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The Caretaker government must stop the on going human rights violations by its law enforcing forces: Human Rights in Bangladesh seminar at the House of Lords

A well attended seminar on Bangladesh titled 'Human Rights in Bangladesh' was held today (Tuesday 24 July 2007) in Committee room 2 at the Houses of Lords, organised by the International Bangladesh Foundation and chaired by Lord Avebury, the Vice Chair of All Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group and Chairman of International Bangladesh Foundation . The seminar was attended by MPs, MEP, Peers, and representatives of human rights organisations including Commonwealth Secretariat, Liberation, Saferworld, Ahmadiyya Muslim Association, International Crisis Group, Jago Bangladesh, London School of Economics, and University of London.

Lord Avebury in his opening remarks said, Whilst attention has rightly been focused on the caretaker government's strategy for genuinely free and fair elections; the reformation of the political system and the eradication of corruption, there is concern also about problems of human rights. The establishment of a national human rights commission, promised by the government, was a priority. Meanwhile, causes of concern included the detention of a large number of people, and lack of prosecutorial and judicial capacity to hold trial promptly; allegations of torture in custody, particularly the death under torture of the indigenous leader Cholesh Ritchil and the torture of journalist Tasneem Khalil; the imprisonment of Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, a British Bengali citizen; failure to bring to justice terrorists who committed outrages during the last government, the need to curb the activities of fanatics who stir up religious hatred, and restrictions on the freedom of political parties to decide freely on how to democratise themselves.

Mr Ashraf Uddin, the Acting High Commissioner for Bangladesh gave a comprehensive presentation on the Caretaker Government's commitment to minority and human rights in its reform plans. He said that a draft of the law on the Human Rights Commission was about to be circulated to stakeholders for consultation. He was followed by Baroness Uddin, Chair of All Party Group on Bangladesh; Amnesty International's South Asia researcher Abbas Faiz; Conservative Friends of Bangladesh Chair Ms Ann Main MP; Labour MP Rt Hon David Drew; Human Rights Watch Asia Director Brad Adams, and European Friends of Bangladesh Chair Dr Charles Tannock MEP.

Other contributors included Harry Cohen MP, Tower Hamlets Mayor Cllr Ann Jackson, Awami League representative M A Rahim, BNP representative Barrister Jushna Miah, Gano Forum's representative Cllr Ayub Korom Ali, Respect Cllr Lutfa Begum, Bangla TV's M S Alam Liton, ex Cllr Talal Karim and Akik Rahman Chowdhury.

British Parliamentarians expressed their concern about the undignified arrest last week of the former Prime Minister and Awami League president Sheikh Hasina and the denial of her application for bail. AL spokesperson said Sheikh Hasina was arrested and imprisoned under emergency powers that appear to deny her basic legal rights, including legal representation. Others criticised the use of emergency powers generally, as was undermining the rule of law, and it was said that some detainees had been wrongfully arrested and subjected to ill-treatment. It was suggested that the restrictions on political activity would have to be lifted before the local elections, now scheduled for January 2008. It is also suggested that a delegations parliamentarians should visit to Bangladesh to observe the situations.

Lord Avebury in his concluding remarks said, "We as fellow members of the Commonwealth, and with the ties of family and history that bind us together, want to see Bangladesh go through a new liberation, emerging with strong political, legal and human rights institutions".

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