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Amnesty International Report 2014/15

People's Republic of Bangladesh

Head of state: Abdul Hamid

Head of government: Sheikh Hasina

Dozens of people were forcibly disappeared. Journalists and human rights defenders continued to be attacked and harassed. Violence against women was a major human rights concern. Police and other security forces committed torture with impunity. Factory workers continued to be at risk owing to hazardous safety standards in the workplace. At least one person was executed with no right to appeal against his death sentence.

Background

The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina continued in office after her party, the Awami League, was declared the winner in the January elections. The elections were boycotted by the opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, and its allies. More than 100 people were killed during opposition protests against elections, some after police opened fire on demonstrators who were often violent. None of these deaths were believed to have been investigated. Supporters of opposition parties reportedly attacked bus commuters with petrol bombs, killing at least nine people and injuring many others.

Verdicts by the International Crimes Tribunal, a Bangladeshi court set up in 2009 to try crimes committed during the 1971 Bangladesh independence war, were delivered amid a highly polarized political atmosphere. Supporters of these trials demanded death

sentences for those on trial regardless of the strength of the evidence presented against them.

Enforced disappearances

The exact number of people who were forcibly disappeared was not known; some estimates suggested over 80. Of the documented cases of 20 people subjected to enforced disappearance between 2012 and 2014, nine people were subsequently found dead. Six had returned to their families after periods of captivity lasting from weeks to months, with no news of their whereabouts until their release. There was no news about the circumstances of the other five.

Following the enforced disappearance and subsequent killing of seven people in Narayanganj in April, three officers of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) were detained and investigated for their alleged involvement in abductions and killings; this rose to at least 17 RAB officers by the end of the year. This was the first such action since the formation of the battalion in 2004. Amnesty International welcomed the investigation as a move towards holding law enforcement officials accountable for alleged human rights violations. However, concerns continued that the government might drop the cases if public pressure to bring them to justice lessened. Apart from this case, there were no clear indications of a thorough investigation into other incidents such as the unexplained abduction and killing of Abraham Linkon in February.¹

Freedom of expression

The government's use of Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act severely restricted the right to freedom of expression. Under this section, those convicted of violating the Act could be sentenced to a maximum of 10 years in prison if the charges were brought against them before 6 October 2013; at that time, an amendment not only increased the maximum punishment to 14 years in prison but also imposed a minimum punishment of seven years.

Section 57 of the ICT Act criminalized a wide array of peaceful actions such as criticizing Islamic religious views in a newspaper article or reporting on human rights violations. At least four bloggers, two Facebook users and two officials of a human rights organization were charged under Section 57 of the ICT Act during 2013-2014. They included bloggers Asif Mohiuddin, Subrata Adhikari Shuvo, Mashiur Rahman Biplob and Rasel Parvez; and human rights defenders Adilur Rahman Khan and Nasiruddin Elan.

More than a dozen media workers, including journalists, said that they had been threatened by security agencies for criticizing the authorities. The threats were usually

in phone calls directly to the journalists, or via messages to their editors. Many journalists and talk show participants said they exercised self-censorship as a result.

Freedom of expression was also threatened by religious groups. In at least 10 instances, these groups were reported to have spread rumours that a certain individual had used social media to insult Islam, or had engaged in allegedly anti-Islamic activity in the workplace. At least five people were subsequently attacked; two were killed and others sustained serious injuries. The two killed were Ahmed Rajib² and a Rajshahi University teacher, AKM Shafiul Islam, who died of stab wounds in November 2014, allegedly perpetrated by members of a group who denounced his opposition to female students wearing burqa in his class as “un-Islamic”.

Violence against women and girls

Violence against women remained a major human rights concern. A women's rights organization, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, said its analysis of media reports showed that at least 423 women and girls were subjected to various forms of violence in October 2014 alone. The organization said that more than 100 of those women were raped, of whom 11 were then killed. More than 40 were subjected to physical violence because their families could not provide the dowry demanded by the husband or his family, 16 of whom died from their injuries. Women and girls were also subjected to domestic violence, acid attacks and trafficking.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment was widespread and committed with impunity. Police routinely tortured detainees in their custody. Methods included beating, suspension from the ceiling, electric shocks to the genitals and, in some cases, shooting detainees' legs. At least nine people died in police custody between January and July 2014, allegedly as a result of torture.

Workers' rights

Safety standards in factories and other workplaces were dangerously low. At least 1,130 garment workers were killed and at least 2,000 more injured when Rana Plaza, a nine-storey building that housed five garment factories, collapsed on 24 April 2013. It later emerged that managers had ordered workers to go into the building that day despite it having been closed on the previous day after cracks had appeared in the walls. A similar incident had occurred in 2012, when at least 112 workers died in a fire

at the Tazreen Fashions factory in Dhaka after managers stopped them from escaping, saying it was a false alarm.

Initiatives to provide compensation to the victims of workplace disasters involving the government, global brands and the ILO proved insufficient, and survivors continued to struggle to support themselves and their families.

Death penalty

Courts continued to impose death sentences. Eleven were imposed by the International Crimes Tribunal. One death sentence was imposed directly by the Supreme Court after the government appealed against the defendant's life sentence by the Tribunal. He was executed in December 2013. Prisoners whose death sentences were upheld on appeal were at imminent risk of execution.

1. Bangladesh: Stop them, now! Enforced disappearances, torture and restrictions on freedom of expression (ASA 13/005/2014) www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/005/2014/en/
2. Bangladesh: Attacks on journalists rise with tension around war crimes tribunal (PRE 01/085/2013) www.amnesty.org/en/articles/news/2013/02/bangladesh/

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