

Human rights practices in Bangladesh

ANNUAL STATE DEPARTMENT HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT 2000

THE Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens in some areas; however, its record remained poor in many other significant areas, and it continued to commit serious abuses. The Home Affairs Ministry controls the police and paramilitary forces...

The newly-enacted Public Safety Act (PSA) gives the police even greater opportunity to abuse their powers. Much of the judiciary is subject to executive influence and suffers from corruption. A large case backlog slowed the judicial process...

Some domestic servants, including many children, work in conditions that resemble servitude and many suffer abuse. Child labor and abuse of child workers remained widespread and serious problems. However, a 1995 agreement between the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), UNICEF, and the International Labor Organization (ILO) that has eliminated about 95 percent of child labor...

Political and Other Extrajudicial Killings

Security forces sometimes used unwarranted lethal force. On February 9, police officers shot and killed Mohammad Ahmed Hossain Sumon, while...

trying to arrest him. Police officers also shot and wounded Sumon's brother and 12-year-old niece. Family members began to drive the victims to the hospital in a van, at which time the police again shot at them, breaking the van's windshield. No action was taken against the policemen involved in the killing. On May 3, police officers shot and killed two workers in the Savar EPZ...

According to government figures, 134 persons died in prison and police custody during the year. According to an independent human rights organization, 70 persons died in police, prison, court custody, and army camps during the year.

Most police abuses go unpunished, and the resulting climate of impunity remains a serious obstacle to ending police abuse and extrajudicial killings. However, in some instances where there was evidence of police culpability for extrajudicial killings, the authorities took action. In March 1999, four police officers were charged with manslaughter after a body was found in the rooftop water tank of the Detective Branch in Dhaka.

Court proceedings continued against 14 persons, including 13 police officers, arrested and charged after a college student in police custody was beaten to death in July 1998. At year's end, nine of the accused persons were in custody, and proceedings in the case were continuing.

The Government continued to imprison eight persons accused of perpetrating the November 1975 murders of four senior Awami League leaders who then were in jail. On October 12, charges were filed against these individuals and 13 others who are not in custody. At year's end, the court was scheduled to begin hearing testimony in the case on January 24, 2001.

Vigilante violence against criminals by private citizens occurs. The Government reported that, by year's end, vigilantes killed 1 person, compared to 20 persons during the first 9 months of 1999. Authorities rarely arrest and punish those responsible for vigilante violence.

Press reports of vigilante killings by mobs are common. Tallying these reports, a newspaper estimated that mobs had beaten to death at least 14 persons in May and had killed at least 10 persons in June. Press editorials and commentaries opined that the increasing mob violence reflected a breakdown of law and order and a popular perception that the criminal justice system does not function.

Mob violence also occurs. On August 18, Alfred Soren, a leader of the Santal tribe in the northern part of the country was killed and dozens of others were injured, in a mob attack, reportedly carried out by Bengalis who were angry with the tribals over a land dispute.

Violence, often resulting in killings, is a pervasive element in the country's politics. Supporters of different political parties, and often supporters of different factions within one party, frequently clash with each other and with police during rallies and demonstrations. According to government figures, 15 persons were killed and 56 others were injured in politically motivated violence during the year.

During an opposition-called hartal in 1999, eyewitnesses saw Maqbul Hossain, an Awami League Member of Parliament (M.P.) for the Dhanmondi area of Dhaka, order the killing of two young BNP activists who had been seized by Hossain's armed followers. Members of Hossain's entourage then shot at point-blank range one of the men, BNP activist Sajal Chowdhury, who subsequently died; the other person was beaten.

Political killings continued during non-hartal periods as well. On July 16, Shamsur Rahman, a well-respected journalist who wrote articles on smuggling and terrorism in the southwestern region, was killed in Jessore. The Home Minister blamed the opposition for the killings; others blamed members of the ruling party who are connected with the smugglers.

In March 1999, two persons were killed while making bombs at ruling party M.P. Mohammed Mohibur Rahman Manik's residence in the Sylhet region. Newspaper speculations that the bombs were to have been used if...

local intraparty conflicts were contested. Police arrested Manik in May 1999 for involvement in bomb making. The court charged the M.P. on February 29; at year's end, Manik remained free on bail.

Violence also is endemic between the student political wings of the major national parties, and between rival factions within the parties. In an escalation of political violence, on July 12, gunmen fired automatic guns at a van in Chittagong, killing eight persons, including six members of the ruling party's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). The Government accused the student wing of the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami Party of being responsible for the attack.

Extortion from businesses and individuals by persons with political backing was common, and businessmen on several occasions went on strikes to protest the extortion. On May 25, several young men shot and killed Iftekhar Ahmed Shipu, owner of a cellular telephone shop in Dhaka, after Shipu refused to give them a free telephone.

A ruling party parliamentarian's son and several others were charged with the killing in a case filed by Shipu's relatives. According to press accounts and a subsequent investigation by a human rights organization, a gang led by Sumon, son of an influential local Awami League leader, abducted two young men on September 15 and demanded a ransom of about \$1,000 (50,000 Taka), which the parents did not pay. The dismembered bodies of the two victims were found in a drain the following day.

Disappearance

During the night of September 18, Nurul Islam, the BNP Organizing Secretary for Laxmipur district, was abducted from his home. According to reports from neighbors and from BNP sources, the General Secretary of the local chapter of the Awami League was behind this abduction and suspected killing.

Torture

Nasir Uddin Pintu, a leader of the opposition student group Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), alleged that he was tortured in police custody with beatings, sleep deprivation, and dousing with water. He also reported that he was denied proper food and water while in custody from December 1999 to January.

Rape of female detainees in police or other official custody has been a problem, as the Chief Justice of the Bangladesh Supreme Court acknowledged in a March speech when he observed that rapes and killings in police custody frequently occurred. Some well-publicized reports of rape in police custody in prior years resulted in a widespread public outcry.

According to human rights groups and media reports, police engaged in violence and looting during the July 1999 raid of the Tanbazar and Nimtali brothel districts, allegedly attacking residents as well as over 40 female human rights activists who were protesting the eviction.

Police sometimes rape women who are not in custody. The Government reported that in May a police constable raped a woman who was not in police custody. After an investigation, the constable was charged with rape and placed under suspension. The case was pending at year's end.



The government frequently uses the police for political purposes.

rights organization asserted that as of September, 307 females (including adults and minors) and 114 male children were in "safe custody." Government figures showed that 353 persons, including 139 women, were in safe custody at year's end.

The police often employ excessive, sometimes lethal, force in dealing with opposition demonstrators. Before a scheduled rally of former Awami League M.P. Kader Siddiqui in May, police stopped Siddiqui in front of his house, fired gunshots into the sky to scare his followers, and beat him so severely that he required hospitalization.

According to a May Human Rights Watch (HRW) report, Rohingya refugees living in camps continue to suffer abuses, including beatings and other forms of physical abuse, and in the past have been coerced by camp administrators trying to secure their return to Burma.

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Acts of political repression in 2000

ODHIKAR

THE Year 2000 has experienced clear lack of decent political culture that accompanied violence and intimidation in the political arena. However people's republic has become nothing but a mere rhetoric, as guns and goons took over. The number of political killing in the year 2000, according to Odhikar's report, is 234 and most of them were state sponsored.

During the same year 6405 people were injured in political encounters and 1976 people were arrested, sometimes on petty grounds like, belonging to a particular political party. The nation was shocked to know about some undeclared enclaves prevailing in Feni, Laxmipur, Narayanganj. Media revealed the grisly tale of the political godfathers and their so called followers.

leader was attacked by the armed hooligans but the police arrested the mourners. The law enforcing agency and the local administration of this area are apparently working as puppets in the hands of this particular person.

On the other hand, Abu Taher of Laxmipur is so powerful that even after the planned abduction and killing of a veteran local politician advocate Nurul Islam, law-enforcing agency remained mum.

In Barishal town the armed hooligans burned the house of the district BNP Secretary Mr. Ebadul Haque in August 2000. The 'Panama Bahini', a ruling party sponsored terrorist group, were held responsible for this attack.

On December 11 2000 the house of the local BNP secretary Mr. Abul Hossain Miah was attacked by the Chatra League cadres. They dam-

aged the property worth one million taka and looted the property equivalent to half a million taka. During this Chatra League despite repeated

request police reached the spot after one hour when the armed gang already left and no action has been taken yet.

On August 20, 2000 Dhaka City BNP leader Advocate Habibur Rahman Mondol was shot dead in old Dhaka on broad day light. Media indicated involvement of a ruling party Ward Commissioner in this killing.

Last August a veteran businessman and political leader Mr. S.M. Rob who was earlier declared as mayoral election candidate of AL in Khulna city corporation by the prime minister, was killed by the assailant. In the same month Kail Das Baral a local AL leader of Bagherhat was shot dead. He was twice elected as Upazila Chairman of his locality.

A real sense of lawlessness gripped the country after the eight murders in Chittagong. Even after five months of that incident the culprits still remain unidentified.

In October BNP Joint Secretary of Sitakunda Thana, Mr Nuruzzaman was beheaded. Eyewitnesses alleged the involvement of Jewel Majumdar, son of a ruling party MP Kamal Majumdar in the Shipu murder case of Banani.

Every one has the right to justice. But the legal system is used as a tool to oppress the political opponents. Although controversial Special Power Act (SPA) was existent the government introduced a new law titled Public Safety Act (PSA) which came into force from February 2000.

public rally held in Paltan maidan Jubo League president, health and family welfare minister Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim urged his Jubo League activists to take the law in their own hand.

Although controversial Special Power Act (SPA) was existent the government introduced a new law titled Public Safety Act (PSA) which came into force from February 2000. Since its inception the law has been proved as a weapon to harass the opposition activists.

The random abuse of Public Safety Act (PSA) and Special Power Act (SPA) is a common case. Even the influential people like industrialist and parliamentarian Morshed Khan and his son were sued under the PSA. According to a daily news paper, more than 350 cases were filed against the Narayanganj district BNP leaders and workers.

Due to obstacle from the government, in last year opposition activities were mostly confined within their party office premises and a few streets in Dhaka. On the other hand anti hartal and so-called 'peace processions' were allowed to take over the street. It is alleged that 'peace processionists' are by nature violent and they possess illegal arms.

Not only that within hours of the split verdict, the house of the brother of a High Court judge came under attack for differing his opinion regarding the death sentence of the five others. Although freedom of movement and assembly is a fundamental right, last year in several occasions, opposition activists were prevented from joining rally and mass gathering. Even the law enforcing agencies including the police and BDR put road barricade to prevent leader of the opposition Khaleda Zia from visiting flood hit Kolaroa.



The right to movement was frequently denied in 2000.

Fazlous Sattar has prepared this report on behalf of Odhikar, a coalition for human rights.