



September 8, 2010

File: 20405-B02

Hon. Lawrence Cannon
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade
Government of Canada
125 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, ON, Canada K1A 0G2

Email: Cannon.L@parl.gc.ca

Dear Minister Cannon,

We are writing to request that the Canadian government take steps to secure the release of worker rights advocates who have been detained in Bangladesh.

As the New York Times reported on August 16, the Government of Bangladesh has arrested the leaders of a globally respected labour rights organization: the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS). BCWS Executive Directors Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter remain in detention.

The arrests, carried out on August 13, came in the wake of widespread unrest among Bangladeshi garment workers who were demanding an increase to the country's minimum wage. Bangladesh has the lowest wages of any major apparel producing country. Unrest peaked on July 30 of this year, when an announced wage increase for garment workers was significantly less than many anticipated. Unfortunately, instead of dealing effectively with the poor working conditions that underlie the recent turmoil, the Bangladesh government has responded by scapegoating peaceful, respected labour rights advocates, falsely accusing them of inciting riots.

The crackdown on BCWS leaders has been condemned by leading human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch, which has described the government's actions as "part of a campaign against labour right activists, union leaders, and workers who have been pressing for the right to organize unions and demanding increases in the minimum wage."

We are also concerned for the health and well-being of Ms. Akter and Mr. Akhter in detention. Bangladesh's security forces have an abysmal human rights record. The U.S. Department of State found, in its most recent human rights

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report, that "[a]lthough the constitution prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment, security forces including the RAB, military, and police frequently employed severe physical and psychological abuse during arrests and interrogations... Abuse consisted of threats, beatings, and the use of electric shock." Human Rights Watch noted that "[t]he police force has a well documented history of frequent human rights abuses, including use of arbitrary arrests and torture to extort money and extract confession. It is regarded as one of the most corrupt institutions in Bangladesh."

It is this police force, and specifically the Detective Branch, that has detained the BCWS leaders. Prior to the leaders' arrests, a BCWS staff person was detained and tortured in an effort to force him to give false evidence against himself and other BCWS leaders.

We ask that the Canadian High Commission in Bangladesh take steps to secure the release of labour rights advocates Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter without delay, and, on behalf of the Government of Canada, ask that the Government of Bangladesh refrain from any further intimidation, repression and harassment of peaceful labour and human rights advocates.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'K. Georgetti', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Kenneth V. Georgetti
President

cc. CLC Officers and Assistants
Mr. Robert McDougall, High Commissioner, High Commission of Canada to
Bangladesh