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Bangladesh Court Calls a Halt to the Persecution of River Gypsies

A vulnerable community is still imperiled by hunger

A court in Bangladesh has put an end to years of persecution against the River Gypsies (photo), one of the most vulnerable minorities in Bangladesh, by dismissing long-standing charges against Shahed Kayes, a prominent advocate for the Gypsies and partner of The Advocacy Project (AP).

The recent decision by the Comilla district court amounts to a stinging rebuke to local politicians and corporations, who had accused Mr Kayes of breaking the law after he exposed them for stealing sand from the Gypsies and other fishing communities, threatening food supplies.



The campaign against Mr Kayes (**seen in the center of the photo**) culminated in a **[violent attack in 2013](#)** that almost claimed the lives of Mr Kayes and an AP Peace Fellow. The assault provoked an international outcry and forced Mr Kayes to flee the country. He returned to Bangladesh early last year after almost six years of exile to resume his advocacy on behalf of the Gypsies, who are facing a serious shortage of food as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Kayes told AP in a Zoom meeting this week that he felt vindicated by the recent court decision. “I still have to be careful - but basically we won,” he said.

Mr Kayes launched his organization, **[The Subornogram Foundation](#)**, in 2003 to empower communities like the River Gypsies that live on the margins of society in Bangladesh, one of the world’s poorest countries.

Largely unknown outside Bangladesh until Mr Kayes took up their cause, the Gypsies live on boats and enjoy what seems at first sight to be an idyllic existence. But they have also faced peril from floods, discrimination, violence, poverty and hunger.



Mr Kayes registered an early success in 2008, when the government passed a law giving voting rights to the Gypsies. His attention was then drawn to a bloody dispute on Mayadip Island between Gypsies and local construction companies that were raiding the island to steal sand. Anyone who resisted was likely to be beaten and even killed.

In 2012 AP sent a Peace Fellow, Mathew Becker, to volunteer with Mr Kayes.

Mathew captured the picturesque life of the Gypsies in [photos](#) and [blogs](#), but also met with victims of the sand wars who were recovering in hospital ([photo](#)).

Thanks in large part to Mr Kayes' advocacy, the government of Bangladesh outlawed sand dredging in 2012, but this was ignored by the dredgers. The violence came to a head the following year, when Mr Kayes was returning from a visit to Mayadip Island with [Chris Pinderhughes, AP's 2013 Peace Fellow](#).

Their boat was forced to the shore by thugs employed by the dredgers. Mr Kayes was repeatedly stabbed and would probably have died had it not been for Mr Pinderhughes, who helped him to hospital and alerted the police before being hustled out of Bangladesh for his own safety.

Even after Mr Kayes left for South Korea the sand dredgers in Bangladesh kept up their campaign through the law courts.



AP continued supporting The Subornogram Foundation during Mr Kayes' absence and raised over \$1,500 to support floating schools that Mr Kayes started for Gypsy children ([photo](#)).

AP was also among several advocacy groups that vigorously protested to the United Nations human rights unit. The UN declined to criticize the attacks on Mr Kayes. Instead, three UN "rapporteurs" (on the rights to housing, food and poverty)

wrote to the Bangladesh government warning that the sand extraction on Mayadip Island was threatening the Gypsies' right to food.

Mr Kayes said this convoluted UN intervention had been "extremely effective" because it invoked rights that are taken seriously by the Bangladesh government. "It forced them to wake up and take action," he said. "It helped us a lot."

The situation on Mayadip further improved when a new MP who is more sympathetic to human rights and the Gypsies was elected in the district, opening the way for Mr Kayes to return home.

Looking back on his long struggle, Mr Kayes says he realizes that confrontation is not the only way to defend human rights: "I learned that if I was tactful I could also achieve results." He remains deeply grateful to AP for helping to save his life and supporting him through exile.

Meanwhile, the families on Mayadip are once again struggling with hunger as a result of isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Subornogram is exploring ways to boost local fishing and set up a community kitchen. AP will assign a Peace Fellow to support the project remotely and commit an initial \$500 to the start-up.

Scenes from [the River Gypsy Quilt](#)



Resisting the sand dredgers



Bringing in the catch



Gypsy girl cooking



Floating schools



Under the trees



Playing soccer

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This bulletin was written by [Iain Guest](#)



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