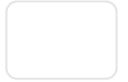


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Bangladesh: Unlawful use of force against protesters must end immediately

The Bangladeshi authorities must urgently end the use of excessive force against protesters, Amnesty International said today, after verifying evidence of reports of violent attacks against protesters and opposition party leaders during a sit-in protest organized by the country's main opposition party, on 28 and 29 July. The eyewitnesses Amnesty International spoke to said that the protests were largely peaceful prior to the police attacking them.

The Bangladesh National Party (BNP) protest, which called for a caretaker government to be appointed before the elections in January 2024, was held at various entry points to Dhaka, the capital. The protests ended with violent clashes with the police.

"The videos and images that Amnesty International has verified shed light on the human rights violations by the Bangladeshi authorities. We call on the Government of Bangladesh to guarantee strict adherence to the law by the law enforcement agencies, as well as full respect for the people's right to exercise their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, in order to avoid further harm to people's physical integrity and possible escalation of this crisis," said Smriti Singh, interim Regional Director for South Asia at Amnesty International.

Amnesty International's researchers and Crisis Evidence Lab reviewed 56 photos and 18 videos from the protests, and the organization also collected nine eyewitness testimonies to corroborate the findings.

Use of less lethal weapons

A journalist at the Matuail protest site, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Amnesty International that the police fired rubber bullets and tear gas at the protesters, even though they were only chanting slogans and sitting on the floor.

Another eyewitness, who was with the families protesting against enforced disappearances at the BNS Center market, told Amnesty International: "The police fired tear gas at protesters... As far as I could see, the protesters didn't have any weapons with them."

A video posted on Twitter, and geo-located by Amnesty's Crisis Evidence Lab, shows a crowd of people running from tear gas at the Institute of Child and Mother Health Hospital in Mutuail, Dhaka. At least five of them appear to be women. The video was filmed within the ground of the hospital, right at the entrance of one of its buildings.

Tear gas should not be deployed near or around a hospital. According to the United Nations guidelines on the use of less lethal weapons, police should minimize the incidental impact of the use of force on susceptible people, including older people, children, pregnant women and people suffering from illnesses, who may have difficulty escaping affected areas.

"Police should not use tear gas, rubber bullets on peaceful protesters. The fact that the Bangladeshi police is resorting to using tear gas inside a hospital reveals their alarming disregard for international law. The police should always bear in mind the diversity of those participating in a public assembly and their varying means of escaping or avoiding exposure to tear gas," said Smriti Singh.

Unlawful use of force

A videoposted to Twitter, and geolocated to Dholaikhal Road by Crisis Evidence Lab, shows police officers beating protesters with long, baton-like sticks. In the video, protesters are clearly running away from the police. The protesters have no visible weapons and do not pose any apparent threat to the police officers. The use of weapons against unarmed protestors is disproportionate and excessive.

In another portion of the same video, protesters can be seen lying on the ground while police officers continue to beat them. In another video posted on Twitter, geolocated to Dholaikhal by the Crisis Evidence Lab, at least four police officers can be seen beating senior BNP politician Gayeshwar Chandra Roy with long batons as he lays on the ground while posing no apparent threat to the police. These incidents may amount to a violation of the absolute prohibition of torture, or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

"Amnesty International has repeatedly called for restraint from law enforcement authorities in Bangladesh. The government must ensure that the police respect international human rights law and follow the United Nations Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, which clearly states that police should only resort to the use of force exceptionally when strictly necessary and proportionate in pursuit of a legitimate law enforcement purpose," said Smriti Singh.

Groups in civil clothes attack protesters alongside police

Niloufar Yasmin, a female BNP political activist who suffered injuries during the police crackdown on the protest at the BNS Center market, told Amnesty International: "When (the police) fired tear gas, we scattered. (But) then groups in civil clothes caught me and assaulted me. The police did nothing to stop them."

According to another eyewitness, the police barricades were manned not only by law enforcement officials but also by people in civilian clothes purportedly to be the supporters of the ruling party.

Amnesty International also verified at least seven photos and two videos, including evidence shared by an eyewitness journalist, of people in civilian clothing, brandishing weapons like hammers, sticks, and clubs at the protests. The evidence includes footage of these individuals beating up protesters 'side by side' of police personnel or branding batons and sticks at protesters.

In media statements, the police said that law enforcement officers in plainclothes were deployed as well, though according to United Nations General Comment 37 on the right of peaceful assembly, deployment of officers in plainclothes must be strictly necessary in the circumstances and officers must never incite violence.

“It is just unacceptable for civilians to join in with the police as they attack protesters. Amnesty International also condemns the unlawful use of force on protesters. The government must ensure that all those suspected of criminal responsibility are held to account, and impartial, independent, and swift investigation is conducted against the police officers that failed to prevent such breaches of the law. It is the duty of the authorities to facilitate and protect the right to peaceful assembly,” said Smriti Singh.

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