



Fighting Internet Shutdowns around the World

#KeepitOn: Joint letter on keeping the internet open and secure during the election in Bangladesh

**Re: Internet shutdown during Bangladesh's elections**

Your Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh

CC:

Minister of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology  
 Minister of State for Information and Communication Technology Division  
 Chairman of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission  
 Chairman, Members, and Secretariat of the Election Commission of Bangladesh

We are writing to urgently request that your offices ensure the stability and openness of the internet during the upcoming elections in Bangladesh. We have received reports that your government is tampering with the internet connection and intends to slow down broadband internet, downgrade mobile data from 4G to 2G, and block mobile banking apps. Free and open internet expands political discourse and is an indicator of a legitimate election. On behalf of the more than 170 organizations from over 60 countries that make up the #KeepitOn Coalition, **we implore you to keep the internet on.**

**Internet shutdowns harm human rights and economies**

Research shows that internet shutdowns and violence go hand in hand. [1], [2] Shutdowns disrupt the free flow of information and create a cover of darkness that shields human rights abuses from public scrutiny. Especially during elections, journalists and media workers cannot contact sources, gather information, or file stories without digital communications tools.[3] Citizens cannot receive critical information regarding polling stations, elections results among other issues. Justified for various reasons, internet shutdowns cut off access to vital information, e-commerce, and emergency services, plunging whole communities into fear. Disruptions also destabilize the internet's power to support small business livelihoods and to drive economic development. A 2016 study by the Brookings Institution, a prominent think tank, revealed that shutdowns drained \$2.4 billion from the global economy between 2015 and 2016. [4]

The open Internet has fostered unprecedented creativity, innovation, and access to information and other kinds of social, economic, cultural, and political opportunities across the globe. The

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technical means used to block access to information online often dangerously undermine the stability and resiliency of the Internet. **Internet shutdowns must never be allowed to become the new normal.**

**Disinformation and hate speech online are a threat to the democracy, peace, and stability of many countries including Bangladesh. However, there's no evidence that suggests that using broad and disproportionate measures like shutdowns and throttling will stop the spread of disinformation and propaganda online.**

In Bangladesh, extending access to the global internet remains a key driver to bridge digital divides and reach your commitments to achieve and implement the *Digital Bangladesh* Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. **We estimate a shutdown will cost your country close to US \$63,419,225 per day in direct economic costs, and will slow the realization of economic, social, and cultural rights broadly.** [5]

## Internet shutdowns violate international Law

A growing body of findings and resolutions hold that intentional disruptions to the internet violate international law. The UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly have passed, by consensus, multiple resolutions that unambiguously condemn internet shutdowns and similar restrictions on freedom of expression online. For example, the UN Human Rights Council in Resolution A/HRC/RES/32/13:

*Condemns unequivocally measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online in violation of international human rights law and calls on all States to refrain from and cease such measures.*

Experts from the United Nations, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Organization of American States (OAS), and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), declared that internet "kill switches" can never be justified under international human rights law, even in times of conflict. [6]

The UN Human Rights Committee, the official interpreter of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, emphasizes in General Comment no. 34 that restrictions on speech online must be strictly necessary and proportionate to achieve a legitimate purpose. [7] Shutdowns, by contrast, disproportionately impact all users, and unnecessarily restrict access to information and emergency services communications during crucial moments. Shutdowns are neither

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necessary to, nor effective at, achieving a legitimate aim, as they block the spread of information, contribute to confusion and disorder, and obstruct public safety.

We respectfully request that you use the important positions of your good offices to:

- Ensure that the internet, including social media and mobile banking apps remains on
- Retract your decision to slow down broadband internet and downgrade mobile network speeds, and to notify the public of this decision
- Encourage telecommunications and internet services providers to respect human rights through public disclosures on policies and practices impacting users.

We are happy to assist you in any of these matters.

Sincerely,

Access Now

Afro Leadership

Article 19

Bachchao Project

Blogger Association of Kenya

Campaign for Human Rights and Development International

Center for Media Research - Nepal

Committee to Protect Journalists

Digital Rights Foundation

EXPRESSION NOW

Human Rights Centre Somaliland

Internet Freedom Foundation

Internet Sans Frontieres (ISF)

KICTANet

Le Réseau Ouest Africain des Défenseurs des Droits Humains/ The West African Human Rights

Defenders Network

Media Foundation for West Africa

Media Matters for Democracy

NetBlocks

Paradigm Initiative

PEN America

Reporters without Borders (R

Social Media Exchange (SMEX)

Software Freedom Law Center (SFLC)

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The African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)  
Unwanted Witness Uganda

[1] An internet shutdown is defined as an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information. See more at <<https://accessnow.org/keepiton>>.

[2] Anita R. Gohdes, 'Pulling the Plug: Network Disruptions and Violence in the Syrian Conflict' (Journal of Peace Research: 31 January 2014)

<[http://www.anitagohdes.net/uploads/2/7/2/3/27235401/gohdes\\_synetworkaug14.pdf](http://www.anitagohdes.net/uploads/2/7/2/3/27235401/gohdes_synetworkaug14.pdf)> accessed 24 March 2017.

[3] Jonathan Rozen, 'Journalists under duress: Internet shutdowns in Africa are stifling press freedom' (Africa Portal) 17 August 2017)

<<https://www.africaportal.org/features/journalists-under-duress-internet-shutdowns-africa-are-stifling-press-freedom/>>

[4] Darrell West, (Brookings Institution, October 2016) "Internet shutdowns cost countries \$2.4 billion last year" <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/internet-shutdowns-v-3.pdf>

[5] CIPESA and Netblocks, 'Cost of Shutdowns' <https://netblocks.org/cost/>

[6] Peter Micek, (Access Now, 4 May 2015) 'Internet kill switches are a violation of human rights law, declare major UN and rights experts'

<https://www.accessnow.org/blog/2015/05/04/internet-kill-switches-are-a-violation-of-human-rights-law-declare-major-un>

[7] UN Human Rights Committee (UN, July 2011) "General Comment No. 34"

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrc/docs/GC34.pdf>