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Bangladesh: Six student human rights defenders arbitrarily detained and forced to announce withdrawal of protest program

On the 26th to 28th July 2024, six student human rights defender namely: **Nahid Islam, Abu Bakar Majumder, Asif Mahmud, Sarjis Alam, Hasnat Abdullah, and Nusrat Tabassum** reportedly have been arbitrarily detained under custody of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's (DMP) Detective Branch (DB) and coerced to announce the withdrawal of their protest programmes through a video message sent to media from the DB office at around 8:00 PM on 28 July 2024.

Nahid Islam, Abu Bakar Majumder, Asif Mahmud, Sarjis Alam, Hasnat Abdullah, and Nusrat Tabassum are students and dedicated human rights defenders and National Coordinators of the Students Against Discrimination Movement. Nahid Islam is from the Sociology Department, Abu Bakar Majumder from the Geography Department, Asif Mahmud from the Linguistics Department, Sarjis Alam is affiliated with the Zoology Department, Hasnat Abdullah is from the English Department, and Nusrat Tabassum is from the Political Science Department of Dhaka University.

Students Against Discrimination Movement is a student led protest demanding reform of the present quota system in government jobs. A total 56 percent of first and second class government jobs in Bangladesh entailed quotas. 30 percent of the total reserved for the descendants of 'freedom fighters'. This quota has been widely criticised especially by the students, stating that it create a discriminatory system and allegedly used to recruit students affiliated with the ruling party. Following widespread protests in 2018, the Government of Bangladesh abolished all quotas with an executive order. However, on 5 June 2024, the High Court ordered the Government to reinstate the quota with the power of any adjustment they want to make.

Since 01 July 2024, the protests have escalated in several university campuses. The protests was met with a severe crackdown from the authorities involving ruling party goons, police and paramilitary forces from Rapid Action Battelion (RAB) and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB). It has reportedly resulted in the deaths of at least 250 people with thousands more injured. With the internet shutdown for almost a week, suspicion remains about many more killings. Since 18 July 2024, local media reported over 10000 people, including many students been arrested in a mass arrest spree.

On 28 July 2024, at around 5:00 AM, woman human rights defender Nusrat Tabassum from Dhaka University had been reportedly picked up by individuals claiming to be from Dhaka Metropolitan Police's DB at her cousin's home in Mirpur.

On 27 July 2024, two more student human rights defenders Sarjis Alam and Hasnat Abdullah were picked up and brought to the DB office. The Additional Commissioner of the

DB claimed in a press conference that the student human rights defenders have been brought to their custody to ensure their safety, however the commissioner did not clear it whether they have been arrested. While the family members were not allowed to even enter into the DB office on 28 July 2024, they were allowed to meet the students on 29 July - only after their video message of withdrawal of their protest program been covered in media.

On 26 July 2024, at around 4:00 PM, human rights defenders Nahid Islam, Asif Mahmud and Abu Bakar Majumder were forcefully taken from Gonoshasthaya Kendra Hospital by the police in plainclothes in Dhaka and taken to custody of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police's DB. Nahid and Asif were undergoing treatment Gonoshasthaya Kendra Hospital while Abu Bakar was accompanying them. Police also took away their phones.

Front Line Defenders condemns the arbitrary detention and coercion of student human rights defenders Nahid Islam, Abu Bakar Majumder, Asif Mahmud, Sarjis Alam, Hasnat Abdullah, and Nusrat Tabassum by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police in an attempt to repress their human rights work and target legitimate students protests in Bangladesh.

Front Line Defenders urges the relevant authorities in Bangladesh to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Nahid Islam, Abu Bakar Majumder, Asif Mahmud, Sarjis Alam, Hasnat Abdullah, and Nusrat Tabassum.
- Ensure the physical and psychological safety and well-being of Nahid Islam, Abu Bakar Majumder, Asif Mahmud, Sarjis Alam, Hasnat Abdullah, and Nusrat Tabassum while they remain in custody.
- To secure their immediate access to their families, legal representation, and any medical care they may require.
- End to all forms of harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary detention of student human rights defenders in Bangladesh. The rights to freedom of expression, assembly, and association must be respected and protected.
- Conduct independent and transparent investigation into the arbitrary detention and coercion of these student human rights defenders.