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# 2024 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After weeks of mass student protests and hundreds of persons killed in clashes with police and Awami League party youth wings, on August 5, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled the country. On August 8, the president swore in an interim government headed by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus in the role of “Chief Advisor” (prime minister-equivalent). After some incidents in August, the human rights situation in the country stabilized, although some concerns persisted.

Significant human rights issues – primarily under the previous government – included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; disappearances; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country by the previous government, serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship; significant restrictions on workers’ freedom of association; violence or threats against labor activists or union members; and significant presence of the worst forms of child labor.

There were numerous reports of widespread impunity for human rights abuses under the previous government, which rarely took credible steps to identify and punish officials or security force members who committed human rights abuses. After the fall of the previous government, the Interim Government arrested members of the previous government accused of committing human rights abuses.

Credible reports by human rights organizations and media documented serious human rights abuses by the former ruling Awami League party’s student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League in July and August. The Interim Government worked with the United Nations and used both its ordinary justice system and the Bangladeshi International Criminal Tribunal to hold the perpetrators accountable.

Section 1.

## Life

### a. Extrajudicial Killings

There were numerous reports the previous government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year. The previous government neither released official statistics on total killings by security personnel nor took transparent measures to investigate cases. The interim government (IG) began to do this. In the few known instances in which the previous government brought charges, those found guilty generally received administrative punishment.

Law enforcement raids occurred throughout the year, allegedly to counter terrorist activity, drugs, and illegal firearms. Suspicious deaths occurred during many of these raids, and other law enforcement operations, and at significant scale during student protests.

Local human rights organization Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) reported in October at least 986 persons, including students, children, political activists, laborers, and police, were killed

between July 16 and September 9. Verified video of police, paramilitary, and political party members, including Bangladesh Chhatra League, shooting rubber bullets and live rounds at unarmed protesters emerged. On September 24, the IG released a draft list documenting 708 fatalities related to the mass protests but called for public contributions to ensure the data was accurate.

The Students Against Discrimination's (umbrella organization that coordinated the protests) health committee released data on September 20 alleging 1,423 persons were killed in the unrest and 22,000 injured. The highest number of victims, 77 percent, died from bullet injuries. Seventy percent of the deceased were younger than 30, and 52 percent of them were students. The victims included 107 children, six journalists, and 51 law enforcement personnel.

Extrajudicial killings continued at approximately the same rate as in the previous year from January until July. Domestic human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) reported that excluding those killed during the student protests, 17 individuals died from January to October in alleged extrajudicial killings or while in custody, including three in a confrontation with police and joint forces (comprising police and army), one in a cross fire with Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), one by suicide in custody, and 12 due to alleged physical torture while in custody. The HRSS reported 12 alleged extrajudicial killings between January and June, with two killed by law enforcement cross fire and one person shot and killed by law enforcement officers, while three died in custody, and six others died from alleged torture while in custody.

## **b. Coercion in Population Control**

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

Section 2.

# **Liberty**

## **a. Freedom of the Press**

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the previous government frequently contravened this right. There were significant limitations on freedom of expression by the previous government from January to August. Members of media and bloggers self-censored their criticisms of the government due to harassment and fear of reprisal. In September, the IG announced it would withdraw more than 1,000 criminal cases filed under the Cyber Security Act (CSA) 2023, the now defunct Digital Security Act (DSA) 2018, and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act 2006 for "speech-based offences" related to speech against Hasina. The Ministry of Law stated anyone detained in those cases would be released.

In October and November, the IG revoked the credentials of 167 journalists connected with the previous government or ruling party. Without accreditation, journalists could write and publish through media outlets but were denied entry to government ministries, restricting their ability to cover official events or press conferences inside the government secretariat complex, which housed most ministries.

The constitution equated criticism of the constitution with sedition. Punishment for sedition ranged from three years' to life imprisonment.

The law limited hate speech but did not clearly define it, which permitted the government broad latitude to interpret it. The government could restrict speech deemed to be against the security of the state; against friendly relations with foreign states; and against public order, decency, or morality; or that constituted contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to an offense. The law criminalized any criticism of constitutional bodies.

The CSA allowed police the power to search, seize, and arrest suspects without a warrant. Cases initiated under the repealed DSA continued under the CSA. The previous government used the CSA against persons criticizing the government or a particular religion. Media and the law minister reported that as of August, a total of 5,818 cases remained pending before all eight cyber tribunals across the country filed under the ICT, DSA, and CSA acts, including one case against a teenager. The HRSS reported that from January to June, 12 persons were arrested and 62 more were accused in 19 CSA and DSA cases. The law was used against speech found on social media, websites, and other digital platforms, including for commentators living outside the country.

In September, a mob in Khulna beat Utsab Mandal, a teenage boy, regarding a comment on Facebook containing derogatory remarks concerning the Prophet Muhammad. A case was filed against the boy under the CSA for hurting Muslims' religious sentiment. Law enforcement authorities took him into custody, where he underwent medical treatment.

In September, the IG announced it would withdraw cases filed under the CSA, DSA, and ICT acts for "speech-based offenses" that included criticizing the previous government's actions. The Ministry of Law stated detainees under these laws would be released through legal proceedings. In a total of 5,818 pending cases filed under the three cybercrime laws, 1,340 were identified as "speech-based offenses," while the remaining were deemed "computer-based offenses" such as hacking and digital fraud.

### **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

Authorities, including police, intelligence services, and student affiliates of the previous ruling party, subjected journalists to violence, harassment, and intimidation, especially when tied to the DSA, which human rights activists called a government and ruling party tool to intimidate journalists. During the previous government, individuals faced the threat of being arrested, held in pretrial detention, subjected to costly criminal trials, fines, and imprisonment, as well as the social stigma associated with having a criminal record. The situation improved significantly in August after the IG was appointed.

ASK reported 388 journalists were victims of harassment and attacks in 115 instances from January to August. It reported five journalists were shot in the line of duty during student protests in July and August. The HRSS reported that between January and June, two journalists were killed and 128 were injured in 120 incidents of attacks on or harassment of journalists.

In March, a mobile court, operated by an executive magistrate, sentenced a *Desh Rupantor* newspaper correspondent, Shafiuzzaman Rana, to six months in jail for allegedly "misbehaving" with a government official while trying to collect information from the local government administrator's office in the district. Rana had filed an application with the office seeking information concerning the purchase of computers and laptops under a government program. The government official convened the mobile court after the correspondent reportedly had a heated argument with her over not receiving the requested information. In June, Rana was acquitted of the charges.

### **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

Both print and online independent media were active and expressed a variety of views; however, media outlets that criticized the previous government were pressured. Independent media could not

operate freely or without restrictions during the previous government. Media freedom improved significantly under the IG, although some journalists complained of implicit pressure in terms of what could be covered.

In January 2023, the previous government ordered the closure of 191 websites it accused of publishing “anti-state news.” Many of these sites were reopened after the change in government.

Following the change in government, media reported that journalists perceived to be supportive of the previous government were subjected to arrest and charged in criminal cases based on accusations from individuals, some of which appeared to have little factual basis, or to be acts of extortion. In August and September, at least four senior journalists were arrested – Farzana Rupa, Shakil Ahmed, Mozammel Babu, and Shyamal Dutta – whose coverage was viewed as supportive of Hasina and the Awami League. Rupa, Ahmed, Babu, and Dutta were also among the more than two dozen journalists named in an August complaint filed with the ICT alleging they were involved in crimes against humanity and genocide during the mass protests, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Twenty-eight other journalists also were facing investigations in connection with the mass protests, it reported.

Independent journalists and media alleged that, under the previous government, intelligence services influenced media outlets in part by withholding financially important government advertising and pressing private companies to withhold their advertising. The previous government penalized media that criticized it or carried messages of the political opposition’s activities and statements. The situation improved under the IG.

## **b. Worker Rights**

### **Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

The law provided workers the right to form unions, bargain collectively, and engage in legal strikes, and prohibited antiunion discrimination. The law did not cover all informal sector workers, which made up an estimated 85 percent of the labor force. The legal definition of workers excluded managerial, supervisory, and administrative staff. According to the law, civil servants, firefighters, security guards, and employer special assistants were not allowed to join unions. Unions were not permitted in the export processing zones (EPZs).

The law provided workers in collective bargaining unions the right to strike in the event of a failure to reach settlement; however, it placed limitations on this right. At least 75 percent of union employees had to support a strike action. The government could prohibit a strike deemed to pose a “serious hardship to the community” and terminate any strike lasting more than 30 days. In addition, the law prohibited strikes for the first three years of commercial production if the factory was established from foreign investment or owned by a foreign investor. Few strikes followed the cumbersome legal requirements, and strikes or walkouts often occurred spontaneously. Work stoppages, strikes, and workplace actions regarding wage arrears, improper or illegal shutdowns, layoffs, terminations, and discrimination were prevalent in several sectors during the year.

Although the law required factories with more than 50 employees to have worker participation committees, employer interference prevented the independent functioning of those committees. Many employers appointed workers to participation committees rather than allowing elections to those positions as required by law.

The law restricted the right to organize and bargain collectively for the approximately half a million workers in the EPZs. EPZ workers could establish worker welfare associations (WWA), but the law did not empower WWAs to represent workers in collective bargaining. WWAs were prohibited from establishing any connection to outside political parties, unions, federations, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) dominated the WWAs and continued to supplant independent unions. Among the 456 operating enterprises in the eight EPZs, WWAs were formed in 288 enterprises. Employers under the BEPZA dominated the WWAs.

The 2022 EPZ labor rules required the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) to provide prior notice to inspections to the BEPZA executive chairman. The DIFE conducted 110 inspections in EPZ factories during the year. The EPZ Labor Act provided for EPZ labor tribunals, appellate tribunals, and conciliators; however, those institutions were not established. Instead, 13 labor courts and one appellate labor court heard EPZ cases. The law did not empower the DIFE to file cases in the labor courts or give notice to an establishment for violations in EPZ factories; instead, the law required the DIFE to send its observations directly to the BEPZA.

In 2023 the government amended the Bangladesh Economic Zones Act to extend the Bangladesh Labor Act to the economic zones, which legally allowed the right to form trade unions. There were no reports of any trade unions in the economic zones during the year. Ten economic zones were in operation under the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority.

The previous government did not effectively enforce laws protecting freedom of association, the right to bargain collectively, and the right to strike. Penalties for unfair labor practices and antiunion discrimination were not commensurate with other penalties involving the violation of civil rights. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators, more often against workers who were deemed at fault than employers. The Department of Labour (DOL), within the Ministry of Labour and Employment, reported that between January and September, workers filed nine complaints regarding unfair labor practices and antiunion discrimination. As of September, all complaints remained under investigation.

The law did not allow workers to file unfair labor practices or antiunion discrimination cases directly with the labor courts. Workers were required to first file complaints with the DOL alleging unfair labor practices. The DOL investigated and attempted to bring parties to consensus through arbitration; however, decisions were nonbinding. The DOL could file cases with the labor court if arbitration failed to reach a resolution between the parties. A labor court could order the reinstatement of workers fired for trade union activity; however, reinstatement was rarely awarded. The DIFE had authority to mediate wage-related disputes. Labor organizations reported the conciliation process did not provide adequate remedies for workers.

While the law permitted up to three unions in a factory, in practice, the DOL created hurdles for the registration of beyond one union in any given garment factory. Labor leaders reported that only management-supported unions received quick union registration credentials.

Barriers to union formation remained in law and practice. The law required a minimum of 20 percent of workers at an enterprise to petition to form and register a union. According to labor leaders and organizations, unions in large enterprises faced significant difficulties meeting the 20 percent membership threshold. From January to December, the DOL rejected 55 registration applications for not meeting the membership threshold. Labor groups cited practical barriers to registration beyond the law, including the DOL's failure to review and issue registration certificates to unions within the 55-day legal limit, comparing worker signatures, and requiring unions to hold two general meetings for registration. Labor rights organizations reported that politically affiliated factory owners interfered with the union registration process and trade union activities.

Labor leaders, organizers, and workers faced violence, threats, and unfair labor practices for exercising the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. Following the June 2023 killing of labor organizer Shahidul Islam, in February of 2024, the Industrial Police reported the arrest of nine individuals, obtained confessional statements from key suspects, and submitted an investigation report accusing 14 individuals, all of whom were later released on bail. In March, labor activist Kalpona Akter and Islam's widow filed a no-confidence petition on the investigation report, but the criminal court dismissed their petition.

## **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Acceptable Work Conditions**

### **Wage and Hour Laws**

The National Minimum Wage Board established minimum monthly wages by sector. The minimum wage was not indexed to inflation, but the board occasionally made cost-of-living adjustments to wages in some sectors. None of the set minimum wages provided a sufficient standard of living for urban dwellers, but many were above the poverty level.

The law established a standard workday of eight hours. A standard workweek was 48 hours; however, the workweek could be extended to 60 hours subject to payment of an overtime allowance double the basic wage. Overtime work could not be compulsory. Workers had to have one hour of rest if they worked for more than six hours a day, or a half hour of rest for more than five hours of work per day. The law required every worker be allowed at least 11 festival holidays with full wages in a year, fixed by the employer in consultation with the collective bargaining agent. The law provided factory workers with one day off each week and shop workers received one-and-a-half days off per week.

### **Occupational Safety and Health**

The law established occupational safety and health (OSH) standards, and amendments created mandatory worker safety committees. These initiatives were designed to align with international health and safety standards and were generally appropriate for the major industries in the country. The government attempted to proactively identify unsafe conditions by conducting regular inspections and responding to complaints made through the DIFE OSH hotline. Workers were generally allowed to remove themselves from situations that endangered health or safety without jeopardy to their employment, provided they followed the established reporting procedures.

Labor law implementing rules outlined the process for forming OSH committees in factories. As of June 2023, the DIFE established approximately 6,700 OSH committees both in ready-made garment (RMG) and non-RMG factories. The OSH committees included management and workers nominated by the collective bargaining agreement or, in the absence of an agreement, worker representatives from the factory's participation committee.

From January to June, 475 workers died in workplace accidents. Alleged OSH violations were common in the garment and textile manufacturing, construction, shipbreaking, and informal sectors. Construction and manufacturing remained the deadliest sectors.

On September 7, a boiler explosion at the SN Corporation Ship Breaking Yard killed seven workers and injured six others. The Ministry of Industry fined the corporation \$29,500 for failure to implement safety regulations and ordered a three-month closure.

On September 17, the IG launched the National Occupational Health and Safety Training and Research Institute to improve OSH through training and research according to national and international standards.

The DIFE worked closely with the Ready-Made Garment Sustainability Council (RSC), a private, tripartite organization with a mandate to oversee safety in export RMG factories following a Ministry of Commerce approved framework. In accordance with the framework, the DIFE held meetings with the RSC, shared data and reports in prescribed format, conducted technical

discussion on safety monitoring, and established a joint working group. The Ministry of Commerce supervised RSC activities through a government coordination council that included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Textiles and Jute, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Ministry of Industry, Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority, and BEPZA. From January to June, the RSC conducted 3,654 inspections at 1,784 factories.

The building code failed to meet basic international fire safety standards, and government oversight of building safety outside the export RMG sector remained limited. Although brand-led initiatives such as the Accord improved structural, fire, and electrical safety in 2,300 export factories, auditors reported fire detection and suppression systems often did not work due to lack of proper maintenance.

A government National Initiative covered an additional 1,549 RMG factories producing primarily for the domestic market. A DIFE-led Remediation and Coordination Cell monitored and remediated the National Initiative factories. The DIFE's Industrial Safety Unit, comprising seven engineers, oversaw the National Initiative factories. The Industrial Safety Unit also worked with the RSC to monitor and remediate industrial safety standards in the export RMG sector.

### **Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement**

The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for similar crimes and were rarely applied against violators.

The number of labor inspectors was insufficient to enforce compliance. The DIFE had 446 inspectors and 31 inspectorate offices to review safety matters in more than 530,000 production units and shops across the country. DIFE labor inspectors had the legal authority to make unannounced inspections in establishments. Within the EPZs, the DIFE could only conduct inspections with prior notice to the BEPZA.

The government rarely acted to prevent violations. Legal limits on hours of work were routinely violated, and one labor rights NGO found 95 percent of factories did not comply with overtime limits. In many cases, employers required workers, including pregnant women, to work more than 12 hours a day to meet quotas and export deadlines but failed to compensate workers for overtime. Stakeholders and media reported some employers delayed workers' pay or denied full leave benefits.

According to the *Labor Force Survey 2022*, a total of 70.47 million employed persons, or 84.9 percent of the employed population, worked in the informal sector where the majority of OSH incidents occurred. Agriculture, construction, textile and garment manufacturing, retail and wholesale trade, and domestic work had the highest levels of informal labor. Legal protections for informal sector workers were inadequate and rarely enforced.

## **c. Disappearance and Abduction**

### **Disappearance**

There were reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities under the previous government. Human rights groups and media reported disappearances and kidnappings continued, allegedly committed by security service personnel. Between January and June, the HRSS reported three persons were victims of enforced disappearances and eight persons were victims of illegal detention for more than 24 hours before being released or arrested. The previous government made limited efforts to prevent, investigate, or punish such acts. Civil society organizations reported most victims of enforced disappearance were political opposition leaders, activists, and dissidents. Following alleged disappearances, security forces released some

individuals without charge and arrested others. There was one reported incident of an alleged enforced disappearance under the IG. Relatives of Aslam Serniabat, an automobile association official, filed a police case alleging he was abducted from Dhaka by both uniformed law enforcement and plainclothes personnel on August 29. On September 25, police produced him before a court in connection with a murder case.

In the days immediately after the government turnover, many victims of enforced disappearances were released from secret detention centers where some had been detained for up to eight years. Chittagong Hill Tracts Indigenous peoples activist Michael Chakma was one of those released after more than five years in secret detention. Human Rights Watch estimated an additional 100 victims of enforced disappearance were missing.

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2024 Country Report* noted, "Security forces have faced persistent accusations of extrajudicial killings, abductions and other human rights abuses, including during operations to counter the drug trade, organized crime, and terrorism."

In August, the IG established the Bangladesh Commission on Enforced Disappearance, which was tasked with investigating reports of enforced disappearances between January 2010 and August. While initially tasked for 45 days, the commission was subsequently granted additional time to complete its investigations. As of early November, the commission found eight secret detention centers in and around Dhaka City and received 1,600 complaints of enforced disappearances.

### **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

The constitution prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention, but the law permitted authorities to arrest and detain an individual without an order from a magistrate or a warrant if authorities perceived the individual might constitute a threat to security and public order, or if authorities perceived the individual was involved with a serious crime. Authorities often held detainees for a few days without divulging their whereabouts or circumstances to family or legal counsel, or without acknowledging having arrested them. The constitution provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The previous government did not generally observe these requirements, but the IG did so beginning in November.

The constitution required arrests and detentions be authorized by a warrant or occur because of observation of a crime in progress, but the law granted broad exceptions to these protections.

Under the constitution detainees had to be brought before a judicial officer to face charges within 24 hours, but this was not regularly enforced. The government or a district magistrate could order a person detained for 30 days to prevent the commission of an act that could threaten national security; however, authorities sometimes held detainees for longer periods with impunity.

There was a functioning bail system, but police routinely rearrested bailed individuals on other charges, despite directives from the Supreme Court's Appellate Division prohibiting rearrest of persons on new charges without first producing them in court.

Authorities generally permitted defense lawyers to meet with their clients only after formal charges were filed in the courts, which in some cases occurred weeks or months after the initial arrest. Detainees were legally entitled to counsel even if they could not afford to pay for it, but the country lacked sufficient funds to provide this service. Many detainees were not permitted to communicate with others outside of detention.

Arbitrary arrests occurred, often in conjunction with political demonstrations or speech, or as part of security force responses to alleged terrorist activity, and the government held persons in detention without specific charges, sometimes to collect information regarding other suspects. The expansiveness of the 1974 Special Powers Act granted legal justification for arrests that would often otherwise be considered arbitrary, since it removed the requirement that arrests be based on crimes that had occurred previously. Human rights activists claimed that under the previous

government police falsely constructed cases to target opposition leaders, workers, and supporters, and that the government used law enforcement agencies to crack down on political rivals.

Under the previous government, police continued to arbitrarily arrest members of opposition political parties. In January, media reported on accusations from then opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) members who said the previous government had launched a major crackdown targeting BNP supporters and opposition politicians on trumped-up charges in the lead-up to the January national elections. The BNP claimed more than 20,000 of their members were jailed in the months prior to the election. Previous government officials argued the figure was much lower and that arrests were not made based on political affiliations, but rather for specific criminal charges such as arson.

Arbitrary and lengthy pretrial detention continued due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited resources, lax enforcement of pretrial rules, and corruption. Lawyers attributed the overuse of laws such as the now defunct DSA, some of which had provisions that generally did not allow for bail, as another explanation for the high numbers of pretrial detentions. In some cases, the length of pretrial detention equaled or exceeded the sentence for the alleged crime.

#### **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

#### **e. Trafficking in Persons**

See the State Department's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

Section 3.

## **Security of the Person**

### **a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

Although the constitution and law prohibited torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, local and international human rights organizations and media reported that under the previous government security forces, including those from the intelligence services, police, and military soldiers seconded into civilian law enforcement agencies, employed such practices. The law allowed a magistrate to place a suspect in interrogative custody, known as remand, during which suspects could be questioned without a lawyer present. Human rights organizations alleged many instances of torture occurred during remand. Some victims who filed cases under the Torture and Custodial (Prevention) Act were reportedly harassed and threatened, while some withdrew their cases due to fear of reprisal during the previous government. No torture during remand incidents were reported after the IG was installed.

According to multiple organizations, security forces reportedly used torture to gather information from alleged militants and members of political opposition parties. These forces reportedly used beatings with iron rods, kneecappings, electric shock, rape and other sexual abuse, and mock executions. Organizations also claimed security forces were involved in widespread and routine commission of torture, occasionally resulting in death, for the purpose of soliciting payment of bribes or obtaining confessions.

In January, the widow of a bodybuilder, Farooq Hossain, filed a case with a Dhaka court against six police officers in connection with his death in police custody. Hossain, a former personal bodyguard of a private bank's chairman, called his wife Ima Akhter Happy on January 12 and informed her he was forcibly detained and being tortured. Happy, along with her two children, rushed to the police outpost and discovered Hossain in detention. Happy alleged police beat him and demanded Bangladeshi Taka 100,000 (\$830) when she sought her husband's release. On January 13, Hossain was sent to Dhaka Central Jail after he was produced before a court in connection with a narcotics case. On January 15, Happy was informed through a telephone call that Hossain had died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. At the hospital morgue, she found injury marks on his neck, chest, and back.

According to civil society and media reports, impunity was a pervasive problem in the security forces, including but not limited to the Rapid Action Battalion, BGB, Detective Branch of Police, and other units. Politicization of crimes, corruption, and lack of independent accountability mechanisms were significant factors contributing to impunity, including for custodial torture. While police were required to conduct internal investigations of significant abuses, civil society organizations alleged investigative mechanisms were not independent.

## **b. Protection of Children**

### **Child Labor**

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings/>.

### **Child Marriage**

The legal age of marriage was 18 for women and 21 for men. The law included a provision for marriages of women and men at any age in "special circumstances."

The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) 2024 report assessed 51 percent of girls married before the age of 18. High rates of child marriage resulted in girls leaving school at a higher rate than boys. UNICEF noted girls who married in childhood were less likely to remain in school.

The government's own statistics were lower than UNFPA's estimate but still high. In March, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reported the number of early marriages involving girls younger than 15 increased from 6.5 percent in 2022 to 8.2 percent in 2023. For those younger than 18, the rate was 41.6 percent in 2023, compared with 40.9 in 2022. The bureau attributed increases in child marriage rates to the long-term impacts of the COVID pandemic. Early marriage rates continued to be higher in rural areas than urban ones.

To reduce early and forced marriages, the government offered stipends for girls' school expenses beyond the compulsory level. The government and NGOs conducted workshops and public events to teach parents the importance of their daughters waiting until age 18 before marrying.

According to the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, two mobile services were available to report cases of child marriage and provide other services; the Joya App and the 109 Hotline. The ministry's website hosted a digital library to provide information on existing laws and other resources to prevent child marriage.

Civil society organizations reported survivors of child marriage had less negotiating power to make family planning choices.

## **c. Protection to Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to Rohingya refugees.

The government was not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. As a result, the government claimed it was not under legal obligation to uphold the basic rights enshrined in this treaty.

A National Task Force of 25 ministries and department representatives chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided oversight and strategic guidance for the overall Rohingya response. The Ministry of Home Affairs coordinated and maintained law and order for the response, with support from members of the Armed Police Battalion, a specialized unit of the Bangladesh police responsible for security in the Rohingya camps. At the local level, the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission, under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, was responsible for the management of the camps. In December, the IG appointed a special envoy for Rohingya reporting directly to the chief advisor.

### **Provision of First Asylum**

The law did not provide for granting asylum or refugee status, nor did the government have a formal system for providing protection to refugees. Nonetheless, the government provided significant protection and assistance to Rohingya refugees residing in the country. Prior to the 2017 Rohingya arrivals, the government and UNHCR provided temporary protection and basic assistance to approximately 33,000 registered Rohingya refugees from Burma living in two official camps (Kutupalong and Nayapara), while the government and the International Organization for Migration aided approximately 200,000 undocumented Rohingya living in makeshift settlements in Cox's Bazar. In 2017, more than 750,000 Rohingya fled genocide in neighboring Burma to seek safe haven in Bangladesh, totaling more than one million registered Rohingya refugees living in refugee camps. The previous government claimed actual numbers totaled more than 1.3 million.

Following escalating violence in Burma's Rakhine State, more than 64,000 Rohingya entered the country between June and October, in some cases giving bribes to brokers and the BGB. The previous government did not recognize the post-2017 arrivals as refugees, referring to them instead as "forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals," but abided by many of the established UN standards for refugees. UNHCR continued to operate registration centers to update individual and family status due to marriages, divorces, births, and deaths. The previous government did not permit registration of more than 65,000 Rohingya who entered the country during the year. In October, the IG allowed aid organizations to provide lifesaving assistance to these Rohingya using a token system, but this assistance did not include shelter.

As of December 31, Bhasan Char hosted 36,593 Rohingya refugees. Programs operated under a 2021 memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the government and UNHCR that outlined the humanitarian and protection framework underlying UN operational engagements on the island. The MOU had provisions to improve protections and services for Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char. It proposed expanded access to services, such as education, skills and vocational training, livelihoods, health care, and uninterrupted telecommunication services, which were funded by some international donors through the *2024 Joint Response Plan*.

### **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

There were very few Jewish residents in the country. Politicians and imams made antisemitic statements.

### **e. Instances of Transnational Repression**

The previous government used transnational repression to intimidate or exact reprisals against individuals outside its sovereign borders, including against members of diaspora populations, such as political opponents, civil society activists, human rights defenders, and journalists. There were no reports of transnational repression by the IG.

### **Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion**

According to the press, police and intelligence agencies under the previous government continued to threaten, harass, and surveil human rights defenders, civil society leaders, and the family members of critics based outside of the country through July. Journalists living abroad reported police and intelligence agencies harassed and intimidated their relatives in the country to silence criticism. Under the IG there were no such reports.

In January, a human rights defender living in Hong Kong reported being harassed by previous government officials and ruling party affiliates at a UN event in Geneva due to his work. The same defender also reported being informed by multiple government-connected individuals that the government would seek cooperation from his host government in returning him to the country to answer for tarnishing the country's reputation.

### **Bilateral Pressure**

There were credible reports the previous government, for politically motivated purposes, attempted to exert bilateral pressure on other countries aimed at having them take adverse action against specific individuals.

In July, Human Rights Watch reported that Emirati authorities arbitrarily detained, convicted, and sentenced to long prison terms 57 Bangladeshi migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates after they peacefully protested in support of student movement protesters in Bangladesh and against the previous government. In September, the Emirati president pardoned all 57 of the convicted labor migrants following negotiation with the IG.