

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 15, 2006

Bangladeshi Journalist on Trial for Sedition

Cosponsor House Resolution 1080 to Save Shoaib

Choudhury

Dear Colleague:

We encourage you to join us in cosponsoring House Resolution 1080, which calls on the Government of Bangladesh to drop sedition charges pending against Bangladeshi journalist Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury. Mr. Choudhury faces these charges because of his belief in the importance of an interfaith dialogue between Jews and Muslims and articles he published critical of Islamic extremism. Under Bangladeshi law, sedition is a crime punishable by death. The introduction of this resolution coincides with the beginning of Mr. Choudhury's sedition trial. Please see the reverse side for an editorial in today's Wall Street Journal on Mr. Choudhury's case.

Mr. Choudhury is a journalist in Bangladesh known for his favorable views on expanding dialogue between Muslims and Jews and developing ties with Israel, and his criticism of the rise of Islamist parties in Bangladesh. Mr. Choudhury was detained in November 2003 at Zia International Airport in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on his way to board a flight bound for Tel Aviv, Israel, to participate in the annual Hebrew Writers Conference. Mr. Choudhury's passport was seized, along with considerable sums of money and several personal items. On that same day, police raided his home and newspaper office, seizing files and computers.

Since Bangladeshi law prohibits travel to Israel, Mr. Choudhury was first cited for a minor passport violation. He subsequently was charged with sedition, accused of espionage as an Israeli spy, and incarcerated for 17 months. He was subjected to harsh interrogation techniques and received no treatment for a debilitating case of glaucoma.

Despite public pledges from senior Bangladeshi government officials that all pending legal action against Mr. Choudhury would be dropped, the government pressed forward with its prosecution on charges of sedition. Mr. Choudhury won PEN USA's "Freedom to Write Award" and was presented with the American Jewish Committee's prestigious "Moral Courage Award" in absentia in Washington, D.C. In spite, or perhaps because, of these honors, Mr. Choudhury's continued harassment persisted. His newspaper offices were bombed by Islamic extremists in July 2006, and he was physically attacked by a mob in his office on October 5, 2006. Then a judge with alleged ties to an Islamic extremist group ruled that Mr. Choudhury would stand trial for sedition. His trial began Monday.

Congress must send a clear message: we cannot allow moderate voices in the Muslim world to be silenced. Please join us in cosponsoring H.Res. 1080 to urge the Bangladeshi government to drop all charges against Shoaib Choudhury. Contact Jeffrey Phillips with Rep. Kirk (5-4835) or Beth Tritter with Rep. Lowey (5-6506) to cosponsor or with any questions.

Sincerely,



Mark Steven Kirk

Member of Congress



Nita Lowey

Member of Congress

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'I Am Not Guilty'

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On Monday in a Bangladesh courtroom, a judge read the following charge to a defendant: "By praising the Jews and Christians, by attempting to travel to Israel and by predicting the so-called rise of Islamist militancy in the country and expressing such through writings inside the country and abroad, you have tried to damage the image and relations of Bangladesh with the outside world. For which, charges under section 295-A, 120-A, 124-A, 105-A and 108-A are brought against you. Are you guilty or not?"

Answered the defendant: "I am not guilty."

The defendant is journalist Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury. As editor of the Weekly Blitz, Mr. Choudhury wrote articles friendly to Israel and critical of Islamic militants, and sought to travel to Israel in 2003 for a writers' conference. He never made it. Instead, he was detained at the airport in Dhaka, imprisoned in solitary confinement and without trial for 17 months and denied medical treatment for glaucoma.

Mr. Choudhury was finally released in early 2005, largely thanks to pressure from Illinois Representative Mark Kirk. But the campaign against him, official and otherwise, never abated. The offices of his newspaper were bombed and later overrun by a mob. The government continued to press the charges. If convicted, Mr. Choudhury could be hanged.

The good news is that Congress is paying attention: Yesterday, Mr. Kirk and New York Democrat Nita Lowey introduced a resolution demanding the charges be dropped. That should get the attention of a government that receives \$64 million a year in American aid. The government of Bangladesh might also consider that the harm it claims Mr. Choudhury's journalism has done to its national "image" has, in fact, been wholly self-inflicted.