

Bangladesh Rights Advocate is Kidnapped and Assaulted for Protesting Sand Theft

- AP Peace Fellow is Unscathed but Leaves the Country -

Sonargaon, Bangladesh: In a shocking display of corporate intimidation, Shahed Kayes, a leading human rights defender in Bangladesh, was recently kidnapped by workers from two construction companies that are stealing river sand and threatening the livelihood of marginalized river communities. He was found several hours later, severely shaken and suffering from stab wounds.



Shahed Kayes is treated for wounds after his abduction

Mr Kayes, an AP partner, has repeatedly protested against the sand dredging, which is illegal. He was attacked on July 25, while travelling on a boat with a volunteer from his organization, the [Subornogram Foundation](#), and [Chris Pinderhughes](#), who was serving as an AP Peace Fellow at Subornogram. Chris, who graduated recently from New York University, raised the alarm and gave evidence to the police. He has since left the country.

The attack was clearly intended to discourage Mr. Kayes from speaking out against sand dredging by the two corporations, the Shahjalal Enterprise and

Four Point Trading & Construction Ltd. The dredging has affected fishing around Mayadip Island and threatens the communities that live there.

The sand thieves are also causing an environmental crisis. [Matthew Becker](#), who served at Subornogram last year as a Peace Fellow, pointed out in a blog: "The two companies, which are both owned by locals with a lot of political influence, have contracts to dredge the river for purposes of navigability but instead have been extracting (stealing) sand from the river banks, which causes mass erosion of both the riverbanks and the banks of the islands in the river. This causes greater instability in an area that is already feeling the effects of climate change, and can lead to increased flooding."

Mr. Kayes founded Subornogram in 2003 to serve the children of marginalized river communities - river gypsies, fishermen, Dalit cobblers and indigenous people - who find it hard to attend school because of poverty and caste discrimination. Subornogram opened the first-ever floating boat school for gypsy children (*Bede Bahar Vashaman Pathshala*)

in 2007.

"If we want to eliminate poverty, first of all we have to educate our people," says Kayes. "Now we are running 8 free schools for those non-privileged community children. We dream a time when all of our children will get education and will be more knowledgeable person and will lead a decent life, enjoy all the rights that they deserve as a human being."



Students from river communities study aboard one of Subornogram's floating boat schools

On the day of his kidnapping, Mr. Kayes and his two companions were travelling to Ramprasader Chor Island to visit the newest Subornogram school. Their boat was intercepted by two speedboats which tried to force them ashore on an island. When they noticed villagers congregating on the beach, the assailants tried to force Mr Kayes's boat back out into the river. They then pulled Mr Kayes onto their boat and sped off.



Sonargaon river gypsies and cobblers live on boats anchored near the shore

As soon as he reached land, Peace Fellow Chris Pinderhughes called a journalist known to Mr Kayes, and the event quickly turned into a major news story in Bangladesh. A search party of journalists and police found Mr. Kayes injured but alive. He was rushed to the local hospital where doctors treated multiple wounds to his arms and upper body.

A [communique from the Asian Human Rights Commission](#) confirmed that Mr. Kayes' abductors had been mining sand

near the Mayadip and Nunertek islands, and named two of the abductors as Zakir Hossain, the owner of Shahjalal Enterprise, and Md. Mohsin, an employee at the Four Point Trading & Construction Ltd. According to the Commission the attackers shouted threats at Mr Kayes during the attack: "You are fighting against us and we have lost lot of money because of your movement in our deals. We made the mistake of not killing you before. This time we will kill you."

The attack on Mr Kayes fits a pattern of violence by the companies against those who protest their illegal activities. Last year's Peace Fellow, Mathew Becker, also from New York University, [visited several villagers in hospital](#) who had been beaten up by company employees.

Yet Mr Kayes remained defiant after his ordeal and pledged to continue his advocacy. AP is committed to supporting him and will send a complaint on his behalf to Mrs. Margaret Sekaggya, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders.

- Read the blogs of [Chris Pinderhughes](#) (2013) and [Matthew Becker](#) (2012)
- Make a donation to a [Subornogram boat school](#)
- Read a call from the [Asian Human Rights Commission](#) urging protection for Shahed Kayes
- View [photos from the Mayadip Island and river communities.](#)

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