Do the Right Thing

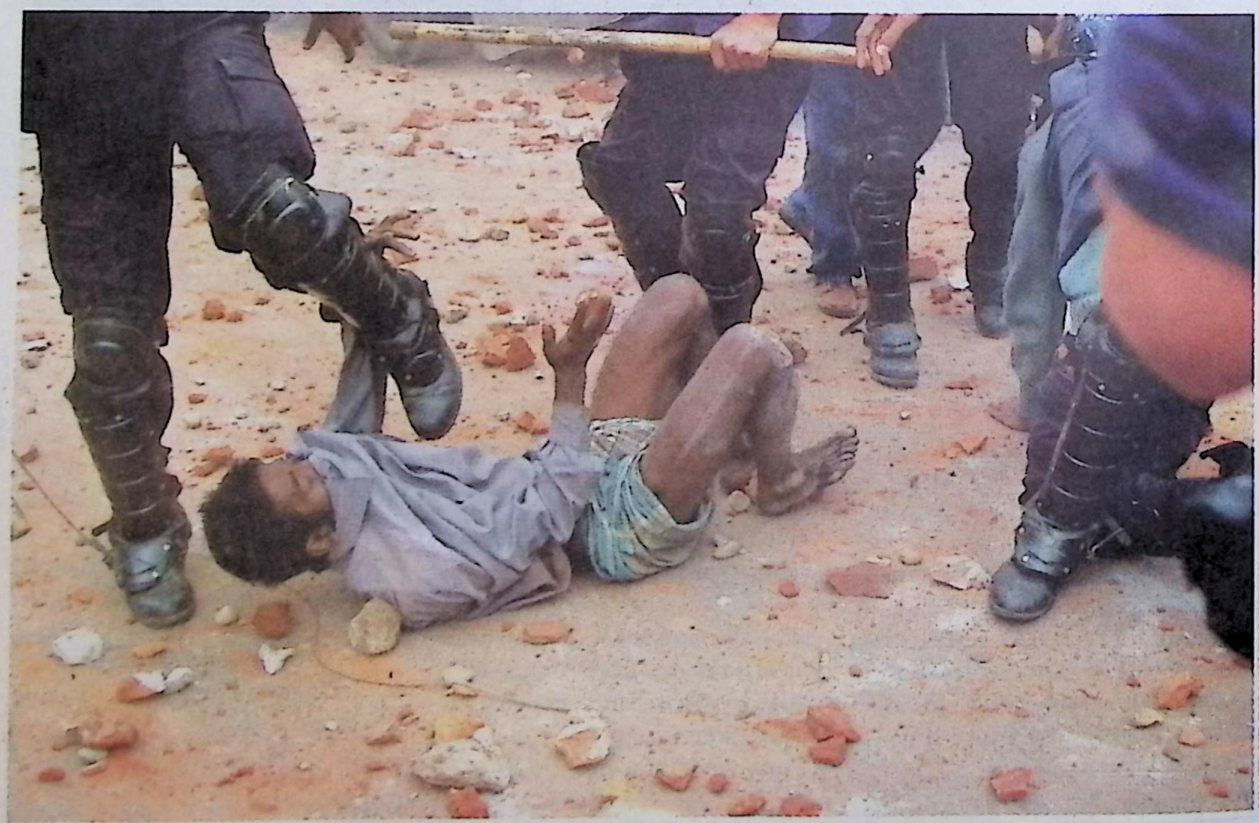
A human rights commission must have effective powers, argues Hameeda Hossain

TO the surprise of human rights defenders an Ordinance on a Human Rights Commission was promulgated on December 23, 2007. Although the need for such an institution had been pressed by human rights defenders for over 15 years, and Bangladesh had made international commitments to this effect, elected governments had since failed to enact the legislation.

The government may be commended, as this was not a commitment of the care-taker government. The ordinance could have benefited from consultations with the human rights constituency and it is a pity that the bureaucrats' committee tasked with this did not in fact hold any consultations in preparing the draft.

While the announcement of the government's intention may help to prove Bangladesh's credentials in the Human Rights Council in 2009, the design of the Human Rights Commission does not suggest a serious capacity to promote and protect human rights, prevent violations, and to take action against the violators.

Bangladesh has never hesitated to signal a formal commitment to human rights. Chapter III of the Constitution expressly guarantees a citizen's fundamental rights and civil liberties. Between 1998 and 2000, Bangladesh ratified three of the basic human rights treaties: the International Covenants for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), as well as the Convention against Torture (CAT). It had also ratified the Conventions on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and on Child



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