

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 12, 2009

The Honourable Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Old Sangshad Bhaban
Tejgaon
Dhaka-1215
Bangladesh

Dear Sheikh Hasina:

We are writing to congratulate you and your colleagues on your peaceful electoral victories. We applaud your efforts to bring democracy, integrity and prosperity to Bangladesh.

As the first step in achieving these worthy goals, we urge your government to quickly drop all charges against Bangladeshi journalist Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury.

As you may know, forces from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government arrested Mr. Choudhury in November, 2003 on suspicion of anti-state activities and espionage while on his way to Israel to participate in a conference with the Hebrew Writers Union. It was our strong judgment that Mr. Choudhury was arrested for attempting to travel to Israel. Under Bangladeshi law, this was a crime punishable by three months in jail. Mr. Choudhury was instead incarcerated for seventeen months without arraignment. While imprisoned, he received no care for his debilitating glaucoma and suffered mistreatment by prison guards.

At the time of Mr. Choudhury's release on bail, we were assured by the Government that bail would preclude the dropping of all charges against him and the return of his passport and seized possessions. As such, we were dismayed to learn of the BNP's intent to fully prosecute Mr. Choudhury on treason, sedition and blasphemy charges. As you know, sedition is a capital crime under Bangladeshi law. Even a number of former Bangladeshi government officials noted that this case was inspired by radicals. Mr. Choudhury was beaten, and his office was bombed by Islamic extremists critical of his moderate views. No arrests were ever made for either of these incidents.


When the Caretaker Government took over, officials assured us that Mr. Choudhury's case would be dispensed with upon running its course through the criminal justice system. However, the government harassment only continued. The numerous judges and prosecutors involved in the case, some with alleged ties to Islamic extremist groups, continued to press forward, forcing Mr. Choudhury to appear in court more than forty times in the past forty months he has been out of prison. On March 18, 2008, the paramilitary police force, RAB, arrested Mr. Choudhury on false charges of drug possession and held him for hours without food or water. He was eventually released but forced to sign an affidavit giving permission to the RAB to enter his office or home at any time for any reason.

On March 13, 2007, the United States Congress overwhelmingly passed House Resolution 64, by a vote of 409-1, condemning such persecution and urging the government of Bangladesh to drop all charges against Mr. Choudhury. I have enclosed a copy of the resolution for your review. Despite this Congressional action and similar responses from the European Parliament, Canadian and Australian governments, journalists and human rights activists around the world, Mr. Choudhury continues to face the death penalty merely for attempting to travel to Israel and publicly advocating for interfaith dialogue. Furthermore, prominent human rights lawyers maintain that this case violates a number of Bangladeshi laws.

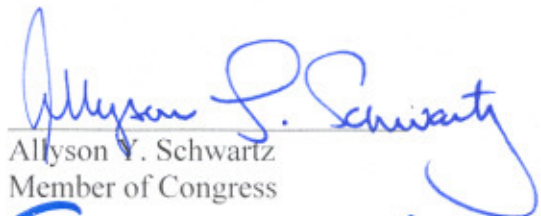
We strongly urge you to drop all charges against Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury to demonstrate your commitment establishing democracy, building a secular society and freeing Bangladesh from the corruption of past regimes that crippled the nation. Doing so will take a significant step toward restoring faith in the Bangladeshi government and removing a significant obstacle in Bangladeshi/American relations.

Congratulations again, and we look forward to your response.


Sincerely,



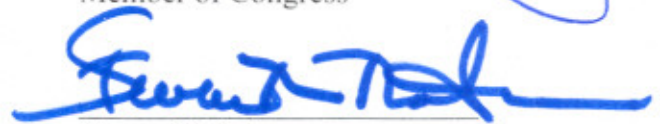
Mark Steven Kirk
Member of Congress



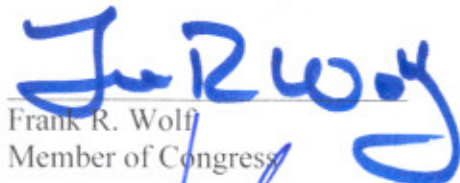
Allyson Y. Schwartz
Member of Congress



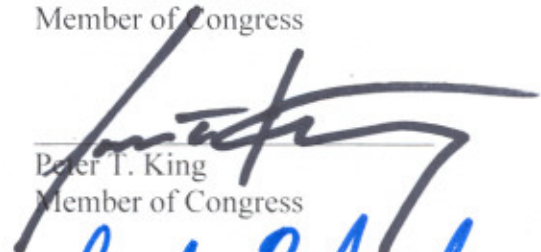
Trent Franks
Member of Congress



Steven R. Rothman
Member of Congress



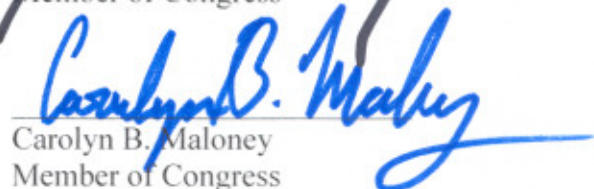
Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress



Peter T. King
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Carolyn B. Maloney
Member of Congress



Scott Garrett
Member of Congress



Thaddeus G. McCotter
Member of Congress

Enclosure

CC: The Honorable James F. Moriarty, United States Ambassador to Bangladesh