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Armed groups claiming to act in the name of Islam killed dozens of people in targeted attacks, including foreign nationals, secular activists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people. The government's response was marked by human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, unlawful killings, torture and other ill-treatment. The right to freedom of expression was further restricted as the government applied repressive laws and pressed criminal charges against critics.

Freedom of expression

Independent media outlets and journalists came under severe pressure by the government. Several journalists faced arbitrary criminal charges, often for publishing criticism of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, her family or the Awami League Government. Journalists reported increased threats from government officials or security agencies.

In February, more than 80 sedition and defamation cases were brought against Mahfuz Anam, editor of the newspaper *Daily Star*. The charges related to his admission that he had, under pressure from military intelligence, published unsubstantiated corruption allegations against Sheikh Hasina when she was out of government during the military rule of the 1990s. All charges were stayed by the High Court but the prosecution could reactivate them in the future. In April, 82-year-old journalist and opposition supporter Shafik Rehman was arrested on suspicion of involvement in an alleged plot to "kill and kidnap" the Prime Minister's son, Joy Wazed. After being held for more than four months without charge, including several weeks in solitary confinement, he was released on bail in August.

The government continued to use a range of repressive laws to restrict the right to freedom of expression extensively. It increasingly used the Information and Communications Technology Act which arbitrarily restricted online expression. The human rights organization Odhikar reported at least 35 arrests under the Act, compared to 33 in 2015 and 14 in 2014. Journalists, activists and others were targeted. Dilip Roy, a student activist, was one of those arrested, in September, for criticizing the Prime Minister on Facebook. He was released on bail on 17 November.

In October, parliament adopted the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act which significantly increased government control over the work of NGOs and threatened them with deregistration for making "inimical" or "derogatory" remarks against the Constitution or constitutional bodies. Several other bills that threatened freedom of expression were proposed in parliament, including the Digital Security Act and the Liberation War Denial Crimes Act.

Enforced disappearances

Enforced disappearances continued at an alarming rate, often of supporters of opposition parties Bangladesh National Party and Jamaat-e-Islami. Odhikar reported at least 90 people arrested by security forces and not heard from again. In August, three sons of prominent opposition politicians – Abdullahil Amaan Azmi, Mir Ahmed Bin Quasem and Hummam Qader Chowdhury – were arrested by men in plain clothes, some of whom identified themselves as police officers. The authorities continued to deny responsibility and the victims’ families were not informed of their whereabouts.

Abuses by armed groups

Armed groups killed at least 32 people in targeted attacks in 2016, including secular activists, LGBTI people and religious minorities. Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansar al-Islam, which respectively claimed allegiance to the armed groups Islamic State (IS) and al-Qa’ida, claimed the attacks. In April, Nazimuddin Samad became the sixth secular activist to be hacked to death in a targeted killing in less than two years. The editor of *Roopbaan*, Bangladesh’s only LGBTI magazine, and prominent LGBTI rights activist Xulhaz Mannan and his friend Tanay Mojumdar, were also killed by unidentified men. A range of human rights activists received threats from similar groups and said that the police did not offer enough protection, while others were reluctant to approach the police fearing they would be charged or harassed.

In July, JMB gunmen stormed a restaurant in the capital, Dhaka, and killed at least 22 people, including 18 foreign nationals. Police responded with a heavy-handed “anti-terror” crackdown. At least 15,000 people were arrested, and human rights groups raised concerns that several thousand were politically motivated arrests of opposition supporters. Police said at least 45 suspected “terrorists” were killed in shoot-outs in the months following the July attack. Two of the surviving hostages from the attack were detained by police and held incommunicado for several weeks before being presented to court on 4 August. One of them, Hasnat Karim, was still held without charge at the end of the year.

Death penalty

Scores of people were sentenced to death and several were executed.

In October, one alleged militant convicted of killing a judge in 2005 was executed. The government afterwards said that it would fast track the trials of people accused of crimes under the Anti-Terrorism Act which could lead to the death penalty, and that at least 64 people convicted under this Act since 1992 were on death row.

The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a Bangladeshi court established to investigate the events of the 1971 independence war, sentenced at least six people to death. The proceedings were marked by severe irregularities and violations of fair trial rights, such as the arbitrary restriction of the number of defence witnesses allowed. Two people convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity by the ICT were executed, both senior members of Jamaat-e-Islami – Motiur Rahman Nizami in May and Mir Quasem Ali in September. On 23 August a group of UN human rights experts expressed concern about the fairness of ICT trials, and urged the government to annul Mir Quasem Ali’s death sentence and grant him a retrial, stating that proceedings were “marred” by “irregularities”.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment in custody was widespread; however, complaints were rarely investigated. The 2013 Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act was poorly enforced due to a lack of political will and awareness among law enforcement agencies. Human rights groups accused several security force branches – including police and the Rapid Action Battalion – of torture and other ill-treatment. Torture was carried out to extract “confessions”, for extortion or to punish political opponents of the government.

Chittagong Hill Tracts

Police in September asked a court to close the investigation into the disappearance of Kalpana Chakma, an Indigenous Peoples’ rights campaigner, from the Chittagong Hill Tracts – an area in southeastern Bangladesh – citing a lack of evidence. She was abducted in 1996. Government restrictions on access to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and on communication with “tribal” people there remained in place, arbitrarily restricting the right to freedom of expression of journalists and human rights organizations. Women and girls in the region faced multiple forms of discrimination and violence including rape and murder due to their gender, Indigenous identity and socio-economic status. Victims of gender-based violence continued to be denied justice because of pressure to settle out of court, non-availability of judges or other bureaucratic delays.

Violence against women and girls

Human rights groups said that rape conviction rates continued to be extremely low, mainly because investigations were not timely or effective. Many women and girls were reluctant to report rape to the authorities, for fear of being stigmatized and subjected to police harassment. Human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra confirmed that at least 671 rape cases were reported by media, with the actual number of cases likely to be much higher. The rape and murder of 19-year-old Tonu in March sparked outrage and large-scale street protests. Activists claimed the police deliberately delayed the investigation and pressured the survivor’s family into making false statements.