and attacks by Mohammad Hashem and other local leaders of Awami League who have been engaged in illegal sand mining in the area. In 2013, Front Line Defenders also issued an urgent appeal against the attacks faced by human rights defender Shahed Kayes.

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the attack on woman human rights defender Mariyam Akhter Pakhi and her family, as it believes it to be in response to her legitimate human rights work to provide education to children from low-income households, as well as her work challenging illegal mining. Front Line Defenders is also deeply concerned about the ongoing threats against Mariyam Akhter Pakhi and her family, which have made it extremely difficult for the woman human rights defender to return to her original residence and endangered her, and her families, security and well-being.

**Front Line Defenders urges the relevant authorities in Bangladesh to:**

1. Immediately ensure the protection and well-being of woman human rights defender Mariyam Akhter Pakhi and her family, as well as Shahed Kayes, and assist them to safely return to their original residence in Mayadwip Island, Sonargaon, Narayanganj district;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the assault and threats against Mariyam Akhter Pakhi and her family, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Mariyam Akhter Pakhi and her family;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Bangladesh are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw attention to Article 6 (b and c): *“Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others: (b) As provided for in human rights and other applicable international instruments, freely to publish, impart or disseminate to others views, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms; (c) To study, discuss, form and hold opinions on the observance, both in law and in practice, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and, through these and other appropriate means, to draw public attention to those matters”*, and to Article 12 (1 and 2): *“(1) Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to participate in peaceful activities against violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms. (2) The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.”*

Please inform us of any actions that may be taken with regard to the above case.

Yours sincerely,



Andrew Anderson

Executive Director