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BANGLADESH

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH

Head of state: Iajuddin Ahmed

Head of government: Iajuddin Ahmed (replaced Begum Khaleda Zia in October)

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: signed

Human rights abuses by gangs linked to political parties continued in the context of widespread political violence. Police used excessive force against protesters seeking improved economic conditions, and against opposition rallies. Mass arbitrary arrests of political activists took place. Scores of people were killed in bomb attacks or in violent clashes between the opposition and ruling party supporters. Women continued to face violence, including acid attacks. Death sentences were handed down and one execution was carried out.

Background

Escalating tension between the ruling coalition parties and the opposition alliance led to several violent clashes leaving scores of people dead and hundreds more injured.

In waves of mass protests, opposition parties led by the Awami League called for the resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner, claiming that he was a supporter of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party. They objected to the composition of the Election Commission and declared the compilation of the voters list to be biased and flawed.

The government relinquished office in late October as scheduled. Following mass violent clashes between the outgoing ruling party members and their opposition, the designated Chief Adviser for the caretaker government turned down the post. President Iajuddin Ahmed appointed himself as the Chief Adviser amid unresolved controversy that his decision was in breach of the Constitution.

There were waves of strikes and mass demonstrations by garment factory workers, farmers and primary school teachers seeking improved economic conditions.

Cycle of violence and abuses

Bomb blasts occurred but apparently on a much lower scale than in previous years. Targets were mainly opposition party members and court premises.

- On 31 October, a bomb attack took place in Rajshahi aimed at several opposition parties, including Gono Forum. They claimed it was carried out by the Bangladesh Islamichatra Shibir cadres, the youth wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami party. On

15 November, eight people were reportedly wounded when a series of small bombs exploded near the offices of the Awami League. No one was known to have been brought to justice.

By the end of the year no one had been brought to justice for the August 2004 grenade attacks against the Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina.

Electoral violence

Scores of people died in clashes between the ruling and opposition parties in the run-up to the general elections. No one was known to have been brought to justice.

- According to the human rights group Odhikar, at least 50 people were killed and more than 250 injured between 27 October and 5 November in violence that erupted between the two main parties over opposition demands which included the resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner.

Police brutality

Police repeatedly attacked opposition rallies, targeted leading activists and subjected them to severe beatings.

- Senior Awami League leader Saber Hossain Chowdhury suffered head injuries when he was severely beaten on 6 September by more than 12 police officers.

- Asaduzzaman Noor, an opposition member of parliament, was beaten by police on 12 September and taken to hospital with severe back injuries. None of the police officers involved was brought to justice.

Police continued to use excessive force including live ammunition against demonstrators, causing dozens of deaths and injuries to hundreds more.

- At least 17 people were killed in protests relating to electricity shortages in the northern town of Kansat in April after police fired live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas to dispel the crowds. No independent investigation was initiated into the killings.

- At least five people were killed and more than 100 injured in Phulbari on 26 August when police and the paramilitary force Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) fired live ammunition into a crowd protesting against the establishment of an open-pit coalmine by the British firm Asia Energy Corporation. The government eventually agreed to some of their demands, giving assurances that no one would be forcibly evicted or lose their livelihoods because of the mine.

Mass arbitrary arrests

Thousands of people were arrested ahead of planned rallies by opposition parties, and thousands more were detained on suspicion of involvement in criminal activity. The families of detainees were not informed of their arrest and were forced to search for them in police stations. Many were held without charge or trial for weeks while others were released on bail after a few days.

Violence against women

Reports of women beaten to death or strangled for not meeting their husbands' dowry demands continued. Women were subjected to acid attacks. Domestic workers were ill-treated or killed if they failed to work excessive hours.

- According to reports compiled by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, at least 169 female domestic workers were killed between 2000 and 2005 in Dhaka alone. Another 122 were critically injured and 52 were raped. A significant proportion of the victims were reportedly children.

Death penalty

At least 130 people were sentenced to death and one man was executed.

AI country reports/visits

Reports

- Bangladesh: Briefing to political parties for a human rights agenda (AI Index: ASA 13/012/2006)
- Bangladesh: Handover to caretaker government marked by violence (AI Index: ASA 13/014/2006)

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