Bangladesh 2006: A human rights audit

Hameeda Hossain runs a critical eye over Bangladesh's human rights record of the past year

BANGLADESH took great pride in its nomination to the UN Human Rights Council last March. But it overlooked its responsibility to account for its own record of reporting to the UN committees charged with monitoring state implementation of human rights standards on torture, civil and political rights and social and economic rights.

If it had, the state's failure to protect the rights of its citizens to life, liberty and livelihood would have come to international attention. Perhaps many thought that selection to the council would whitewash our national image, but, in fact, the record of political democracy in Bangladesh has shown declining respect for human rights and democratic practices.

This year, as earlier, impunity for egregious violations of human rights by both state and non-state actors constituted an acute source of insecurity. Second, the rights to life and liberty, to equality and security were, and continue to be, imperiled in the absence of any change in the now all-pervasive political culture of winner-takes-all for purposes of accumulation and control, and vendetta against political opponents. The denial of political freedoms allowed a silencing of the right to livelihood.



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Right to life

In the last parliamentary elections in 2001, the BNP strategically contested on a commitment to restore law and order, as a response to the political violence which had preceded its rule. But little did the voters, who brought the four party alliance to power, realize that within three years the right to life would be seriously endangered as the government set up the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a composite security force drawn from the military, police and other auxiliary forces under a special law passed in 2004.

Crossfire killings: Ten RAB battalions went into action in June 2004 with orders to arrest alleged "terrorists" or criminals. But their operations led to an unprecedented number of extra-judicial killings. The due process of law was ignored -- without even the customary lip service being paid to the