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Freedom of expression continued to be heavily curtailed by draconian laws. The authorities carried out serious human rights violations including enforced disappearances, unlawful detention, torture and extrajudicial executions. Peaceful protests by opposition political parties and students were prevented and suppressed by the authorities, on some occasions using excessive force. Violence against women increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. Indigenous peoples experienced scarcity of resources because of increasing deforestation and land-grabbing. Refugees and religious minorities suffered violent attacks.

Background

Bangladesh was ranked seventh among nations most affected by extreme weather in the past 20 years. Tens of millions of people were at risk from the devastating impact of frequent cyclones, floods, erosion and rising sea levels, which continued to cause displacement. Farmers' livelihoods were threatened by waterlogging and high levels of salinity, which killed crops. From March to May, at least four strong heatwaves dominated the pre-monsoon period. Bangladesh's climate continued to shift towards hotter and longer summers, warmer winters and longer monsoons from February to October. It was predicted that average temperatures in Bangladesh would rise by 1.4°C by 2050. Community adaptation efforts fell short of providing adequate protection, and experts warned that government investment in climate-related projects remained too low. The 10-year Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan expired in 2019 and had yet to be replaced.

Freedom of expression

The authorities cracked down strongly on peaceful protests and dissent. Criticism of the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and other issues led to arrests and ill-treatment of journalists, cartoonists, writers and critics' family members. The death in prison of a writer, after he was tortured and detained for 10 months under Bangladesh's draconian Digital Security Act, stirred protests across the country calling for a repeal of the law.

The authorities imprisoned 433 people under the Digital Security Act, the majority of whom were held on allegations of publishing “false or offensive information” under Section 25.¹ This represented a 21% year-on-year increase in the number of people detained under the Act. As of 11 July, the longest-serving prisoner detained under the Act had been held since 24 December 2018. Section 25 (publication of false or offensive information), Section 29 (publication of defamatory information) and Section 31 (offence and punishment for deteriorating law and order) of the Act were used systematically to target and harass dissenting voices, including those of journalists, activists and human rights defenders. These actions contravened Bangladesh's commitments under the ICCPR as well as its domestic constitutional obligations.

In May, the authorities arrested human rights defender Shahnewaz Chowdhury on charges of attempting to “deteriorate law and order” for sharing his personal opinion in a Facebook post. Released on bail on 16 August, he was facing up to 10 years in prison if convicted.

On 17 May, the authorities arrested Rozina Islam, a senior journalist, on allegations of stealing confidential documents and espionage.² No concrete evidence suggesting a recognizable criminal offence was provided.

The government also shut down websites, including five Indigenous and human rights-related news portals. These included Hill Voice, an online news portal on the rights of Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh, published in Canada.

In October, Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion arrested Nusrat Shahrin Raka, sister of exiled journalist Kanak Sarwar. Four days before her arrest, she filed a complaint with the police about a fake Facebook account that was created using her information, which criticized the government. Instead of investigating her complaint, the authorities arrested her under the Digital Security Act and Narcotics Control Act. Her brother said that she was targeted in retaliation for his criticism of the government.

Communal violence

In October, at least 40 pandals (temporary structures made for the Hindu religious ceremony of Durga Puja) and 25 homes and properties belonging to members of the Hindu community were damaged or set on fire during and after the Durga Puja, the country’s biggest Hindu festival. The authorities filed at least 71 cases across the country, arrested more than 450 people and accused 10,000 unidentified people in connection with the violence that erupted following allegations on social media that a copy of the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam, had been desecrated at a puja pandal. At least seven people were killed and hundreds injured in violent clashes across the country.

A lack of proper investigations into previous incidents of communal violence created an environment of impunity.

Freedom of assembly

According to local human rights group Ain o Salish Kendra, 157 people were killed and 10,833 injured in 932 incidents of political violence and clashes with the police and between supporters of ruling and opposition political parties during the year.

Opposition leaders were detained and otherwise prevented from carrying out protests throughout the year.

On 25 March, at least 14 people, including a journalist, were injured at a demonstration that opposed the visit of Indian prime minister Narendra Modi to Bangladesh.

On 26 October, police prevented supporters and activists of the leading opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party from carrying out a “peace rally” to protest against communal violence in the country. Police alleged that the party did not have permission to hold a rally; however, having to seek permission contravenes the right to peaceful assembly. At least 44 members and supporters of the party were detained during clashes with the police.

Torture and other ill-treatment

On 10 March, political cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore filed a case with the metropolitan sessions judge’s court in the capital, Dhaka, under the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act 2013. He accused state security agencies of torturing him in custody.³ He had been detained along with writer Mushtaq Ahmed in May 2020 under the Digital Security Act, for posting satirical cartoons and comments on Facebook, critiquing the government’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Mushtaq Ahmed died after 10 months in prison without trial. The government’s investigative committee concluded that he died of natural causes. He had been denied bail at least six times. Ahmed Kabir Kishore told Amnesty International that he was forcibly disappeared from his Dhaka residence at least three days prior to the date stated in official records of his arrest. He added that both he and Mushtaq Ahmed were tortured in custody by state security agents. The cartoonist required a hearing aid after losing the hearing in his right ear.

Extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances

According to Ain o Salish Kendra, at least 80 people were subjected to extrajudicial executions during the year. Among them, 73 people were killed allegedly in “shootouts” or “crossfire” and seven others died after they were subjected to physical torture. Odhikar, another local human rights organization, reported that 18 people were allegedly subjected to enforced disappearance in the first nine months of the year.

Despite allegations of hundreds of enforced disappearances reported in the media, the government continued to deny them. In some cases they justified extrajudicial executions as “self-defence” by the security forces.

Police frequently attributed deaths of suspects to “gunfights”, “shootouts” or “crossfire”. In many cases, the fact that these deaths occurred after victims had been taken into police custody raised concerns that the victims were extrajudicially executed by the authorities. On 13 November, state minister Kamal Ahmed Majumder told high-school students: “I’m in favour of crossfire because hundreds of thousands of people pass sleepless nights because of criminals. Those criminals have no right to live.” His statement indicated that “crossfire” was used by the authorities to mean extrajudicial execution, as opposed to retaliation in self-defence.

Violence against women and girls

At least 1,321 women were reported to have been raped during the year, although actual numbers were likely to be higher. Reports indicated a rise in the number of incidents of sexual harassment and violence against women compared to previous years. According to Ain o Salish Kendra, 224 women were murdered by their husbands, alongside other incidences of violence against women including physical assault by male partners or family members. Section 155(4) of the Evidence Act 1872 allows defence counsels to raise questions regarding the character of a woman who files a complaint of sexual violence. Calls for reforms to the legislation and justice system from rights activists were not addressed during the year.

Indigenous peoples’ rights

On 28 October the cabinet secretary, Khandker Anwarul Islam, said that people living in forests would be removed to other places in a bid to keep forests “intact”. Indigenous peoples’ rights activists expressed concern that the action could put Indigenous peoples at risk of forced eviction. Some Indigenous communities have been living in the forests for centuries and Indigenous groups reported continued violations of their rights, including land grabbing and

deforestation. On 30 May, non-state actors cut down 1,000 betel trees belonging to 48 Indigenous Khasi families at Agar punji, a cluster village in Moulvibazar. The trees had been a key source of livelihood for the community. Continued deforestation and clearing of stones and sand from surface water bodies across Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts worsened the problem of water scarcity for hill people in the region.

Refugees' rights

Violence in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar escalated, with fires damaging shelters in the camps, killing at least 15 people, injuring hundreds and displacing thousands in the first quarter of the year. On 29 September, armed men shot dead Mohib Ullah, a prominent Rohingya civil society leader, in the Kutupalong camp.⁴ At least seven more people were killed by violent groups on 22 October in the Balukhali camp. Some Rohingya refugees reported feeling insecure inside the camps after they received death threats by phone. Refugees reported that armed groups operating drug cartels and committing extortion killed people as they vied for control of the camps.

Bangladesh relocated more than 19,000 Rohingya refugees to Bhashan Char, a remote island in the Bay of Bengal, despite concerns about conditions on the island. Refugees with friends and family in camps on the mainland were not permitted to leave the island. Media reported that more than 200 refugees were arrested or detained for “escaping” from the island, which remained off-limits to journalists, human rights defenders and humanitarian workers without prior permission. The Bangladeshi government and the UN signed a memorandum of understanding on 9 October, establishing a common protection and policy framework for the humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee situation. Although the memorandum paved the way for refugees to access services such as education and the right to voluntary relocation, it continued to restrict freedom of movement.

1. [“Bangladesh: End crackdown on freedom of expression online”, 25 July](#)
2. [“Bangladesh: Rozina Islam must not be punished for her journalistic work”, 19 May](#)
3. [Bangladesh Mid-Term UPR Assessment \(Index: ASA 13/4732/2021\), 22 September](#)
4. [“Bangladesh: Investigate killing of prominent Rohingya activist Mohib Ullah”, 29 September](#)

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