



**JANUARY 2007**

**COUNTRY SUMMARY**

## **Bangladesh**

Political and security conditions continued to deteriorate in Bangladesh in 2006. The country's already poor human rights record worsened, as security forces continued to commit numerous abuses, including extrajudicial killings, excessive use of force, and custodial torture. The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB, an elite "anti-crime" and "anti-terror" unit) and the police were responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial killings in 2006. A culture of impunity—reinforced by legislation which largely shields the security forces from legal challenge and by government praise for many of the unlawful killings—leads to abuses going largely uninvestigated and unpunished.

Security forces used mass arrests as a means to suppress demonstrations. Workers in the export garment industry were subjected to violence and job dismissal in response to demands for wage increases and safe work conditions. Violence by religious extremists increased, and fundamentalist political groups gained influence in government.

With elections approaching in early 2007, tensions increased between the two main political parties, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL). There were fears of widespread violence in the pre-election period as the parties argued over the election modalities, including serious disputes over the impartiality of the caretaker government and the Election Commission.

The BNP-led government did little to protect or promote human rights. A bill to create a Human Rights Commission promised by the government was never tabled in parliament. Several other bills that could have promoted human rights—such as bills on freedom of information, nationality, or domestic violence—were shelved.

### **Political Tensions and Violence in the Run-Up to Elections**

Article 58 of the constitution stipulates that parliamentary elections be conducted by an independent election commission during the three-month tenure of a neutral, non-party

caretaker government. At the close of the parliament's five-year term in October 2006 and the resignation of the four-party alliance government led by the BNP, the Awami League and its 14-party alliance renewed their longstanding demands. The demands include the appointment of neutral persons to the caretaker government; reform and restructuring of the election commission; and withdrawal of officials seen as partial to the outgoing government. President Iajuddin Ahmed, contrary to precedent, appointed himself as chief caretaker advisor and selected 10 advisers to assist him.

Political violence between supporters of different political parties in October led to 28 deaths and many injuries. During the year, violence between political parties had accounted for the deaths of 30 activists.

### **Extrajudicial Killings**

2006 saw an increase in extrajudicial killings by RAB and the police, although these were regularly euphemistically dubbed "crossfire" killings. Many killings were of criminal suspects, but some had a political taint. RAB and other security agencies also perpetrated torture during custody and interrogation, and the public display of tortured and executed victims appeared to be a RAB tactic to instill fear among criminals and the population. Instead of holding RAB accountable the government heaped praise on it. Despite substantial evidence, no RAB member has been criminally convicted for extrajudicial killings.

Death in custody is common. In 2006, 51 prisoners, of whom 32 were standing trial, were reported to have died from various causes, including violence by guards and fellow prisoners, and delays in medical treatment.

### **Rise of Extremist Militancy**

Since 1999, 19 bomb and grenade explosions by religious extremists belonging to militant organizations such as Jama'tul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Harqatul Jihad, and Ahle Hadith have left 181 people dead and over 1,700 injured. It was only after synchronized bombings in 63 districts in August 2005 raised national and international concern that the government started investigating and prosecuting suspects. Between December 2005 and October 2006 over 300 alleged militants

were arrested (including the six leaders of the JMB), 241 cases were filed, and 29 people were sentenced to life in prison or capital punishment. Four organizations were banned. It was alleged, however, that madrasas used for training were not investigated and donations from foreign Muslim organizations did not cease.

After a suicide bomber killed two judges in 2005 the judiciary has operated in a climate of fear and uncertainty. This has been exacerbated by political interference and pressure at the national and local levels. On November 12, 2006, judges' associations in the lower courts asked for additional protections from the government.

### **Freedom of Expression, Assembly, and Association**

Opposition demonstrations for the appointment of a neutral chief advisor to the caretaker government and restructuring of the Election Commission were brutally suppressed. On September 6, 2006, police used force to disperse an Awami League (AL) rally, and several leaders including Saber Hussain Chowdhury and Asaduzaman Noor were beaten with rifle butts and batons. The government resorted to imposing Section 144—which bans assembly of more than four persons—on 93 occasions in six districts, followed by preemptive mass arrests of over 28,000 persons to prevent demonstrations by political parties. Most of those arrested were ordinary citizens such as transport workers and day laborers.

Women activists participating in political rallies or demonstrations faced assaults and sexual harassment by police. At an AL rally on March 12, 2006, several young women were assaulted and arrested during a political strike, among them Shaheen Sultana Santa, who was pregnant at that time, but a magistrate dismissed Santa's assault complaint against the Dhaka Metropolitan Police as unfounded after a police investigation. In November six women professionals were assaulted and arrested by police when they joined a march to submit a memorandum to the chief election commissioner.

Journalists, particularly in the southwest of the country, were targets of violence by business syndicates and politicians. In 2006 three journalists were killed, allegedly for their reports on corrupt syndicates or religious militants. Seventy-two reporters were assaulted by gangs allegedly belonging to the ruling party alliance, fundamentalist groups, or powerful businessmen. Criminal or defamation cases were filed against 63

journalists. In Kushtia a BNP member of parliament assaulted and threatened a journalist for reporting his illegal activities. Reporters and photojournalists have also been the target of police assault during political demonstrations.

## **Minorities**

Land-grabs from religious and ethnic minorities have become a common phenomenon. Hindus have complained that the repeal of the Vested Property Act in 2001 has not helped in the recovery of properties appropriated by powerful individuals.

Discrimination against religious minorities is manifest in their low participation in political and other decision-making institutions and their poor access to bank loans and other opportunities. They have also been subjected to violence because of their beliefs. Although Hindus appeared to be freer to perform puja festivals in towns in 2006, village gangs aligned with the BNP were known to attack temples and demolish deities. The Buddhist *Ras Mela* festival had to be canceled in a few villages because of intimidation.

The Ahmaddiyas, a small Muslim sect, have been threatened with expulsion, violence, and occupation of their mosques by religious zealots under the banner of the Khatme Nabuwat Movement. The government has not revoked its ban on Ahmaddiya literature, nor has it prosecuted persons who attacked Ahmaddiya mosques, but in 2006 under international pressure the police were able to prevent large-scale violence.

## **Workers' Rights**

Contrary to expectations, following the expiry of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement, Bangladesh's garment exports to the United States and the European Union increased substantially. But over two million workers who contributed to exports from 4,000 factories did not see improvements in their labor conditions. Unsafe working environments remained common. Following the collapse of a garment factory in 2004 and fire in another factory in Chittagong in 2005, workers became more vocal in their demands for a minimum wage, maternity leave, overtime pay, and safe working conditions. In May-June 2006 strikers in several knitwear factories in Gazipur and Savar were attacked by gangs allegedly hired by management and

police. A tripartite Minimum Wage Board recommended an increase in the minimum wage that fell far short of workers' expectations.

Bangladeshi workers migrating to Persian Gulf states continue to confront a wide range of abuses, including non-payment of their full wages, having their passports withheld, and suffering hazardous working conditions. Many are made especially vulnerable to labor exploitation as a result of exorbitant debt payments to labor recruiters.

## **Corruption**

In 2006 Bangladesh ranked the third lowest in the Transparency International index of corruption. The Anti-Corruption Commission appointed in 2005 has been inoperative.

Corruption in the energy sector leads to scarcity of electricity and water for many people, provoking protests by affected villagers who complain that power distribution favors Dhaka's luxury malls over irrigation. Police shot five persons, including a 10-year-old boy, in a demonstration in Kansat, while protesters in Sonir Akhra were assaulted by gangs led by a BNP member of parliament.

In August 2006 police shot and killed five people demonstrating against plans by the Asian Energy Company for opencast coal mining and the consequent eviction of several hundred indigenous families from Phulbaria.

## **Key International Actors**

There was a lack of urgency in the efforts by outside actors that belied the risks of military intervention or increased militancy facing Bangladesh if elections did not proceed credibly. The European Union troika, on a visit to Bangladesh in February 2006, expressed concerns about free and fair elections, abuses in counterterrorism efforts, poor governance, and a lack of respect for human rights. It asked for strengthening of the Anti-Corruption Commission and for the establishment of a Human Rights Commission. The United States expressed concern with the rising scale of political violence and offered its support for a fair and free election.

Bangladesh was elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council in March, even though it has failed to submit its initial reports to the UN Committees on Civil and Political Rights, on Torture, and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Reservations to articles 2 and 16.1(c) of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have not been withdrawn, and parliament did not amend citizenship laws to enable women to pass their nationality to their partner and children as recommended by the CEDAW Committee.