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Amnesty International

BANGLADESH

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH

Head of state: Iajuddin Ahmed

Head of government: Begum Khaleda Zia

Death penalty: retentionist

International Criminal Court: signed

UN Women's Convention: ratified with reservations

Optional Protocol to UN Women's Convention: ratified

Overview - Covering events from January - December 2005

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A rising tide of violence, much of it perpetrated by Islamist groups, affected most parts of the country. The main targets of the violence were human rights defenders, lawyers, judges, opposition activists, members of minority communities and places of worship. Police abuses, including torture, continued. Violence against women was widespread. At least three people were executed.

Background

Escalating levels of violence, including several waves of bombings, combined with lack of appropriate action by the authorities pushed Bangladesh to the edge of a human rights crisis. The government – a four-party coalition led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – at first blamed the main opposition Awami League before acknowledging that it faced growing Islamist militancy. In February it banned two Islamist groups – Jama'atul Mujahideen (Assembly of the Holy Warriors) Bangladesh and Jagrata Muslim Janata (Awakened Muslim Citizens) Bangladesh.

The World Bank cancelled funding for three development projects, blaming government corruption for its decision. For the fifth consecutive year, the non-governmental organization Transparency International named Bangladesh the world's most corrupt country.

In August, the High Court declared the Fifth Amendment to the Constitution unlawful. The amendment had legitimized the imposition of martial law from 1975 to 1979. Following an appeal by the government, the Supreme Court suspended the High Court ruling.

Escalating violence

After a series of isolated bomb attacks from the beginning of the year, on 17 August hundreds of small bombs, many targeting government buildings, were detonated within a period of 30 minutes across the country. Two people were killed and hundreds injured. Jama'atul Mujahideen leaflets at the bomb sites called for the introduction of Islamic law in Bangladesh. Hundreds of people were arrested in the following weeks.

At least 25 people were killed and hundreds injured in similar attacks at other times in the year. On 29 November Bangladesh's first suicide bombings marked a significant escalation in the violence and sparked widespread criticism of the ruling coalition for failing to prevent such attacks.

Targets of attacks and other abuses

Opposition members

Opposition activists faced attack by Islamists and members of the ruling BNP.

- On 27 January a bomb killed five people, including former Finance Minister and leading Awami League politician Shah Abu Mohammad Shamsul Kibria, at an Awami League rally in Habiganj, north-east of the capital Dhaka. The family of the assassinated politician demanded an independent international investigation, but the government refused their demand.
- Hundreds of Awami League supporters were reportedly injured on 15 August when various Awami League gatherings were attacked by BNP members.

Human rights defenders

Human rights defenders continued to face abuses by the police, army and other law enforcement personnel,

including arbitrary arrest and torture. They were also harassed through the filing of unsubstantiated criminal accusations against them. Many were threatened by individuals or groups linked to armed criminal gangs or political parties. Some were physically attacked. Despite the attacks, human rights defenders remained extremely active.

- Suresh Chandra Halder, former General Secretary of the Association for Village Advancement, a non-governmental organization in Faridpur, was arrested on 9 August, reportedly without a warrant. He remained in Faridpur jail for more than three months, and was denied medical treatment vital for his diabetes and other medical conditions. His harassment was believed to be linked to his attempts to expose corruption in the Association, which angered members of the organization linked to the government. On the orders of a court, he was released on 25 November.

Journalists

Hundreds of journalists were reportedly harassed, intimidated and attacked by state agents and non-state actors including Islamist groups.

- On 5 February a bomb outside the press club in Khulna seriously injured Sheikh Belaluddin Ahmed, the local bureau chief of the daily *Dainik Sangram*. He died several days later.
- A national conference to discuss repression of journalists planned for 11 November in Dhaka by the Federal Union of Journalists was reportedly stopped by the government two days before it was due to start.

Lawyers and judges

Islamist groups attacked courts, judges and lawyers, apparently because they practised non-Islamic law.

- On 3 October, two people were killed when bombs exploded in court buildings in several places around the country. Jama'atul Mujahideen appeared to have carried out the attacks. Two judges were killed on 14 November when a bomb was thrown at their car in Jhalakathi.
- Nine people, including two lawyers, were killed on 29 November by suicide bombers outside courts in Chittagong and Gazipur.

Attacks on minority communities

Attacks on minorities, including Hindus, Christians, Ahmadis and tribal people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and elsewhere were carried out with apparent impunity.

- On 24 July, dozens of tribal villagers in the Chittagong Hill Tracts were severely beaten and otherwise abused, reportedly by soldiers, at Fakinala Nee Aung Karbari Para, Manikchari sub-district, in Khagrachari.
- A hate campaign against members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat continued and involved attacks on Ahmadi places of worship. In one attack in April, more than 50 men, women and children were reportedly injured at Sundarban Bazar in Jotindryanagar by the International Khatme Nabuwat Movement Bangladesh, an Islamist group.
- In October, Hindu temples and houses were attacked and set on fire in Rangpur. Five people were reported to have been seriously injured.

Abuses by police

- Shankar Sen, aged 27, reportedly died on 14 August allegedly after being tortured by police at Ramna police station. He had been arrested six days earlier on suspicion of stealing a mobile phone. Relatives said Shankar Sen had mental health problems.
- On 24 August, Mokaddes Hossain, General Secretary of the Tetulbaria union of the Jubo League, died allegedly as a result of torture by police. He was arrested on his way home from attending an Awami League event.

Violence against women

According to media reports, in the first quarter of the year alone, more than 1,900 women were allegedly subjected to violence, over 200 were killed allegedly following rape, over 300 women were allegedly abused for not meeting their husbands' dowry demands and over 100 were trafficked. Acid Survivors Foundation said that at least 166 incidents of acid attacks involving 210 victims – 138 of whom were women – took place in the first nine months of the year. Social stigma, police refusal to act on most reports of violence against women, and a lack of legal and community support for the victims prevented many of them from seeking justice. However, almost all reports of acid attacks were believed to have been investigated by the police.

Death penalty

At least 217 men and one woman were sentenced to death, and at least three men were executed by hanging.

AI country visits

AI delegates visited Bangladesh in February/March to research human rights and to help stage a workshop for human rights defenders.

Bangladesh

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