

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	437
Land:	Bangladesh
Kilde:	International Federation for Human Rights
Titel:	Stop reprisals against human rights defenders and their families
Udgivet:	7. februar 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	12. august 2022

Bangladesh: Stop reprisals against human rights defenders and their families

Monday 7 February 2022

The Government of Bangladesh must stop reprisals against human rights defenders and their families in its campaign to exculpate perpetrators of human rights abuses, and must ensure they can work in a safe and enabling environment. Coercion, intimidation, and harassment committed by members of the state security and intelligence agencies on those working to document and speak out against human rights violations only further affirm the government's active role in stifling and criminalizing dissent.

On 10 December 2021, the [United States Treasury Department designated sanctions](#) against the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and six former and current commanders, and the United States imposed visa restrictions against two RAB commanders. These sanctions have reignited calls for the United Nations to [ban RAB members](#) from deployment in peacekeeping operations. In response to the sanctions, the government has intensified reprisals against human rights defenders, victims of human rights violations that gave rise to the new sanctions and visa restrictions, and their families. Instead of holding the perpetrators accountable for the violations they have committed, the Government of Bangladesh has praised and even [awarded two RAB officials with medals](#) for “their bravery and service to the country in 2021.”

In the past months, the police have been appearing unannounced to the homes of the [families of the victims of enforced disappearances](#) to [coerce them into signing blank papers or pre-written statements](#) to the effect that their relative had gone missing and the family had hid that information. Some relatives have faced repeated visits and questioning by the authorities and have been taken to the police station at night for hours. These family members have continued to live in a [cycle of fear](#) without justice despite having evidence that indicates the government's involvement in their relatives' enforced disappearances.

In addition, human rights defenders have faced increased criminalization. On 17 January 2022, a court in Mymensingh District charged human rights defender [Md. Abdul Kaium](#) under the [Digital Security Act](#) for documenting cases of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and other human rights violations [1]. Each individual charge carries a potential jail sentence of five to seven years in jail and fines of up to one million BDT; if convicted on all charges, Kaium could face up to 22 years in prison and a fine of three million BDT (USD 34,278).

The police have also launched investigations against exiled human rights activists. To investigate [Mohammad Ashrafuzzaman](#), exiled Hong Kong-based Liaison Officer at the [Asian Human Rights Commission](#), a police officer from the Special Branch, the police's intelligence agency, visited the home of Ashrafuzzaman's family in the district town of Jashore on 28 November 2021. Ashrafuzzaman had spoken at the United States Congressional Briefing on [Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh](#) on 31 August 2021. His relatives and friends confirmed that the police questioned them about his personal and professional information and collected information and addresses of other members of his extended family.

Moreover, rights groups in Bangladesh have been subjected to police interrogations since the imposition of sanctions against the RAB. On 13 January 2022, two police officers of Dhaka Metropolitan police's

Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime and Cyber Crime Department came to the office premises of [Ain O Salish Kendra](#) (ASK), an organization that documents gross human rights abuses in Bangladesh. The police officers, Md. Monirul Islam and Shahidul Islam, asked about their leadership and inquired about the data and sources used for their finding of 80 extrajudicial killings in 2021, which was recently publicized in a [media report](#).

"Instead of targeting those who expose human rights violations, the government should shift their priorities towards holding perpetrators accountable, no matter their rank," said Kerry Kennedy, President of Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights. "The international community is eagerly waiting for the government to reaffirm their commitment to upholding human rights in light of the new sanctions against RAB."

This recent intensification of reprisals following the sanction designations comes at a time of already worrisome and frequent persecution of human rights defenders, journalists, and dissidents. The Government of Bangladesh has continued to prosecute [Odhikar's](#) Secretary [Adilur Rahman Khan](#) and Director [ASM Nasiruddin Elan](#) in a [trumped-up cybercrime case](#) at the Cyber Tribunal of Dhaka. Khan and Elan, who were arbitrarily detained in 2013 for 62 and 25 days respectively after publishing a fact-finding report on extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh, are facing trial at the Cyber Tribunal while their review petition remains pending before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh in violation of the judicial norms of the country. Heightened surveillance by plain clothed men on motorbikes in front of the home of Adilur Rahman Khan since the US sanctions against the RAB has raised great concerns over the personal safety of the human rights advocate.

Internationally-acclaimed photographer [Shahidul Alam](#) continues to be prosecuted in a case filed under Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act, which was repealed in 2018. Alam was detained for 107 days in 2018 and tortured while in custody after being [interviewed](#) by Al-Jazeera and posting videos on social media criticizing the government's violent response to student protests on road safety. On 13 December 2021, the High Court recently [rejected Shahidul Alam's writ petition](#) challenging the legality of the case against him. The High Court's order enables the police to proceed with the baseless cybercrime case against him. The Appellate Division, on 10 January 2022, has [ordered Shahidul to file a leave to appeal petition](#) for further hearing of the matter.

Cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore was detained and tortured by RAB for ten months beginning in May 2020 for publishing cartoons on government corruption. He continues to be prosecuted in a Digital Security Act [case](#) filed by RAB for "spreading rumors and misinformation on Facebook about the coronavirus situation." He [filed a case](#) under The Torture and Custodial Death Prevention Act for the torture he experienced in custody, but the Police Bureau of Investigation [claimed](#) to have found no evidence of mental or physical abuse against Kishore. The Cyber Tribunal of Dhaka is [scheduled to frame charges](#) on 27 February against Kishore.

The families of exiled journalists [Kanak Sarwar](#) and [Tasneem Khalil](#), who have been critical of the government, have also faced reprisals in Bangladesh. RAB-1 arbitrarily [detained Kanak Sarwar's sister Nusrat Shahrin Rak](#) and her three children on 5 October 2021 after raiding her home in Uttara. Her children were released after 30 hours while Raka remains detained. The RAB implicated Raka in a cybercrime case under the Digital Security Act and a drug case in an attempt to intimidate Sarwar as he continues to report in exile. Since Tasneem Khalil began exposing government corruption on his Sweden-based news portal, [Netra News](#), the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) has harassed [his elderly mother Nazneen Khalil](#). The DGFI has frequently knocked on Nazneen Khalil's doors late at night while she was asleep.

The Government of Bangladesh must take urgent measures to bring RAB officials to justice in fair trials, and immediately end reprisals against human rights defenders and their families.

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Footnotes

[1] The District and Sessions Judge charged Abdul Kaium with following offences: digital or electronic fraud (Section 23 of the DSA), which is punishable with five years in jail and a fine of BDT 500,000 (USD 5,713); having committed the offence for a second time *Section 23(3)*, which is punishable with seven years in jail and a fine of BDT one million (USD 11,426); transmitting or publishing false, offensive, threatening data or information (Section 25), which is punishable with five years in jail and a fine of BDT one million (USD 11,426); transmitting or publishing defamatory information (Section 29), which is punishable with three years in jail and a fine of BDT 500,000 (USD 5,713); and having committed the offence of publication of defamatory information a second time *Section 29(2)*, which is punishable with five years in jail and a fine of BDT one million (USD 11,426).