

memorandum of its findings and recommendations to the government. AI's recommendations included ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its (first) Optional Protocol, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol. AI also recommended amending the 1974 Decree Law on State Security Measures to ensure that it conforms with international human rights standards, as well as other practical measures for the promotion and protection of human rights.

hold early elections. It later accused the opposition of not responding and stated that it would complete its term of office.

Torture and ill-treatment by police

Disproportionate use of force by the police against demonstrators continued to be reported throughout 1999. Scores of people were injured when police indiscriminately beat anti-government protesters or journalists covering the *hartals*. Torture, consisting mostly of beatings by the police, was reportedly routine in all areas of the country. It was used to extract bribes or information, or to inflict punishment on detainees. At least three people were reported to have died in custody as a result of torture.

Violence against women

Women were subjected to an increasing number of violent attacks, highlighting the government's failure to take adequate measures to protect women and address underlying gender discrimination. Custodial violence against women continued to be reported, with at least three cases of women being raped by police. In the wider community, hundreds of women and girl children were scarred and maimed in acid attacks and scores of others were murdered in dowry-related incidents.

The failure of law enforcement officials to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and take legal action on acts of violence against women meant that perpetrators were rarely held to account. In one case, the police in Rajshahi were said to have demanded a large bribe before taking action to investigate the reported gang rape of a 12-year-old girl.

Legal and institutional reform

Although the government committed itself to a range of institutional reforms to improve human rights protection, implementation was unduly slow. Neither the proposed National Human Rights Commission nor the office of Ombudsman had been established by the end of 1999. Very few recommendations of the Public Administration Reform Commission, set up to examine ways of improving the effectiveness of public services, had been fully implemented. Despite calls by human rights activists for the Special Powers Act (SPA) to be withdrawn or amended, the law (which allows detention without charge or trial for an indefinite period) was still used to detain hundreds of people including political opponents. Although most people held under the SPA were released after short periods, others remained detained for prolonged periods. Some were released only after the High Court ruled their SPA detention orders to be unlawful.

Death penalty

The death penalty continued to be imposed with at least 19 people sentenced to death for murder. No executions were reported.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts

In May, tribal leader Shantu Larma finally took charge of the interim Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council,

BANGLADESH

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH

Head of state: Shahabuddin Ahmed

Head of government: Sheikh Hasina

Capital: Dhaka

Population: 125.3 million

Official language: Bangla

Death penalty: retentionist

1999 treaty ratifications/signatures: Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

Institutional weakness, political instability and unchecked police brutality appeared to be the major factors in continued widespread human rights violations. Hundreds of people were injured and dozens killed, some as a result of police action, in nationwide strikes (*hartals*) called by opposition parties during 1999. Political party activists and student groups with links to the ruling and opposition parties continued to perpetrate acts of violence, including beating political opponents to death. Apparent corruption within the police and the lower judiciary, and burdensome bureaucracy, facilitated impunity for perpetrators of human rights violations and impeded access to justice for those without money or political influence.

Background

Political confrontations between the major opposition parties and the ruling Awami League, which were at times violent, dominated politics in Bangladesh. A coalition led by the largest opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, accused the government of political and economic mismanagement, boycotted sessions of parliament and local elections and resorted to nationwide strikes which frequently brought the country to a standstill. Violent clashes between government and opposition supporters were a regular feature of the strikes. The government offered to enter into negotiations with the opposition, proposing to

after delays caused by disagreement over three government-nominated members. AI delegates who visited the area in May found that almost two years after the signing of a peace accord, some of its main provisions had not been implemented. These included the rehabilitation of all returned refugees, settlement of land confiscated from the tribal people, and withdrawal of non-permanent army camps from the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Tension between pro- and anti-peace accord tribal groups and between tribal inhabitants and Bengali settlers often erupted into violence. At least six people were killed and dozens injured as the different groups clashed with each other.

AI country visit

AI delegates visited the Chittagong Hill Tracts in May to assess the human rights situation there.

BELARUS

REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

Head of state: Alyaksandr Lukashenka

Head of government: Sergey Ling

Capital: Minsk

Population: 10.4 million

Official languages: Belarusian, Russian

Death penalty: retentionist

The heightened protest activity by the opposition during 1999 was met by increasingly harsh measures on the part of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's government. Prominent figures in the opposition who spoke out against President Lukashenka were imprisoned for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. There were several reports of possible "disappearances" of leading opposition figures. Political opponents of the President and human rights defenders were subjected to harassment and intimidation. The death penalty continued to be imposed on a frequent basis.

Background

During 1999 opposition groups staged a number of peaceful protests against President Lukashenka, questioning the legitimacy of his tenure in office. Several hundred people were arrested during the protests and given short prison sentences or fines. There were numerous allegations of police ill-treatment. In 1996 President Lukashenka held a referendum which led to the dissolution of parliament. This was followed later in the year by a referendum in which he secured a mandate to stay in office until 2001, even though an election was scheduled for 1999.

Opposition groups and a significant part of the international community argued that the second referendum was unfair and violated the Constitution and, therefore, that President Lukashenka's presidency expired in July 1999.

In protest against President Lukashenka's refusal to hold fresh elections, the opposition staged a series of high-profile, nationwide events, including unofficial presidential elections in May, in which around four million people reportedly participated, and several large-scale demonstrations in July and October, as well as numerous smaller protest actions, both in and outside Minsk.

Possible 'disappearances'

There was concern about the possible "disappearances" of leading opposition figures. The possible "disappearances" coincided with significant political events in the country and the authorities appeared reluctant to investigate.

☐ In May the former Minister of the Interior, Yury Zakharenko, apparently "disappeared" in Minsk at the start of the unofficial presidential elections staged by the opposition; his whereabouts remained unknown at the end of the year. Viktor Gonchar — head of the unofficial electoral committee and first deputy chairman of the dissolved parliament — and his companion, Anatoly Krasovsky, apparently "disappeared" in Minsk on 16 September, three days before Viktor Gonchar was due to give an extensive report about the political situation in Belarus under President Lukashenka to members of the dissolved parliament.

Prisoners of conscience

The number of prisoners of conscience increased in 1999. Many leading opposition figures spent time in prison during the year for exercising their rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. Hundreds of people were arrested during the various peaceful demonstrations and actions organized by the opposition. The majority of people were given administrative sentences of around 10 days' imprisonment, but some opponents of President Lukashenka were imprisoned for longer periods of time spanning months and even years.

☐ The leader of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party, Nikolai Statkevich; human rights activist and deputy of the dissolved parliament, Valery Schukin; and the current deputy chairman of the dissolved parliament, Anatoly Lebedko, were arrested following opposition demonstrations during the year and served administrative sentences.

☐ In March the former Prime Minister, Mikhail Chigir, was imprisoned for his opposition activities; he had intended to stand as a presidential candidate in the unofficial presidential elections scheduled for May. He was charged with financial impropriety relating to a position he held as head of a bank, a charge which he denied. After eight months' imprisonment, he was conditionally released at the end of November and was awaiting trial at the end of the year. Other prisoners of

Qusay Shaikh 'Ali Mohsin al-'Uraibi and 'Abd al-Amir al-Isqafi were reportedly held at the airport and then forcibly exiled to the United Arab Emirates and Syria respectively. In December 'Abd al-Majid Muhsin Muhammad al-'Usfar, his Saudi Arabian wife and their five children were held at the airport for four days and then forcibly returned to Denmark.

Amnesty International appealed to the government to release prisoners of conscience, investigate reports of torture and ill-treatment of detainees, and provide details of all those detained without charge or trial. It also expressed concern at the dissolution of the executive committee of the Bar Society.

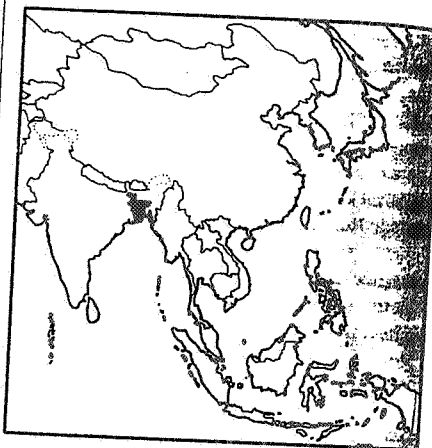
In April Amnesty International submitted information about its continuing concerns in Bahrain for UN review under a procedure established by Economic and Social Council Resolutions 728F/1503 for confidential consideration of communications about human rights violations.

In November Amnesty International wrote to the authorities and proposed to send delegates to Bahrain to discuss human rights protection and promotion with government officials and others. No response had been received by the end of the year.

In response to a letter sent in April, Amnesty International received in September a letter from the authorities stating that information received by the organization about a number of cases was "distorted, incomplete and inaccurate", and that Bahrain had been the target of a "sustained campaign of violence and terrorism organized and funded from abroad". The authorities pointed out that reports concerning the arrests of Rabab 'Abd al-Nabi 'Abd al-Wahab Rabi', 'Abd al-Nabi 'Abd al-Wahab Rabi' and Muhammad 'Ali Muhammad al-'Ikri (see above) were unfounded and that no one of these names was known to have been arrested during the year. The letter added that Ahlam al-Sayyid Mahdi Hassan al-Sitri, Amal Ahmad Rabi', Maryam Ahmad 'Ali Bilway and Laila 'Abd al-Nabi Rabi' (see above) were charged, tried and convicted in accordance with the law. It confirmed the sentences against three of the women but, contrary to reports received by Amnesty International, indicated that Laila 'Abd al-Nabi Rabi' had been acquitted of all charges. The authorities stated that arrest,

detention and trial procedures were all conducted in accordance with Bahraini laws and international standards. However, the government failed to allay Amnesty International's continuing concerns about human rights violations in the country.

BANGLADESH



Scores of political activists were detained without charge or trial under the Special Powers Act (SPA). Torture, including rape, in custody was widespread and led to at least one death. At least 24 people were sentenced to death. No executions were reported.

In March the Awami League government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina reached an agreement with the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to end its six-month boycott of parliament. The government agreed to review criminal charges pending against BNP activists. Supporters of the ruling and opposition parties clashed frequently during the year in strikes and demonstrations that were often violent.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), steps were taken to implement the peace accord reached by the government and tribal representatives. Throughout February members of the armed opposition group *Shanti Bahini* (Peace Force) surrendered their weapons in exchange for an amnesty and rehabilitation. In May parliament passed legislation for the establishment of a regional council granting more political autonomy to the area. By the end

the year the last of some 50,000 people living in camps in India had been sent to the CHT.

The trial of those accused of murdering President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his close relatives in a military court in 1975 concluded in November. Some people were convicted and sentenced to death by firing squad. Four appealed against the judgment, but their appeals had not been heard by the end of the year. In September, three senior BNP leaders were arrested in connection with the killing of four national leaders inside the Central Jail in November 1975. In January they were charged in connection with the killings, along with 20 others, including Major Khairuzzaman who had been in custody for over two years without charge. See *Amnesty International Report 1997*. No further steps were taken by the government towards the establishment of a national human rights commission. A draft bill was made public in December 1997.

In October Bangladesh acceded to the International human rights instruments including the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

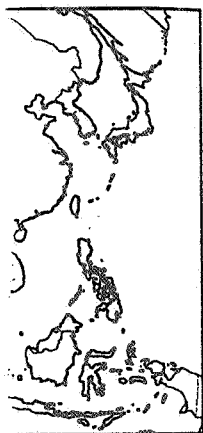
The SPA, which allows detention without charge or trial for an indefinite period, continued to be used to detain scores of political activists, often during demonstrations. Most were released after several days or weeks. Several people were reportedly arrested at the instigation of politically influential individuals on charges. In January, for example, three men were arrested following an altercation with the son of a government minister in a street in Dhaka, the capital. The minister's son threatened to punish the men and they were later arrested at their homes by police accompanied by relatives of the minister's son. While in custody, an officer in charge of the police station reportedly allowed the elder brother of the government minister's son and two other armed men to enter the room where the three men were detained and beat them. In February the three men were released after the Home Minister withdrew the detention order and dropped the charges. In September the writer Taslima Nasrin returned to Bangladesh after four years

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In September the writer Taslima Nasrin returned to Bangladesh after four years of

self-imposed exile. Charges of hurting "religious sentiments" brought against her in 1994 (see previous *Amnesty International Reports*) remained pending. However, calls for her arrest by Islamists were ignored by the authorities. In November she was granted bail after appearing in court. No further legal developments in her case were reported.

Torture in police custody remained widespread. In July a student, Shamim Reza Rubel, was allegedly beaten to death in police custody five hours after being arrested at his home in Dhaka. According to the autopsy report he suffered a brain haemorrhage. Following an investigation by the Criminal Investigation Department, 13 policemen and a local Awami League leader were charged in connection with his death. A judicial inquiry into the case confirmed that Shamim Reza Rubel's death was not accidental, although the full findings of the commission were not made public by the end of the year.

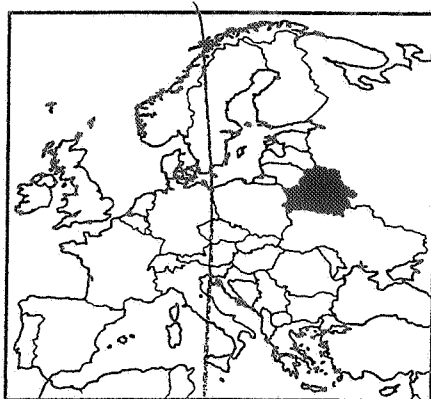
At least three cases of rape in custody by the security forces were reported, in addition to the rape of a 10-year-old girl by an off-duty policeman in April in Dhaka. In one case, a policeman and another man were arrested for the attempted rape of a 15-year-old girl on the premises of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court in Dhaka in May. They were later released on bail. There were no reports of any police officer being tried or convicted of rape during the year. The government's appeal against the court decision to acquit four police officers accused of raping Shima Chowdhury in 1996 had not been heard by the end of the year (see *Amnesty International Reports 1997 and 1998*).

At least 23 men and one woman were sentenced to death for murder. No executions were reported.

Throughout the year Amnesty International expressed concern about torture in police custody and urged the government to take steps to eradicate the practice. In April Amnesty International published a report on children in South Asia appealing to all South Asian governments, including Bangladesh, to take concrete steps to protect children both in custody and in the community and to fully implement the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Bangladesh ratified in 1990. The organization called on the government to ensure the safety of

the writer Taslima Nasrin who was subject to renewed threats from Islamists after she returned to the country. It also urged that the charges against her be dropped.

BELARUS



Hundreds of peaceful demonstrators were detained, including prisoners of conscience. Many were severely beaten by police. At least 84 people were reportedly under sentence of death and 33 people were reportedly executed.

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka continued to exercise total control over most aspects of government. The main law enforcement bodies – the Committee for State Security (KGB) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) – were both answerable to the President.

Political unrest, in the form of protests and demonstrations, increased during the year. Police responded with violence, forcibly breaking up peaceful opposition demonstrations.

Military service remained compulsory; there are no provisions for conscientious objection in the Constitution.

Prisoners of conscience were among hundreds of protesters arrested after peaceful protests. On 22 March up to 50 men and women were arrested and beaten by police following a peaceful demonstration in the capital, Minsk, to mark the 80th anniversary of the independence of Belorussia (the former name of Belarus). Among those detained were journalists and members of the opposition Belorussian Popular Front (BNF), including Boris Khamaida and Vladimir Pleshchenka. A 15-year-old boy, Pavel Rakhmanov, was also arrested. Seven

people were convicted of shouting censored slogans and insulting the President, but were not given custodial sentences. Five members of a local human rights group, the Belorussian Helsinki Committee, were briefly detained.

On 2 April a large anti-government demonstration was forcibly broken up by police who arrested more than 50 protesters. Vyacheslav Sivchik, secretary of the BNF, was arrested and reportedly beaten severely by police. The next day he was sentenced to 10 days' imprisonment under the Administrative Code of Belarus. Pavel Severinets, leader of the BNF's Youth Front, was arrested and faced up to five years' imprisonment on charges of "instigating mass disorder", "organization or participation in group actions violating the public order" and "hooliganism". Both men were prisoners of conscience.

Four other prisoners of conscience were arrested during the 2 April protest and charged with similar offences. Alyaksandr Kashenya and Ivan Abadovsky reportedly received sentences of 10 and 15 days' imprisonment respectively. Leonid Vasyuchenko and Dmitriy Vaskovich were reportedly held after arrest. Dmitriy Vaskovich was allegedly beaten in custody to force him to implicate Pavel Severinets and other detainees in criminal acts during the protest. More than 50 other people, about one third of them reportedly minors, were detained for several hours and in some cases overnight. Some were convicted on 3 April of charges relating to their participation in an unauthorized demonstration. They were released after the court ruled either to fine them or to issue them with a warning.

Two other prisoners of conscience, 19-year-old Aleksey Shidlovsky and 16-year-old Vadim Labkovich, both members of the BNF's Youth Front, stood trial in February on charges of "malicious hooliganism" under Article 201(2) of the Belorussian Criminal Code and "abuse of state symbols" under Article 186. They had been detained since August 1997 for allegedly writing anti-presidential and anti-government graffiti on the walls of public buildings, and for allegedly replacing the national flag of Belarus on the town administration building with the banned red and white flag which is a symbol of the opposition and of the BNF. On 24 February the Minsk Regional Court sentenced

Vadim Labkovich to a term of imprisonment in a strict regime for a month in pre-trial detention.

Following the arrest of 25 April of a nobleman, allegedly beaten (see below).

Human rights were persecuted. Stremkov was called by the Ministry of Belarusian Advocates. She was on her own. It appeared harassment politically.

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