



# MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate release

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## **THE BANGLADESH ENVIRONMENTAL LAWYERS ASSOCIATION TO RECEIVE UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT AWARD**

**DHAKA** - The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) announced today that the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) has been elected to its Global 500 Roll of Honour for outstanding contributions to the protection of the environment. The organization is one of eight individuals and organizations to receive this honour in 2003.

BELA was initiated in 1991 by a group of young lawyers who felt the urgent need for an advocacy group to monitor and pursue the implementation of laws and regulations to protect the environment. Over the years, BELA has become a true pressure group against environmental violations, and its research has played a significant role in popularizing the environment amongst the general-public. Since 1998, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been a strong supporter of BELA and the organization's impressive legal advocacy work through the Sustainable Environmental Management Programme, under the Ministry of Environment and Forest. The support from UNDP helped BELA in highlighting the concept of environmental justice, that eventually led to the formation of Environmental Courts. BELA is now involved in training judges on issues related to environment and environmental justice with the objective to activate the courts.

Opposed to aggressive advocacy, BELA has helped sensitize various actors by raising environmental awareness. It approaches each organization as a co-actor and emphasizes the need for joint action. A model for training and sensitizing professionals and the public was adopted by the organization that presently organizes such programmes with lawyers, NGO workers, government officials, teachers, journalists, students and representatives of local government. BELA is the only organization that arranges special workshops exclusively for judicial officers. With 60% of the total population in Bangladesh estimated at having no access to justice, BELA is considered a pioneer in public interest environmental litigation (PIEL).

BELA has to date filed 38 environmental cases, of which 12 have been decided in favour of the cause while the rest are pending. Other major achievements of BELA include: opening up of PIEL in Bangladesh; recognition of 'right to life' as part of constitutional 'right to life'; directive judgements in mitigating industrial pollution and vehicular pollution; addressing payment of environmental compensation in development projects; river encroachment; and unlawful filling of flood plain zones.



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Other activities undertaken by BELA in Bangladesh include: research into legal documents to minimize the gap between provisions of law and people's expectations, including laws on compensation and on regulating environment and customs on forests and intellectual property rights. BELA produces a quarterly newsletter in English and Bengali on major environmental issues and laws, as well as a bulletin that covers the proceedings of the Parliament on environmental issues and the law making process.

Most recently, BELA spearheaded the lobby for protection of open spaces in urban areas, and the eviction of encroachers on the only river that flows through Dhaka, namely, the Buriganga. Their legal assistance has also been extended to arrange the relocation of 200 tanneries from the residential areas to a properly equipped industrial zone. Currently BELA is lobbying to ensure that environmental considerations are taken seriously by the ship breaking industry.

"The winners of UNEP's Global 500 Roll of Honour are members of a broad environmental movement that is flourishing around the world. They have taken the path that most of us hesitate to take for want of time or caring," says UNEP's Executive Director, Klaus Toepfer. "In honouring the Global 500 laureates, UNEP hopes that others will be inspired by their extraordinary deeds."

Mr. Toepfer will present the award to the Director of BELA, Ms. Rizwana Hasan, in Beirut, Lebanon, at the World Environment Day ceremonies on 5 June 2003.

**Note to Editors:** World Environment Day, which is celebrated in some 120 countries around the world on 5 June, was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1972 to focus global attention and action on environmental issues.

Since the inception of the award in 1987, 735 individuals and organizations, in both the adult and youth categories, have been honoured with the Global 500 award. Among prominent past winners are: French Marine explorer Jacques Cousteau; Sir David Attenborough, producer of environmental television programmes; Gro Harlem Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway; Anil Aggarwal, the prominent environmentalist from India; Ken Saro-Wiwa, the environmental and human rights activist from Nigeria who was executed for leading the resistance of the Ogoni People against the pollution of their Delta homeland; the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States.

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