

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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August 10, 2010

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister's Office
Old Sangsad Bhaban
Tejagaon, Dhaka-1215
Bangladesh

Via facsimile: +880 2 8113244; +880 2 8111015

Re: Stop harassment of apparel industry demonstrators and union leaders

Dear Prime Minister:

We are seeking your immediate intervention to stop the serious harassment of trade union leaders and other labor rights activists and workers in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry who have been pressing for the right of workers to organize in unions and seeking increases in Bangladesh's minimum wage regulations.

On July 29, 2010, after tripartite negotiations with government, workers, and employers, the government raised the daily minimum wage from 1662 taka to 3000 taka. However, the action angered workers who claimed the increase is less than the amount needed to meet the rising cost of living for urban-based workers and fell far short of the increase that the workers, trade unionists, and NGO activists were demanding. As has occurred numerous times in the history of Bangladesh's RMG industry, on July 30 and 31, worker anger and frustration boiled over into the streets, with roads being blocked, vandalism and attacks against factories and properties taking place, and use of force by police and security forces that resulted in scores of injuries among protesting workers. Human Rights Watch condemns instances of violence by the protesters as well as incidents where security forces may have used excessive force to quell the protests.

Human Rights Watch is particularly concerned that these incidents are being used by the government to justify a crackdown on the work

of labor rights activists. On July 30, the government targeted the recognized Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), and accused BCWS leaders Kalpona Akhter, Babul Akhter, and Aminul Islam of inciting worker unrest during the protests. Long considered by independent and impartial international observers as a responsible and peaceful labor rights organization, BCWS has close ties with representatives of foreign apparel companies, NGOs, and international trade union and labor rights groups. The BCWS leaders have denied the charges against them.

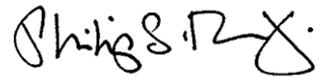
This latest development follows on the heels of other attempts by the government to restrict the work of BCWS and other trade unionists clamoring for an increase in the minimum wage. On June 3, the government's NGO Affairs Bureau (NAB) revoked the NGO registration of BCWS, effectively denying its legal right to exist and operate. Government officials were ordered by the Director General of NAB to seize BCWS's office and property, and their foreign donations account frozen. On June 16, Aminul Islam, who was later charged in the July 30 prosecutions, was detained by National Security Intelligence officers and says he was coerced into signing a self-incriminating statement admitting responsibility for worker unrest and illegal activities. He has publicly stated that he was severely beaten in detention and allegedly threatened with death before he managed to escape. Aminul Islam is currently in hiding.

As a result of this recent history, BCWS leaders have told us and others that they are worried about their own physical safety, as well as that of their families and colleagues. We urge you to act swiftly to encourage prosecutorial authorities to either drop the charges against BCWS leaders or, if they have lawfully obtained evidence justifying a trial, to accord them a fair and expeditious trial. The prosecutorial authorities should examine the credibility and legitimacy of any evidence they have gathered. We also urge an immediate and impartial investigation into the claims by Aminul Islam that he was tortured in detention, and a commitment to hold accountable any officers found to have committed such abuses and that no evidence obtained by torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment will be used in any legal proceedings (except against those who carried out any torture).

Furthermore, we call on you to publicly guarantee the safety and security of labor rights activists from BCWS and other trade union organizations who lawfully protested against their conditions of employment. The government has engaged in a harsh rhetorical campaign against the protesters, branding them as "provocateurs," "saboteurs," and even "terrorists" and claiming they incite violence and unrest in the RMG sector, appearing to allege, without providing any evidence that the protestors are responsible for the violence.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to an opportunity to discuss these matters further.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Phil Robertson". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "P" and a stylized "R".

Phil Robertson
Deputy Director, Asia division

cc: Sahara Khatun, Minister of Home Affairs
Dipu Moni, Minister of Foreign Affairs