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Briefing Notes Summary

Group 62 – Information Centre for Asylum and Migration

Bangladesh – July to December 2023

31 December 2023

31 July 2023

Violent protest by BNP supporters in Dhaka

On 29.07.23, supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) protested violently in the capital Dhaka to press their demand for the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Awami League) which should be followed by new nationwide elections under a neutral caretaker government (cf. BN 19.06.23). The protesters set buses on fire, exploded petrol bombs, blocked roads and pelted security forces with stones. The security forces responded by using tear gas and rubber bullets.

14 August 2023

Cabinet approves draft for new cyber security law

On 07.08.23, the cabinet in principle approved the bill of the new cyber security law to replace the controversial Digital Security Act (DSA) and forwarded it to the Legislative Department for further consideration. According to the Attorney General, the new law will retain almost all the provisions of the DSA of 2018 with some amendments. However, penalties are to be softened in the new law. For example, also offences that were not bailable under the DSA will become so. The offence of defamation shall no longer be punishable by imprisonment, but only by fines. Nevertheless, the opposition criticises the planned Cyber Security Act (CSA), because the definitions of the offences are almost identical and the content of the new law will be almost the same. The concerns raised by the UNHCR and other organisations about the DSA were not taken into account in the CSA bill, the opposition said.

Jamaat-e-Islami leaders and members arrested

On 12.08.23, 13 leaders and members of the Islamist party Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami were arrested in Faridpur for allegedly planning an attack. At the same time jihadist literature and explosives were seized.

High crime rate in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar

According to the judicial authorities, the crime rate in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar is high, especially drug-related crime is a cause for concern. Currently, more than 10,000 cases are pending in Cox's Bazar. Cox's Bazar also has the highest number of homicides in the country. According to media reports on 14.08.23, 34 Rohingyas, mostly children, were freed from traffickers in Cox's Bazar. Two suspected traffickers were arrested. Among those freed were 16 children aged one to five years, ten women and eight men.

21 August 2023

Pressure on opposition; arrests of BNP members

In the northeastern town of Habiganj, police used batons and tear gas during a protest by thousands of supporters of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on 19.08.23. Hundreds of people, including security personnel, were injured. The BNP, led by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, is demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the formation of an independent caretaker government until the next national elections in January 2024.

In a statement on 19.08.23, ai expressed concern about the disappearance of six leaders of the Chhatra Dal, the student wing of the BNP. They were arrested by civilian police in the Azimpur district of Dhaka on 18.08.23. Furthermore, more than 15 BNP leaders and activists were arrested by civilian forces in front of the party office in Dhaka's Nayapaltan district on 19.08.23. The BNP general secretary said that in view of the current political situation in Bangladesh, recent developments indicated that the Awami League-led government is trying to stay in power by all means and is using the state machinery to eliminate opposition members in the run-up to the elections.

Police violence in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar

The human rights organisation Fortify Rights accuses the Armed Police Battalion security forces deployed in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar of human rights violations, citing arbitrary arrests, physical violence, even torture and extortion.

28 August 2023

Sixth anniversary of the Rohingya mass exodus from Myanmar

Since 25.08.23, thousands of Rohingya refugees have been protesting in several camps in Cox's Bazar district to mark the sixth anniversary of their mass exodus from Myanmar. The protests were linked to demands for a safe return to their homeland. Since 25.08.17, Bangladesh has been hosting around 1.1 million Rohingya in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar; they had been displaced by the Myanmar military's targeted violence. On 27.08.23, the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister announced that the government would start repatriating about 1,000 Rohingya refugees to their home country this year. In the process, it must be ensured that families are not torn apart, he said. The activities of criminal groups pushed up the crime rate in the refugee camps since 2022. For example, in the past six years 186 homicides have been officially recorded in the refugee camps. Of these, 85 occurred between 25.08.22 and 24.08.23 alone. These crimes are said to be related to drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping and turf wars by groups active in the camps, such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Arsa) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO).

04 September 2023

HRSS report on the human rights situation

The monthly human rights report for August 2023 of the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) lists 74 incidents of political violence in which at least six people were killed and 878 more were injured. Most of the deaths resulted from clashes between supporters of the ruling Awami League and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In addition, 501 people were arrested on political grounds, including 494 members of the BNP and Jamaate-Islami. The report goes on to say that while Bangladesh has made positive progress under the present government, the human rights situation has not improved significantly overall. The rule of law in general, the right to vote, freedom of expression, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly, as well as social security and women's rights are still of concern, it said.

18 September 2023

Prison sentence for human rights activist

On 14.09.23, two prominent human rights activists were each sentenced to two years in prison and fined in Dhaka. The Dhaka Cyber Tribunal found Adilur Rahman Khan and Nasiruddin Elan guilty of spreading false information under the country's Information Technology Act. The law grants the authorities wide powers to prosecute and

arrest people for matters the government deems defamatory. Directed by the convicts, the major human rights organisation Odhikar had documented excessive violence and alleged killings by security forces at a protest by the ultra-conservative group Hefazat-e-Islam in Dhaka in 2013. The sentences sparked international criticism and numerous human rights organisations called for the release of the two men. Human rights organisations such as AI recently described the charges as politically motivated. Bangladesh is due to hold parliamentary elections in early 2024.

Odhikar has been documenting human rights violations in Bangladesh since the 1990s, including extrajudicial killings by security forces and cases of enforced disappearances. An application for renewal of its registration has been pending with the authorities since 2014 which made the organisation's work very difficult. In 2022, the reregistration was finally denied.

23 October 2023

Pressure on opposition growing; further arrests and convictions of BNP members

Ahead of a demonstration by the largest opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which is planned to take place in Dhaka on 18.10.23, more than 200 leading party members and activists are reported to have been arrested. In addition, more than 130 BNP members were sentenced to prison terms in Dhaka on 19.10.23. The BNP and allied groups have been staging demonstrations ever since the summer of 2022 to demand the resignation of the incumbent prime minister, Sheikh Hasina (Awami League, AL), and to call for the parliamentary elections scheduled for January 2024 to take place under a neutral interim government. Violent clashes with security forces have occurred at a number of these demonstrations (cf. BN of 19.06., 31.07. and 21.08.23). The secretary-general of the governing AL recently rejected the BNP's demands once again. The BNP leadership refuses to participate in the elections under an AL government. The party has announced another large demonstration in Dhaka on 28.10.23 and the AL is also planning to stage rallies on this date. Security measures in the capital have been stepped up. The AL under Sheikh Hasina has ruled the country since 2009. The election in 2018 was neither free nor fair and in 2014 the BNP staged a boycott. As in previous elections, the government is increasingly cracking down on the opposition and critical voices by carrying out arrests and instituting legal proceedings. According to the BNP, some 300 leading party members and activists were arrested in the first two weeks of October alone. The party estimates that around half of its five million members are involved in politically motivated legal proceedings. There are instances in which hundreds of cases are ongoing against a single person.

30 October 2023

Disturbances at demonstration; BNP secretary-general arrested

Violent clashes occurred at a large demonstration against the government in Dhaka on 28.10.23 organised by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which is the largest opposition party. The police used tear gas, flash grenades and rubber bullets against the participants, who were reportedly armed with clubs and bricks. Vehicles were set on fire. One police officer and one demonstrator were killed and more than a hundred people were injured. According to reports in the local media, violent clashes between demonstrators and security forces went on for two hours before the rally was broken up. Both the BNP and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party separately called for nationwide general strikes on 29.10.23 in response to the police's actions and the break-up of the demonstration. Vandalism, arrests and three deaths reportedly occurred in the course of this strike. The secretary-general of the BNP, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, was also arrested.

For some months now, the BNP and allied groups have been calling for the resignation of the incumbent prime minister, Sheikh Hasina (Awami League, AL), and for free and fair parliamentary elections to take place under a neutral interim government in 2024.

06 November 2023

Road blockades; numerous members of the opposition arrested

Following violent clashes between security forces and demonstrators of the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) on 28.10.23 (cf. BN of 30.10.23), the latter and allied groups called for a three-day nationwide road blockade beginning on 31.10.23 and a two-day blockade beginning on 05.11.23. Cases of vandalism and arson

occurred during the blockades. According to reports on 05.11.23, at least 7,800 party members and activists had been arrested since 28.10.23, including the BNP's secretary-general and numerous other leading figures in the party. The BNP alleges that more than 1,000 party activists were arrested in the days prior to the demonstration. For some months now, the BNP and allied groups have been calling for the resignation of prime minister Sheikh Hasina (Awami League, AL), who has been in power since 2009, and for free and fair parliamentary elections to take place under a neutral interim government. Observers fear a further escalation of violence ahead of the parliamentary elections, which are planned for January 2024.

13 November 2023

Textile workers strike and stage protests, some involving violent clashes

For around two weeks now, textile workers in Bangladesh have been demonstrating for higher wages. In some instances, the demonstrations have turned violent. The demonstrators are demanding a three-fold increase in their present pay, in order to be able to meet the increased costs of accommodation, food, healthcare and school fees. On 07.11.23, a government-appointed commission announced a roughly 56 % increase in the minimum wage as of December - the first such increase for five years. The textile workers' union rejected this as unacceptable. Prime minister Sheikh Hasina has ruled out any further increases in pay. On 08.11.23 the protests – which coincided with continuing demonstrations protesting against Sheikh Hasina and calling for free and fair parliamentary elections (cf. BN of 06.11.23) – erupted into violence when clashes occurred with the police. The police subsequently used tear gas and rubber bullets to break up the demonstration. One woman died – the third person to be killed since the protests began. On 09.11.23 some 15,000 workers clashed with the police and looted around 70 factories. 150 factories were closed indefinitely.

The clothing industry is a key factor in the Bangladeshi economy, employing a workforce of some four million, the overwhelming majority of whom are women. The country is the world's second-largest exporter of clothing.

20 November 2023

Date for parliamentary elections; opposition strikes continue

On 15.11.23 the electoral commission announced that the next parliamentary elections are to be held on 07.01.24. The opposition, and in particular the largest opposition party - the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – subsequently called for a continuation of the strikes in protest at the planned date for the elections, and for elections to be held under a neutral interim government. Cases of arson and clashes between supporters of the ruling Awami League and the opposition occurred in various parts of the country. The strikes have led to restrictions for road traffic. According to various sources, more than 10,000 BNP supporters, leading figures and party activists have been arrested in the course of the protests in recent weeks alone (cf. BN of 30.10.23).

04 December 2023

HRW report on government's actions against opposition

A report by human rights organisation HRW accuses the government of using violence against members of the opposition and critics of the government. According to the report, since the beginning of the protests by the largest opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), on 28.10.23 some 10,000 opposition activists have been arrested, at least 16 people – including two police officers – have been killed and more than 5,500 people have been injured. By reference to interviews with witnesses, police reports and video analysis, HRW reports on the use of excessive force by security forces, arbitrary mass arrests, enforced disappearances, torture and extra-judicial killings in connection with the planned elections on 07.01.24. The BNP states that half of its five million members are exposed to politically motivated persecution.

The BNP has announced that it will be continuing its protest and will not be participating in the elections in January.

11 December 2023

ICG report on conditions in refugee camps for Rohingya from Myanmar

A report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) highlights a drastic worsening of the security and food situation in the overcrowded refugee camps for Rohingya from Myanmar. According to the report, power struggles between around a dozen armed and criminal groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO) have led to numerous deaths in recent months. The number of kidnappings for ransom money has reportedly increased almost four-fold in 2023 compared to the previous year and violence is now taking place in broad daylight. Members of the Bangladeshi Armed Police Battalion, which is responsible for security at the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, are also accused of blackmailing, kidnapping and torturing refugees. A decline in international humanitarian aid has led, among other things, to a reduction in food rations, with dramatic consequences for the population, who are highly dependent on external aid. The report states that growing poverty and hopelessness are leading to underage girls being married off and are also prompting many young men to join criminal groups in order to obtain a monthly income. Thousands of people are risking dangerous migration routes in the hope of reaching Malaysia. Meanwhile, Bangladesh is reported to be pushing for the refugees to be repatriated and is restricting their freedom of movement and employment opportunities within the country. According to the ICG, the current security situation in Myanmar and the lack of any rights for the Rohingya to be naturalised rule out the possibility of any large-scale repatriation, however.

18 December 2023

Opposition protest continues

Tens of thousands of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) supporters took part in a demonstration in the capital, Dhaka, on 16.12.23. There was reportedly a large police presence. The BNP has been demonstrating with street protests and calls for strikes for a number of weeks now. It is demanding the resignation of prime minister Sheikh Hasina and calling for the parliamentary elections which are scheduled for 07.01.24 to be held under a neutral interim government. The ruling Awami League's rejection of these demands recently prompted the BNP to announce that it would be boycotting the elections (cf. BN of 04.12.23). Numerous cases of vandalism and arson have occurred throughout the country in the course of the protests. Human rights organisations are accusing the government of targeting leading opposition figures and their supporters. The BNP's leadership is either in custody or living in exile. Thousands of BNP members and activists have been arrested in recent weeks and dozens of court cases are in progress (cf. BN of 23.10., 06.11., 20.11. and 04.12.23).

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Briefing Notes
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