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Bangladesh

## WPFDF Celebrated in Bangladesh

It's difficult time for Bangladesh. A state of emergency is in place for almost four months now. Though there have been no apparent restrictions on the media, the state of emergency can be felt in the rather subdued and cautious manner the media is behaving these days. US Ambassador in Bangladesh Patricia Butenis did not miss to mention it while speaking as the chief guest in a seminar organized to commemorate the World Press Freedom Day 2007 in Dhaka on 3 May. She commented, "The prevailing state of emergency has created uncertainty for the journalists as they are struggling to find a way past the informal controls on media freedom."

Mass-Line Media Centre (MMC) in collaboration with UNESCO Dhaka and *Manusher Jonno* organized the two-day celebration on 3-4 April comprising a number of seminars and roundtable meeting.

Emergency however is certainly not the only problem facing the press in Bangladesh. According to a survey by MMC, the last 10 years saw the killing of 14 journalists across the country while 4 media men were killed in 12 months from May 06 to April 07. During the same period (12 months) 158 newsmen were injured in the line of duty, 257 were assaulted, cases were pressed against 119, 6 were arrested, 91 were threatened, the seminar was told. As in many countries in the world, violence against media professionals constitutes the greatest threat to press freedom and in effect, freedom of expression in Bangladesh.

One commonly used tool to harass the journalists in Bangladesh has been defamation cases. Most editors and many reporters have dozens of defamation cases pressed against them by political bigwigs or businessmen with political clout. Reazuddin Ahmed, Editor of the English daily News Today and President of South Asia Free Media Association, urged the government to cancel the provision of charging journalists of criminal offences under the defamation law.

The speakers praised the courageous role of the journalists who have adhered to their professional duties at the face of constant pressure and enumerable odds. In the absence of any functioning democratic institutions, it is the media that has been doing the job of holding the government accountable to a great extent. The successive governments have resorted to the infamous Official Secrecy Act to hide their misdeeds and corruption from the journalists and in effect, the people. Rahat Khan, the editor of the Daily Ittefaq,

arguably the highest circulated vernacular newspaper, urged to do away with this law which is against the spirit people's right to information.

UNESCO Representative in Bangladesh Malama Meleisea, also the special guest of the inauguration ceremony, echoed the UNESCO Director General's concern for the security of journalists. If people's right to information and freedom of expression are to be ensured the freedom of the media needs to be secured, he argued. In this connection the UNESCO Director urged the government to expedite passages of two relevant laws, one concerning "Right to Information" and another that deals with "National Broadcasting" policy.

The inauguration session on May 3 was followed by two sessions of roundtable discussion. The theme of the first session was "Liberalization of Broadcasting Policy in Bangladesh: Present and Future Perspective", where the existing laws and policies relevant to the print and electronic media, specially the limitations of the laws and probable future recommendations for the future were discussed. A wide range of issues including terrestrial facility for private television channels, potential of the community radio in Bangladesh, giving autonomy to the state-run television and radio came up for discussion.

The theme of the second session was "Security Issues and Challenges of Women Journalists in Bangladesh". A number of well-known women media personalities including Baby Moudud who edits Weekly Bichitra, Tasmima Hossain, editor, Anannya, as well as a number of working women journalists from different parts of the country spoke about the challenges they have to encounter and win over. A souvenir published by UNESCO Dhaka and MMC was also launched on the occasion.