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Bangladesh 2020

Journalists were increasingly persecuted for reporting corruption and criticizing the government’s COVID-19 policies. The draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 was widely enforced to curtail freedom of expression. Police and other law enforcement agencies continued to carry out extrajudicial executions. Violence against women increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Agreement remained stalled and a crackdown on Indigenous activists intensified. People’s right to health care was not adequately protected or fulfilled during the pandemic. Bangladesh continued to shelter nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar as little progress was achieved towards their safe, dignified return.

Background

Bangladesh’s health care system and economy suffered heavily because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the first confirmed COVID-19 case on 8 March, infections spread quickly throughout the country and the health care system was overwhelmed. The economy took a double hit due to the slump in domestic demand and a sharp decline in exports. Millions of workers, especially those working on low wages, for example in the garment industries and in the informal sector, were badly affected by the economic shock. There was also rampant mismanagement and corruption in relief distribution, and the authorities increased their repression of journalists and media outlets that reported these scandals. Rallies and marches could not take place because of physical distancing rules.

Freedom of expression

The government continued to use the draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018 to suppress the right to freedom of expression and to target and harass journalists and human rights defenders. Despite repeated calls from civil society and human rights organizations to repeal controversial and punitive provisions of the DSA, the law was not amended.

According to official statistics, more than 900 cases were filed under the DSA between January and December; nearly 1,000 people were charged and 353 detained.¹ At least 247 journalists were reportedly subjected to attacks, harassment and intimidation, by both state agencies and individuals affiliated with the government.

In April, Mohiuddin Sarker, the acting editor of Jagonews24.com, and Toufiq Imroz Khalidi, editor-in-chief of bdnews24.com, were charged under the DSA for publishing reports on embezzlement of relief materials intended for people economically affected by the COVID-19 lockdown. Both men were granted bail from the High Court and were awaiting trial at the end of the year.

In May, Ramzan Ali Pramanik and Shanta Banik, news editor and staff reporter respectively of *Dainik Grameen Darpan* newspaper, and Khandaker Shahin, publisher and editor of the online news portal Narsingdi Pratidin, were arrested for reporting on a death in custody at Ghorashal police station. In June, AMM Bahauddin, the editor of Bangla national newspaper *Inqilab*, was charged for publishing a story about an adviser to the Prime Minister. The trial was pending with the court at end of year.

Academics were also persecuted for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression. In September, the Dhaka University authorities dismissed Professor Morshed Hasan Khan for publishing an opinion piece in a national newspaper, and the National University authorities dismissed Professor AKM Wahiduzzaman for posting a comment on Facebook about the Prime Minister. In June, two professors at Rajshahi University and Begum Rokeya University were sacked for Facebook comments they made about a deceased ruling party Member of Parliament.

Freedom of assembly

The right to freedom of peaceful assembly continued to be severely restricted. The COVID-19 pandemic limited outdoor political activities after March, and indoor meetings of opposition parties were targeted by the authorities. Between January and December, the government officially blocked 17 public gatherings using Section 144 – a legal

provision under the Penal Code 1860 that permits the authorities to prohibit gatherings of five or more people and the holding of public meetings on grounds of public safety. The government also blocked or dispersed a number of other political gatherings.

In January, members of the ruling party, Awami League, physically attacked the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) mayoral candidate in Dhaka City North during his campaign, injuring him and several of his followers.

In February, police baton-charged and violently dispersed a series of meetings organized by the BNP and its affiliated organizations across the country. In July, police stopped an indoor discussion meeting of the newly formed Amar Bangladesh Party in Brahmanbaria district without any provocation.

In August, police in the southern district of Barguna violently dispersed a peaceful rally and human chain organized to demand the release of a graduate student of Stamford University in Dhaka. Videos suggest that the police broke up the human chain violently without any provocation from the protesters.²

Extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances

At least 222 people were killed by the security forces in alleged extrajudicial executions – 149 people were killed without being arrested, 39 were killed after arrest, and others died during torture or in other circumstances. At least 45 Rohingya refugees were allegedly extrajudicially executed by members of different law enforcement agencies during the year, mostly during operations as part of the “war on drugs”, a government campaign launched in 2018 which has resulted in thousands of extrajudicial executions.

Nine incidents of enforced disappearance were reported during the year: a college teacher, an editor, a businessperson, two students, and four opposition activists. Three were later “found” by the police and then detained, and a student leader was released by undisclosed captors after 48 hours amid intensified protests from civil society and human rights organizations. One political activist was found dead, and four others remained missing at the end of the year.

Violence against women and girls

According to the human rights organization ASK, at least 2,392 cases of violence against women were reported during the year. These included 1,623 reported rapes (331 against girls under 12 years old), 326 attempted rapes, and 443 cases of physical assault. The victims included Indigenous women and girls. At least 440 women and girls were murdered after physical assault, rape, or attempted rape.

In October, a video was shared widely on social media showing a woman being stripped of her clothes, kicked, punched and sexually assaulted by a group of five men. The attack, which is believed to have taken place on 2 September, triggered a mass public outcry and nationwide protests.

Indigenous Peoples’ rights – Chittagong Hill Tracts

At least 285 human rights violations were recorded in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) during the year, including three extrajudicial executions, 99 arbitrary detentions, 54 cases of physical abuse, 104 house raids and 25 incidents of property damage by state security agencies. Of those arbitrarily detained, 50 were sent to prison and the rest were released.

Indigenous activists accused military and intelligence agencies of sowing divisions between Indigenous political groups. These divisions continued to contribute to communal violence in the CHT region. At least 69 Indigenous political activists were killed in local clashes during the year. At least 50 Indigenous activists were abducted, and approximately 82 houses belonging to Indigenous people were set on fire in clashes between local political groups.

In June, three Indigenous activists were abducted in Sadar Upazila in Rangamati district. Their families accused the United People’s Democratic Front – a breakaway faction of the main Indigenous political party, which is allegedly backed by the state security agencies – of the abduction.

In August, an Indigenous woman and girl were gang-raped by settler Bengali men in Lama, Bandarban district. In September, Indigenous political activist U Thowai Aoi Marma was subjected to enforced disappearance in Rowangchhari in Bandarban district. His family and local people accused members of the Bangladeshi military of the abduction. His whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the year.

Refugees and asylum-seekers

Bangladesh continued to host nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees, a persecuted ethnic minority group whose members fled Myanmar in August 2017. Despite little progress in repatriation discussions with Myanmar, Bangladesh maintained its official position that only safe, dignified and voluntary returns of the Rohingya refugees could put an end to their current situation.

The refugees faced restrictions of their rights in Bangladesh. The authorities’ construction of barbed wire fences around the refugee camps curtailed their right to freedom of movement. Restrictions on the refugees’ access to high-speed mobile internet services, in place since September 2019, were partially lifted on 24 August.³

The outbreak of COVID-19 affected an already overburdened health care system in the camps, and refugees lacked access to health care. In May, the Bangladeshi authorities took more than 300 Rohingya refugees to Bhashan Char, a remote silt island in the Bay of Bengal. By December the authorities had relocated a further 1,642 Rohingya refugees to the island. The authorities planned to relocate about 100,000 refugees to Bhashan Char, a move which was largely opposed, principally by human rights organizations, as the island is prone to regular floods, especially during the rainy season, and is vulnerable to frequent cyclones. In interviews with Amnesty International, at least five Rohingya family members representing 23 refugees alleged that the authorities had coerced them to relocate to the island.⁴

Right to health

The COVID-19 pandemic put an enormous strain on the country’s health care system. Given the history of low public health care spending in the country, facilities were found to be inadequate, ill-prepared and ill-equipped to tackle the crisis.⁵ According to the Bangladesh Medical Association, more than 8,000 health workers, including 2,887 physicians, 1,979 nurses and 3,245 other medical staff tested positive for COVID-19. Among them, at least 123 physicians died, and the Doctors’ Association stated that the infections among medical staff could have been reduced if immediate measures had been taken.

The lack of available and accessible critical health care services related to COVID-19 created a major public health crisis across the country, as many public and private hospitals turned away patients with COVID-19 symptoms due to fear of infection, even though they had capacity. This practice led to the deaths of hundreds of people.

Workers’ rights

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in early March, the Bangladeshi authorities introduced nationwide lockdown measures termed “public holidays”, from late March to May. During the lockdown, major business activities were disrupted, and freedom of movement was restricted. The disruption to economic activity and the closure of businesses led many workers to either lose their jobs or experience a significant drop in income. The workers affected by the crisis had little or no social protection, so their right to work and to an adequate standard of living were significantly undermined. More than five million workers in the informal sector, and approximately four million garment workers (80% of whom were women), were most affected.

1. [Bangladesh: Escalating attacks on the media must stop \(Press release, 8 October\)](#)
2. [Bangladesh: Rising attacks on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly must be urgently stopped \(Press release, 11 August\)](#)
3. [Let us speak for our rights: Human rights situation of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh \(ASA 13/2884/2020\)](#)
4. [Bangladesh: Plan to relocate hundreds of Rohingya to remote island must be dropped \(Press release, 20 November\)](#)
5. [Bangladesh must put human rights at the centre of its COVID-19 response strategies \(ASA 13/2268/2020\)](#)

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