Union backing for landmine campaigner

THE EU has taken up the case of a leading Bangladeshi civil society figure who has been held without charge for several weeks and who may, human rights groups fear, be the victim of torture.

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Belgium / Bangladesh: The Dutch presidency is consulting the Bangladeshi government in an attempt to ensure the welfare of anti-landmine campaigner Rafique Al Islam, aged 44. Al Islam is a representative of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), which won the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize. He was arrested on 21 August by a joint army and police squad but, during two court hearings, no charges were brought against him. "On behalf of the EU, the Dutch ambassador to Bangladesh met, last Wednesday [8 September], two officials at the Bangladeshi Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the case of Mr Al Islam," said Judith Maas, a spokeswoman for the Dutch presidency. "We called for a fair trial and good treatment."

The ICBL, backed by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, has campaigned since Al Islam's arrest. "The ICBL believes his situation is grave and urges EU leaders, MEPs and the Dutch presidency to take whatever urgent action is in their power to secure his safe release or fair trial," said Stan Brabant of the ICBL. A growing number of MEPs are responding to the call, with one of the earliest being Raül Romeva, himself a veteran anti-landmine campaigner. The Spanish Green has rallied a group of fellow deputies to sign a letter to the Bangladeshi government. The MEP says he suspects that Bangladesh could be doing itself serious diplomatic damage. It was the first country in south Asia to sign the 1997 UN Landmine Treaty.

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