

First Floor Audrey House  
16-20 Ely Place  
London, United Kingdom  
EC1N 6SN  
Tel: +44(0)20 7618 4700  
Fax: +44(0)20 7618 4701

Kenneth Roth, *Executive Director*

**DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS**

Michele Alexander, *Development and Global Initiatives*  
Emma Daly, *Media (Acting)*  
Barbara Pirto, *Operations (Acting)*  
Joseph Saunders, *Program (Acting)*  
Bruno Stagno Ugarte, *Advocacy*  
Colin Mincy, *Chief People Officer*  
Dinah PoKempner, *General Counsel*  
James Ross, *Legal and Policy Director*

**DIVISION AND PROGRAM DIRECTORS**

Brad Adams, *Asia*  
Nicole Austin-Hillery, *United States*  
Eric Goldstein, *Middle East & North Africa (Acting)*  
Mausi Segun, *Africa*  
José Miguel Vivanco, *Americas*  
Hugh Williamson, *Europe and Central Asia*  
Heather Barr, *Women's Rights (Acting)*  
Shantha Rau Barriga, *Disability Rights*  
Richard Dicker, *International Justice*  
Lama Fakhri, *Crisis and Conflict*  
Bill Frelick, *Refugees' Rights*  
Arvind Ganesan, *Business and Human Rights*  
Steve Goose, *Arms*  
Amanda Klasing, *Women's Rights (Acting)*  
Zama Neff, *Children's Rights*  
Graeme Reid, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights*  
Daniel Wilkinson, *Environment and Human Rights (Acting)*

**ADVOCACY DIRECTORS**

Maria Laura Canineu, *Brazil*  
Louis Charbonneau, *United Nations, New York*  
Farida Deif, *Canada*  
Kanae Doi, *Japan*  
John Fisher, *United Nations, Geneva*  
Meenakshi Ganguly, *South Asia*  
Bénédictte Jeannerod, *France*  
Lotte Leicht, *European Union*  
Wenzel Michalski, *Germany*  
Måns Molander, *Sweden and Denmark*  
Elaine Pearson, *Australia*  
Yasmine Ahmed, *United Kingdom*

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

Amy Rao, *Co-Chair*  
Neil Rimer, *Co-Chair*  
Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, *Vice Chair*  
Oki Matsumoto, *Vice Chair*  
Amy Towers, *Vice Chair; Treasurer*  
Catherine Zennström, *Vice Chair*  
Bruce Rabb, *Secretary*  
Akwas Aidoo  
Lishan Aklog  
George Coelho  
Natasha Dolby  
Kimberly Marteau Emerson  
Loubna Freih  
Leslie Gilbert-Lurie  
Paul Gray  
Caitlin Heising  
Karen Herskovitz  
Susan Kane  
Betsy Karel  
David Lakhdir  
Louisa Lee-Reizes  
Alicia Miñana  
Joan R. Platt  
Shelley Frost Rubin  
Ambassador Robin Sanders  
Bruce Simpson  
Joseph Skrzynski AO  
Donna Slaight  
Siri Stolt-Nielsen  
Marie Warburg  
Andrew Zoll

12<sup>th</sup> of March 2021

Baroness Patricia Scotland  
Secretary-General  
The Commonwealth  
London, United Kingdom

**Re: Bangladesh**

Dear Secretary-General Scotland,

We write to you with deep concern over your recent statements praising Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Prime Minister Hasina has presided over an increasingly authoritarian, near- one-party state where the state authorities have carried out extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture with impunity, while threatening and arresting critics in the media, civil society and opposition for peaceful speech.

We were therefore astonished to read that you wrote in your 5 March opinion [piece](#) in advance of International Women's Day, "I have been impressed by the leadership demonstrated by female heads of government in the Commonwealth. Prime Ministers Mia Mottley of Barbados, Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh and Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand have all been rightly lauded for their able handling of the crisis, marked by coordinated action as well as compassion." You also [tweeted](#), "Join our #SheLeadsTheWay campaign ... by naming women who inspire you," and then went on to name Sheikh Hasina as one such woman.

Your praise came just days after the 25 February death of dissident writer Mushtaq Ahmed in custody. Ahmed was arrested in May 2020 for posting on Facebook that healthcare workers needed more personal protective equipment. He had been held in pre-trial detention for nine months during which it has been [credibly alleged](#) he was subjected to torture. After a public outcry, cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was granted bail soon after Ahmed's death. He described suffering severe torture after he was taken into custody and also said that Ahmed had been brutally beaten.

The Bangladesh government's response to Covid-19 has been to use the pandemic as a pretext to further censor free speech and the media, [threaten academic freedom](#), and arrest [artists](#), [students](#), [doctors](#), [political opposition members](#), and activists for [speaking out about the government's handling of the pandemic](#). This is neither compassionate nor inspiring.

When Sheikh Hasina was illegally detained and mistreated by the Bangladesh military in 2007-2008, Human Rights Watch spoke out strongly for her rights and that of the thousands of others across the political and civil society spectrum suffering grave abuses. Hasina promised

HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

HRW.org

Bangladeshis and the international community that she would make respect for rights her priority and that she would protect civil society and the media while ending rampant extrajudicial killings by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and other security forces.

However, since she became Prime Minister in 2009, RAB, the Bangladesh Border Guards, the police and other security services have all been enlisted in extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, threats, and intimidation against critics with [impunity](#). Despite consistent, well-documented evidence of enforced disappearances by Bangladesh security forces, the Bangladesh government refuses to acknowledge that the practice occurs at all. Extrajudicial killings by security forces are so normalized that MPs [have openly called for “crossfire” killings](#) on the parliament floor. This is no surprise, as Prime Minister Hasina and the ruling Awami League appear to have made it a priority to politicize the security forces by placing loyalists and cronies in key positions, as described in the recent Al-Jazeera [documentary](#), “All the Prime Minister’s Men.”

[The 2018 elections](#) in Bangladesh marked a dark turn towards authoritarian rule. The Awami League-led coalition won 96 percent of seats in parliament through massive intimidation of opposition members and supporters including politically motivated arrests. The [EU](#), [UK](#), [UN](#), and [US](#) all raised serious concerns over reports of election irregularities. Since the election, the Awami League has further entrenched its authoritarian control of the country, which now has no effective opposition.

Hundreds have been accused under the 2018 Digital Security Act which has also been used [to suppress the media](#) with nearly 200 journalists facing cases. Last year, authorities arrested a child under the Act simply for criticizing Prime Minister Hasina on Facebook. The government has made it clear that it is filtering and blocking what it calls “anti-government propaganda” to help [“control expression of ‘undesirable’ views.”](#)

Even on the protection of women and girls, one of Hasina’s signature human rights claims, the government is falling short. [Sexual and gender-based violence](#) is a serious problem in a country in which over 70 percent of married women or girls in Bangladesh have faced some form of intimate partner abuse. Yet only about 3 percent of those who seek legal remedy see a conviction. Despite promises, the government failed to pass a long overdue sexual harassment law or make amendments to the discriminatory rape law. Instead, the government hurriedly approved an amendment to [allow for the death penalty](#) for rape to quell [protests that broke out](#) after [several gang-rape](#) cases came to light. In the Commonwealth [Charter](#), member states reaffirmed their core values and principles, including upholding human rights, freedom of expression, the rule of law and the role of civil society. The Commonwealth website [states](#) that, “The Commonwealth Secretariat is the intergovernmental organisation that supports member countries to achieve the Commonwealth's aims of development, democracy and peace,” including to, among other things, “promote justice and human [rights](#) ... support decision-makers to make good laws ... help strengthen governance and build inclusive public institutions.”

We are therefore puzzled about the criteria you used to conclude that Prime Minister Hasina should be lauded for her leadership and singled out as an inspiring figure. As you know, this kind of notoriety has the effect of providing individuals such as Hasina with undeserved status, which is then used to increase domestic legitimacy and to ignore or even

silence critics. We were particularly surprised by your statements given your longstanding efforts to campaign for accountability at the International Criminal Court and for victims of abuse more generally.

This is a pivotal moment for the Commonwealth and others to stand with Bangladesh civil society, independent media, and those fighting for democracy. The Commonwealth should publicly call on Prime Minister Hasina and the Bangladesh government to end extrajudicial killings and disappearances, protect freedom of expression, repeal the Digital Security Act, and release journalists, critics, and activists who are in detention for speaking out. It should work with the Bangladesh government to better protect women and girls from abuse. We urge you to publicly clarify your comments.

Thank you for your consideration and we would be pleased to discuss this further with you.

Yours sincerely,

[signatures redacted]

Brad Adams  
Asia Executive Director

Yasmine Ahmed  
UK Director