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Severe crackdowns on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly continued to be reported, including police use of excessive or unnecessary force to suppress protests. Rights of workers and ethnic and religious minorities were under threat. Ensuring the human rights of Rohingya refugees inside the world's largest refugee camp continued to pose a major challenge for Bangladesh.

Background

In August, Michelle Bachelet conducted the first official visit to Bangladesh by a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. She subsequently raised several human rights concerns, including the “narrowing civic space, increased surveillance, intimidation and reprisals often leading to self-censorship”.

Freedom of expression

Free expression remained restricted. Reports estimated that in the first nine months of the year at least 179 journalists were harassed or faced reprisals. Most commonly this entailed being assaulted in the course of their work or cases being filed against them in relation to published stories.

The draconian Digital Security Act (DSA) was used repeatedly to stifle dissent and criticism of the government. According to a report by human rights group Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 2,249 cases were filed under the DSA over the course of the year before the Cyber Tribunals in Dhaka, Rajshahi and Chittagong divisions alone. Article 19 documented media reports of 114 DSA cases between January and November and found that the vast majority (78 cases) were filed in connection with posts on social media. It also found that 46 out of the 114 cases were filed by individuals associated with the ruling party.

A former Awami League MP and her daughter filed separate cases against Fazle Elahi, editor of a local newspaper in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), under provisions in the DSA relating to defamation and publishing offensive, false or threatening information, leading to his arrest in June. Fazle Elahi had published an article that detailed alleged irregularities and misuse relating to a government property leased by the MP and her daughter.

In August, the vice-president of the Awami League's Rangpur district unit filed a case under the DSA against online news website Netra News. The case related to an exposé published by Netra News, which used satellite imagery to verify the existence of secret prisons operated by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), the state's principal military intelligence agency, to detain victims of enforced disappearances "for spreading propaganda". The case was also filed against a survivor of the secret prison system who had shared their testimony with Netra News.

The authorities also tried to limit the right to freedom of expression of NGOs. The NGO Affairs Bureau (a body under the Prime Minister's Office) rejected the registration renewal application of human rights organization Odhikar over allegations that they had published "misleading information" about extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and murders. The Bureau argued that this information "tarnished the image" of Bangladesh globally.

Individuals also faced threats to their rights to freedom of expression. In March, a teacher in Munshiganj district was arrested for "hurting religious sentiments" by discussing the difference between science and religion in class, after a complaint was made by the school's office assistant. After his release 19 days later, the teacher told media that he felt he was "framed" because of internal conflicts in the school.

The draft Data Protection Act introduced new restrictions on freedom of expression and threatened people's right to privacy. Broadly worded exemptions granted under the law would give the authorities legitimacy to access the personal data of individuals and institutions without judicial oversight.

Freedom of assembly

The police cracked down on several protests during the year. In Sylhet in January, police clashed with hundreds of students from a public university demanding the resignation of the vice-chancellor, who had earlier ordered police action against a student-led blockade of the premises. The police reportedly used batons, sound grenades and rubber bullets against students, leading to several injuries, and filed a case against 200 students.

In February, police fired bullets and tear gas shells to disperse garment workers protesting against a factory closure. In March, police used tear gas and water cannons against demonstrators from leftist organizations, during protests against rising prices of essential services and basic commodities. In June, police suppressed protests by workers from several garment factories in the capital, Dhaka, who were calling for an increase in the 2018-set national monthly minimum wage of BDT 8,000 (USD 80), due to rising inflation. In July, the police arrested 108 young men from a community centre in Chuadanga for playing "harmful and addictive" games as part of an online gaming competition.

In December, police clashed with activists and supporters of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the largest opposition party, outside the BNP's headquarters in Dhaka. The party had just announced its plan to arrange a political rally demanding the resignation of the ruling party so a neutral caretaker government can oversee the upcoming elections in 2023. A man died from a bullet wound and at least 60 others were injured after the police opened fire on thousands of protesters. In the first half of December, the police conducted mass arrests of 23,968 individuals nationwide, including at least several hundred opposition party leaders and activists.

Torture and other ill-treatment

Allegations of custodial torture and other ill-treatment remained common. Civil society organizations Odhikar and ASK estimated that there were 54 alleged deaths in custody in the first nine months of the year. ASK reported that 34 of those who reportedly died in custody were being detained while on trial.

The death in custody of a delivery man accused of theft was widely reported. The police said that he had hanged himself; however, his wife, Zannat Akhter, alleged that he was beaten to death after the family were unable to pay money demanded from them by police following his arrest. Zannat Akhter told media: “[the] police demanded BDT 500,000 [approximately USD 4,870] from us after arresting my husband. They killed him as we could not pay the money. Allah will judge the people who orphaned my boy.”

Extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances

High rates of extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances in the past decade continued to garner national and international concern, including from UN human rights mechanisms such as the Committee against Torture. During her visit to Bangladesh, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the government to ratify the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

According to estimates from Odhikar, in the first nine months of the year at least 25 people were killed in extrajudicial executions and 16 people became victims of enforced disappearance. Although this represented a significant reduction compared to the previous year, these grave human rights violations persisted at concerning levels despite sanctions imposed by the USA against the Bangladeshi police in December 2021. An investigative report by Netra News exposed details and satellite imagery of “Aynaghar”, a secret facility operated by the DGFI to detain victims of enforced disappearance in central Dhaka. Former detainees described cruel, inhuman and degrading prison conditions in the facility, including windowless cells with large fans that were switched on almost continuously to drown out all other sounds.

Violence against women and girls

Based primarily on a compilation of reports from nine newspapers, ASK estimated that there were records of at least 936 women and girls being raped, while 292 women were murdered by their husbands or other family members. Although these figures were lower than those recorded by ASK in 2021, a culture of impunity persisted for gender-based violence and the lack of official data on violence against women and girls made it difficult to assess the true extent of its prevalence.

A female student at the University of Chittagong was reportedly sexually assaulted and stripped naked on campus by five men reportedly affiliated with the ruling party's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), who also threatened to release a video recording of the incident if she complained. Nevertheless, the woman filed a complaint with the police and the university. Following an investigation, five young men were arrested; at least two of them were found to be active members of the BCL and enrolled as students in the University of Chittagong. They were expelled from the university after dozens of fellow students formed human chains to protest against the authorities' inaction.

Following sustained pressure from women's rights groups, parliament passed an amendment bill for the Evidence Act 1872, repealing Section 155(4) which allowed defence lawyers to subject rape complainants to questions about their perceived morality and character. However, the Rape Law Reform Coalition criticized the bill for crucial omissions and ambiguities, which could continue to allow victim-shaming in court even in the absence of Section 155(4).

Workers' rights

Despite institutional reforms and other changes enacted after the deadly collapse of the Rana Plaza building in 2013, occupational safety of workers remained a distant prospect. The Safety and Rights Society estimated that at least 333 workers were killed in 241 workplace accidents in the first six months of 2022, compared to 306 deaths in the same period in 2021.

In June, a fire at the BM Container Depot killed at least 49 workers and injured 250 others. Along with an array of other non-compliance issues, the Department of Explosives found that the depot did not have a licence to store hydrogen peroxide, the presence of which may have caused the explosion. Some of the surviving workers told the Prothom Alo newspaper that an exit gate was locked, preventing workers escaping. The same issue had contributed to the deaths of workers in the Hashem Foods Factory fire less than a year before, and the Tazreen Fashions fire in 2012. In parliament, an opposition party MP condemned the government's lack of action against the depot owners, who were affiliated with the Awami League's Chattogram South district unit.

The frequency of industrial accidents underscored the continuing failure of the government to monitor and ensure employers' compliance with safeguards under labour and building safety laws relating to the occupational safety of workers.

In August, more than 150,000 tea workers employed by 168 tea estates across Bangladesh launched an indefinite strike to demand an increase in their daily minimum wage from BDT 120 (USD 1.2) to BDT 300 (USD 3). After a series of unsuccessful negotiations, prime minister Sheikh Hasina directed tea estate owners to raise the minimum wage to BDT 170 (USD 1.7).

Discrimination

Minority groups reported facing different forms of discrimination, particularly along ethnic and religious lines. In April, the law minister placed before parliament the long-anticipated Anti-Discrimination Bill, which would outlaw discrimination on various grounds, including gender, religion, ethnicity, place of birth, caste and occupation. It would also introduce a complaints mechanism for victims of discrimination to seek remedies.

In March, reports emerged regarding the death of Indigenous rights activist Nabayan Chakma Milon in military custody. In May, the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Commission issued a press release in which it expressed deep concern over the deployment of new units of the Armed Police Battalion to replace vacant army camps in the CHT; this, it argued, was a violation of the CHT Peace Accord.

In July, a mob in Narail district vandalized a Hindu temple, and ransacked and set fire to the homes of several Hindu families as well as a grocery shop owned by a Hindu man, alleging that a Facebook post by the son of the shop owner "hurt religious sentiments". This assault followed a similar pattern of mob attacks against Hindu communities in recent years, involving calculated looting and then violent

destruction ostensibly in response to a social media post, which would often turn out to be fake. Affected residents described having their possessions stolen by groups of people who also demanded money and then burned down their homes or threatened to start fires.

Marginalized groups from coastal south-western Bangladesh reported their access to water being severely impeded by not only climate change-induced damage to water and sanitation infrastructure but also systemic discrimination. For Dalits, this discrimination was driven by notions of impurity and untouchability.

Refugees' and migrants' rights

Access to education for Rohingya refugees from Myanmar improved during the year despite some early setbacks. Between December 2021 and April 2022, the government reportedly shut down and dismantled about 30 community-led schools. Rohingya refugees alleged that some schoolteachers were detained by the Armed Police Battalion and released only after signing a paper confirming that they would stop teaching. In May, the situation improved when UNICEF reported enrolling 10,000 Rohingya children in the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot, which sought to provide Rohingya children with education based on the national curriculum of their home country. This had been a key demand from humanitarian actors since the start of the refugee crisis. However, UNICEF estimated that, of the more than 400,000 school-aged Rohingya children in Bangladesh's refugee camps, 100,000 were not yet attending learning centres.

On 19 June, the day before World Refugee Day, tens of thousands of Rohingya refugees held a demonstration named "Bari Cholo" (Let Us Go Home) spanning 23 camps in Ukhia and Teknaf. Despite concerns from the international community and human rights groups, the Bangladeshi government persisted in its plans to relocate at least 100,000 Rohingya refugees to the remote and flood-prone Bhasan Char island. In October, 963 Rohingya refugees were relocated to Bhasan Char, bringing the total number to 30,079 according to official figures. Refugees attempting to flee the remote island were reportedly detained by police, raising doubts as to the voluntary nature of the relocation.

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