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Bangladesh

Events of 2023

A relative of political violence victims during a protest in Dhaka, Bangladesh, November 28, 2023.

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In 2023, Bangladesh authorities tightened repression ahead of national elections.

Security forces carried out mass arrests of opposition members and in some cases [responded to protests with excessive force](#). The arrests appeared to reflect senior police officials' plans, stated in [leaked meeting minutes](#), to ensure convictions of opposition members so they would be disqualified from contesting elections. The main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party estimated that [half of its 5 million members](#) face politically motivated prosecution.

On September 14, prominent human rights defenders Adilur Rahman Khan and ASM Nasiruddin Elan of the Dhaka-based rights group, Odhikar, were sentenced to two years in prison for a 2013 report on indiscriminate and excessive use of force against protesters.

Also in September, the government [replaced](#) the Digital Security Act 2018 (DSA) with the Cyber Security Act 2023 (CSA) after facing criticism for the use of the DSA to stifle freedom of expression and suppress dissent. However, the new law retains many of the DSA's abusive elements.

The country continues to host nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees amid rising violence by armed groups and serious donor funding shortages. Bangladesh authorities have made conditions

increasingly hostile in the camps, and hundreds of refugees have embarked on perilous boat journeys to seek protection elsewhere.

Enforced Disappearances, Extrajudicial Killings, Torture, and Impunity

According to Bangladeshi human rights monitors, security forces have carried out over 600 enforced disappearances since 2009. While some people were later released, produced in court, or said to have died during an armed exchange with security forces, [nearly 100 people remain missing](#). The government has [refused to take up the offer](#) from the United Nations to help establish a specialized mechanism to investigate allegations of enforced disappearances in line with international standards. Instead, Bangladesh authorities [continue to harass and intimidate](#) victims' families.

Immediately after the [United States' designation of human rights sanctions](#) against the notoriously abusive Rapid Action Battalion in 2021, some abuses dropped for a period. However, security force abuses, including enforced disappearances, appear to have [resumed](#). Human rights monitors have also noted a disturbing rise in [allegations of torture in custody](#).

Allegations of torture in Bangladesh are rarely investigated or prosecuted. [Only one case of torture resulted in convictions](#) under Bangladesh's Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act since its passage a decade ago, according to media reports.

Bangladesh has ignored [repeated requests](#) from the UN Committee Against Torture to follow up on its recommendations, as required. The Committee's recommendations included the independent monitoring of all detention sites and investigation of all allegations of torture or ill-treatment by law enforcement officials.

Freedom of Speech

Journalists [faced increasing attacks](#) for exercising their right to freely criticize government policies and practices, undermining the conditions for open political debate ahead of elections.

Newsrooms were further driven toward [self-censorship](#), with government authorities demanding they remove news articles from their websites and increasing judicial targeting of major outlets.

On March 30, 2023, authorities arrested [Shamsuzzaman Shams](#), a correspondent for the leading national newspaper, *Prothom Alo*, accusing him of "tarnishing the image of the nation" in an article about the cost of living in Bangladesh. [Matiur Rahman](#), the editor, and others were also sued under the DSA in relation to the same article. In a speech in parliament, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina [castigated](#) *Prothom Alo* as the "enemy" of the ruling Awami League party, democracy, and the people of the country. Following her statement, the *Prothom Alo* offices were vandalized.

Prominent journalists and activists, such as Shahidul Alam and Rozina Islam, continue to face charges under the DSA.

The new CSA [retains many of the abusive elements](#) of its predecessor, the DSA, that grant wide authority to officials to criminalize and jail critics of the ruling Awami League government. For example, it [maintains](#) section 21, which criminalizes "any kind of propaganda or campaign against liberation war, spirit of liberation war, father of the nation, national anthem or national flag."

[In a letter to the Bangladesh government](#), the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan, raised concerns that the CSA "contains vague and overly broad provisions which criminalize a large variety of legitimate forms of expression. These provisions have been reproduced from the Digital Security Act,

although they contravene international human rights law, have been used wrongly against journalists, human rights defenders and scholars, and have led to severe negative human rights consequences, including prolonged detention, deaths in custody and attacks on media freedom.”

Labor Rights

On June 25, union leader Shahidul Islam [was beaten to death](#) after he visited a factory to secure unpaid wages for the factory’s workers, following a pattern of targeted [attacks against labor organizers](#) in Bangladesh. Islam’s murder underscored the [inadequacy of the social audits and certifications](#) that brands and retailers use to monitor working conditions in factories and their failure to adequately prevent and respond to threats to workers trying to organize independent unions.

The Bangladesh authorities have yet to amend the labor laws to protect workers’ freedom of association and collective bargaining in line with International Labour Organization conventions and recommendations, including to curb anti-union tactics by managers and assaults on independent union organizers.

In November, the government raised the minimum wage for garment factory workers from US\$75 to \$113 per month following massive protests. The protesters had been calling for an increase to \$208, which is still far below the livable wage estimated by Bangladesh think tanks.

Despite the high prevalence of sexual harassment at work in Bangladesh, the 2006 Labour Act does not define or effectively prevent sexual harassment at work. The authorities also have yet to ratify the [ILO Violence and Harassment Convention \(C190\)](#), which requires comprehensive protections to end violence and harassment, including gender-based violence, at work.

Women’s and Girls’ Rights

Women in Bangladesh continue to have little recourse to seek protection or services or access justice for domestic violence. Bangladesh continues to have one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with a [shocking 51 percent](#) of girls married before 18, and has the shameful distinction of being one of the only countries in the world to have [legalized child marriage](#) in recent years. Women and girls face widespread sexual violence with little recourse and protection; in Bangladesh, it is estimated that fewer than [1 percent](#) of rape cases investigated by the police leads to conviction.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

While Bangladesh has taken important steps toward protecting *hijras*, authorities force them to undergo abusive medical examinations to legally recognize their gender identity. (In South Asia, hijra refers to an identity category for people assigned male at birth who develop a feminine gender identity.)

On August 12, police forced eight hijras to strip naked after they [were arrested](#) in Dhaka on charges of extortion. The police then [presented them](#) to the media, saying that the detainees had disguised themselves as hijra in order to extort people.

Same-sex conduct is criminalized in Bangladesh, and LGBT people continue to face harassment and violence with little protection from the police.

Disability Rights

In June, [police attacked people with disabilities](#) who were protesting to increase their social welfare monthly allowance from 850 taka (US\$7) to 5,000 taka (US\$45). The government [did not increase](#) the monthly allowance despite [commitments](#) to do so.

[Human Rights Watch found](#) that Bangladesh authorities failed to ensure that people with disabilities and older people had access to protection, services, and infrastructure during unprecedented flooding in northern Bangladesh in June 2022.

Refugees

The nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh face [growing restrictions by the authorities](#). Refugees describe new barriers to education, livelihoods, and movement. Camp authorities [resumed harassing and evicting Rohingya](#) shop owners, including by destroying their stores.

Bangladesh authorities have relocated 30,000 Rohingya to the isolated silt island Bhasan Char, where they risk food and medicine shortages, flooding, waterborne diseases, drowning, and injuries due to cyclones and rising sea levels.

Amid [surging violence by armed groups and criminal gangs](#) in the camps, Bangladesh authorities have failed to provide protection, maintain security, or prosecute those responsible. Refugees have reported facing layers of barriers to police, legal, and medical assistance.

The 2023 UN Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya humanitarian crisis has received less than one-third of the US\$876 million sought in donor contributions. The funding shortfall has led the World Food Programme to [cut Rohingya food rations](#) by a third since February, down from US\$12 to only US\$8 per month per person. Rohingya and humanitarian workers reported that the ration cuts were already having medical and social consequences.

Bangladesh authorities contend that the repatriation of Rohingya is the only solution, refusing to support sustainable solutions to ensure safety, health, and livelihoods in the camps, and freedom to move outside the camps, the prerequisite for productive self-sufficiency and integration. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) [reported](#) that 300,000 out of more than 400,000 refugee children were enrolled in classes teaching the Myanmar curriculum, but their education was not accredited. The government has initiated steps with the Myanmar junta to return Rohingya to Rakhine State under a pilot project that has been [marked by coercion and deception](#).

Key International Actors

On August 4, 2023, [the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) called on all political parties, their supporters, and the security forces to create a peaceful, inclusive, and safe environment for a free and fair election. In March, the UN High Commissioner [said](#): “In Bangladesh, I regret the increasing incidence of political violence, coupled with arbitrary arrests of political activists, and ongoing harassment of human rights defenders and media personnel in the build up to the elections this year.”

In May, the US government [announced a new policy](#) that will restrict the issuance of visas for any Bangladeshi who undermines “the democratic election process in Bangladesh.” Fourteen [US Congressmembers expressed](#) their concerns over the violent crackdown on opposition parties and dissidents leading up to the elections.

On August 31, 2023, [more than 170 global leaders](#), including former US President Barack Obama and former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to suspend the judicial harassment of Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus and raised concerns about ongoing threats to democracy and human rights in Bangladesh.

In July, the EU special representative for human rights visited Bangladesh, holding institutional talks about human rights developments in the country and drawing attention to the situation of the Rohingya.

The [UN independent expert on the rights of older people](#) called on the government to take urgent action to mitigate the impacts of climate change on older people.

In September, the European Parliament passed an [urgency resolution](#) on the “Human rights situation in Bangladesh, notably the case of Odhikar,” urging the release of Odhikar’s leaders and deploring the increasing repression in Bangladesh. [UN independent experts](#) and the [UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) expressed concern over the intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders and civil society leaders, including the leaders of Odhikar.