



Human Rights Defenders Conference
**Odhikar stressed for establishing a nationwide HR Defenders Network
to effectively safeguard human rights**

Odhikar, with the support of the May 18 Memorial Foundation, organised a two-day Human Rights Defenders Conference on February 19–20, 2010 in the UBINIG Hridoypur Centre at Tangail. Odhikar’s human rights defenders, from 40 districts, took part in various sessions of the conference. Prominent women rights leader, Farida Akhter inaugurated the conference by lighting oil lamps. The inauguration was presided over by Odhikar Secretary, Adilur Rahman Khan. UBINIG Director Shima Das Shimu; Member of the Editorial Board of Fortnightly Chinta, Mustain Zahir and Odhikar Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan gave welcome speeches at the inaugural session.



Farida Akhter said that many women in Bangladesh are victims of acid violence, rape, dowry, domestic violence and trafficking. She stressed that human rights defenders can effectively mitigate violence against women by playing an active role in the society.

Accepting the liability for defending human rights, Mustain Zair said, “we have to organise a movement by creating social awareness among the people in order to establish our denial logical rights”.

The speakers said that the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Human Rights Defenders Declaration are the safeguards to protect and promote rights of the people, though it is a debatable issue that how effective these instruments are. In the inaugural session defenders shared their experiences in regard to dealing with human rights related issues.

A video documentary on Tribunal against Torture was presented after the inaugural session. Odhikar organised this tribunal on 27 June 2009 to commemorate the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, 26 June, 2009.



Moderating the first session on the concluding day, Poet, Columnist and Political Analyst Farhad Mazhar said human rights defenders should not only monitor the rights recognised by the United Nations but should also be concerned with the rights required for an individual or a community to live a beautiful, natural and diversified life and to protect the sovereignty of countries such as Bangladesh. He said, a unity of thoughts and collective effort amongst HRDs are very important regardless of nation, group, caste and creed in order to ensure human rights. He urged HRDs to gear up human rights movement in Bangladesh to implement this mission.

He observed that it would be inaccurate to claim that the predominant challenge faced by human rights defenders in Bangladesh arose from the exercise of power endowed by law. In reality, a far more serious problem was the abuse of power by law enforcement agencies, and the focus of this abuse upon human rights defenders. He commented that a significant concern in Bangladesh, and one of Odhikar's primary focuses, involves custodial torture, remand and extrajudicial killings carried out by law enforcement agencies.

Odhikar Programme Coordinator, Sazzad Hussain, discussed the potential risks and challenges of HRDs in the first working session of the concluding day. He emphasised how Odhikar became a victim of harassment by the government. Human rights defenders of Odhikar have been tortured, assaulted and harassed while monitoring human rights violations, regardless of the regime. He added that Odhikar and its grassroots level human rights defenders faced intimidation and enormous challenges during the military-backed 'Caretaker' government.

Sazzad Hussain observed that one of the major challenges faced concerned the failure of the Bangladeshi government to establish an effective dialogue between itself and the human rights defenders community. The persecution of defenders stalls the start of any progressive communication, and the criminalisation of defenders as 'anti-state' fosters negative attitudes in

the community. He said that a better relationship between the government and human rights defenders is required if the human rights situation is to improve.

Sazzad informed those present that the government had stopped the 'Human Rights Defenders Training and Advocacy Programme' project of Odhikar for a second time without giving any specific reasons. Odhikar has been implementing the project, with approval from NGOAB on April 28, 2009, with assistance from the Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims (RCT) in Denmark as part of a large project on the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OP-CAT) funded by the European Union. After receiving EU approval for an extension of the OP-CAT project for three more months, on completion of its term on December 31, Odhikar submitted the project again on January 17, 2010 to NGOAB for extension. On February 11, the Bureau issued a letter rejecting the proposal for the extension of the project. Without giving any specific reasons, the letter said the Bureau could not allow the extension of the project as the Home Ministry had objected to it. The aims of the project are to educate human rights defenders in the OP-CAT and highlight the fact that the persisting acts of torture by law enforcement agencies go against both national and international laws.

Secretary of Odhikar, Adilur Rahman Khan, said the human rights record of Bangladesh has never been good. Successive governments have failed to address systemic human rights abuses, particularly those perpetrated by State actors. The poor and marginalised people have always been deprived from their rights. The issue of establishing human rights and a participatory democracy has been neglected. He said that the democratic and peace loving people of Bangladesh fought against the autocratic regime during 1982 and finally succeeded in 1990. While describing about the May 18 Memorial Foundation, he said, the most tragic and disgraceful incident in modern Korean history took place in Gwangju in May 1980. During the uprising, many citizens of Gwangju were killed by military. The Gwangju democratic uprising offered important inspiration to the traditional spirit of democratic uprisings in Korea. Today it is acknowledged and recognised as an active demonstration of the civil society's right to resist. He said that the spirit and ideals of May 18 are a noble heritage entrusted to all, to be elevated and celebrated. It is our responsibility to keep this history alive as a lesson for all humankind. This kind of democratic movement will also inspire others who are fighting for establishing democracy, peace and human rights around the world.

The second working session was moderated by Farida Akhter. In the second working session of the conference, Odhikar Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan discussed the creation of an effective network of human rights defenders. He said, monitoring of human rights situation would be easier if an active HRD network exists. It is a primary responsibility of the HRDs to stand beside the victims for support and also campaign for the remedies. Human rights defenders who seek to expose sensitive breaches of injustice commonly fall victim to ongoing intimidation by law enforcers, who wish to retain the impunity they hold in relation to such misdeeds. He commented that in some serious cases, human rights defenders have been victims of physical and mental torture at the hands of the state actors.

Human rights defenders in the conference also stressed the need for developing a network to effectively safeguard human rights. Specific recommendations were given by HRDs as to how this network could be active in terms of raising a collective voice against all sorts of human rights abuses. They mapped out a work plan for the network through group exercise.

Furthermore, the HRDs expressed their commitment to continue their struggle to uphold human rights and the movement for democracy in Bangladesh.

Major contents of the conference

The conference based its discussions on the following issues:

- Incidences of Human Rights Violations and root causes
- Concepts of human rights and the role of human rights defenders in relation to defending human rights.
- Risks and Challenges for Human Rights Defenders.
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Human Rights Defenders Declaration, articles and underlying principles
- The Role of Human Rights Defenders in upholding the obligations under CAT and the significance of signing OPCAT.
- Awareness and discussion of the relevant laws and policies relating to human rights.
- Definition of Fundamental Rights, analysing differences between fundamental rights and human rights and examining the Constitution of Bangladesh in comparison to UDHR and other international instruments to see the position of human rights as fundamental rights in the Constitution of Bangladesh.
- Determining strategies to develop human rights sensitivity among the stakeholders and the community.
- Defending Human Rights: Action for the Future.

Characteristic Features of Human Rights Defenders

Though the discussions, and based on Odhikars previous training exercise with HRDs the following conclusions regarding HRDs in Bangladesh can be drawn:

- HRDs are idealistic, with strong motivation and commitment to social change and justice through legal or political means
- HRDs are more often non-lawyers and play significant role in advocacy and education programmes.
- HRDs are more often associated with non-governmental organisations.
- Their primary work is monitoring and giving legal advice for, or representation of, poor people and other disadvantaged or marginalised populations.
- Their work includes community education, human rights documentation, legislative advocacy and legal research on a range of issues.
- The most common civil and political rights issues involve fair trials and protecting the rights of the victims and accused, whether for political or common crimes.

Objectives of Human Rights Defenders

The most effective human rights defending organisations have a clearly stated objective or set of objectives, and have appropriate strategies to achieve them. However, practice shows that organisations that find a narrow set of achievable objectives lead to more success rates than those that have wide-ranging, comprehensive goals, even when clearly defined.

It is believed that human rights defenders should pursue the following goals:

- Ensuring that the principles, rights and responsibilities enshrined in the Constitution are respected, promoted, protected and fulfilled;

- Building respect for the rule of law and constitutional democracy;
- Enabling the vulnerable and the marginalised to assert and develop their rights;
- Promoting gender equality and opposing all forms of unfair discrimination;
- Contributing to the development of human rights jurisprudence; and
- Contributing to the social and economic transformation of society.

Achieved Results

The main target group of this conference was the grassroots level human rights defenders. Participants from 40 districts were present in the conference. This conference helped the grassroots level defenders to initiate a network and a vibrant environment prevailed as they shared experiences, risks taken and challenges overcome. Thus, the results that were achieved from the conference are as follows:

- Human rights defenders and community people from 40 districts of Bangladesh were sensitised about the concept of human rights culture and democratisation process.
- A network of human rights defenders has been developed.
- Knowledge and skills of each and every participant on rights issues have been enhanced.
- Participants received material on human rights, laws relating to human rights, which will assist them to carry out human rights activities independently.
- A sustainable grassroots movement for the protection and promotion of human rights has been created.

Conclusion

At the end of the conference, the participants shared their opinions and experiences. Most of the participants expressed their wish to organise more sharing meetings and conferences on human rights issues at the district level. The significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Declaration of Human Rights Defenders were comprehensively discussed. In the conference, the defenders expressed their commitment to set up an active human rights defenders network countrywide in order to work actively in the human rights field.

This conference has given Odhikar an opportunity to develop network human rights defenders, which is hoped, will be beneficial to the communities, for future work. The network established between the human rights defenders and Odhikar will continue which will assist the organisation its local-level activities to reduce human rights violations across the country.