

09 January 2020

Bangladesh: Killing attempt against Sarwar Ali

On 5 January 2020, after forcibly entering his house, two unidentified men attempted to kill human rights defender Sarwar Ali while holding his family hostage.

Dr Sarwar Ali is one of the pioneer leaders of the human rights movement in Bangladesh. He is a Trustee of the Liberation War Museum and a member of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, the only global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives which connects past struggles to contemporary human rights movements. He campaigned for the trial of war criminals and has also been involved in anti-nuclear movements.

On 5 January 2020, at around 10:00pm, two men in their late 20s entered the building where Sarwar Ali and his family live. The men first went to the second floor of the building where Sarwar Ali's daughter, Sayma Ali, resides with her husband, Humayun Kabir. On realising that the human rights defender did not live in the house, one of the assailants stayed back, holding the daughter and her husband hostage at knifepoint, while the other went to the floor above. When Sarwar Ali opened the door, the knife wielding attacker grabbed him and seeing his wife Makhduma Nargis behind him, threatened to kill her if she screamed for help.

In the meantime, Humayun Kabir and Sayma Ali managed to break free of the assailant holding them and pushed him out of the house, locked the door and immediately called the emergency police helpline. Hearing the commotion, two neighbours came out of their homes and tried to confront and catch the attackers, to no avail. The incident left Sayma Ali, Humayun Kabir, Makhduma Nargis and the two neighbours with minor injuries.

Sarwar Ali filed a case at the Uttara Paschim Police Station the following day. The police detained the building's security guard and the driver of one of the building's residents, and the two were sent on a two-day remand on 7 January 2020.

As the attackers did not steal anything, Sarwar Ali strongly suspects that they were members of a militant group who consider him a threat to their ideologies.

Front Line Defenders is concerned for the safety of human rights defender Sarwar Ali and it condemns the attack against him, which it believes is solely motivated by his peaceful human rights activities.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Bangladesh to:

1. Ensure that the ongoing investigation into the attempted killing and attack against Sarwar Ali and his family, be prompt, thorough and impartial, with a view to bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of Sarwar Ali as well as of the members of his family;
3. 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, including judicial harassment.