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BGD41618.E

05 August 2003

Bangladesh: Information on goons/thugs/mastans, and the nature of their relationship to political and police authorities (1998-2003)

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At a seminar on law and order in Bangladesh, several high-ranking government, business and legal representatives described a "grim picture" of civil security in the country (UNB 27 July 2002). Enamul Huq, former Inspector General of Police, stated that "without internal security, there can be no government, and without constitutional government there can be no freedom" (ibid.). He added that "the term 'mastan, muscleman, hijacker, goon, and above all, political activist' under the patronage of Godfathers ... are more or less familiar to each and everyone" in present-day Bangladesh (ibid.). According to the *Daily Star*, in the past, local mastans were no more than petty street criminals, but with the patronage of godfathers and armed with guns, they have been transformed into "formidable 'terrorist[s]'" (10 June 1999). The *Daily Star* reports that the

... godfathers ... are very influential persons disguised as the "elite" of the society. Some of them are drug lords, some are arms dealers, while others are smugglers, all of whom harbour mastans to protect their illegal business. Then, there is the growing number of politicians who either give shelter to mastans or "hire" mastans into their respective party-backed armed cadres.

The nexus between politicians and criminals allows the politician to strengthen his/her power base on the one hand, while it allows the mastans to enjoy legal and political protection on the other. Other than the underworld crime syndicates and politicians, some businessmen and industrialist[s] - aware that the State is failing to provide security - also recruit mastans for personnel [sic] and material protection against other mastans. *In short, mastans are able to sustain [themselves] because of the various vested interest groups of the society.* Whether the cause is political, commercial or personal, there is invariably a constant demand for mastans in the society (ibid., italics in original).

Several articles address incidents of violence allegedly caused by goons on behalf of the two main political parties: the governing Awami League (AL) party long before the October 2001 elections (*Vancouver Sun* 30 June 1998), the AL and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) in the period leading up to and during the October 2001 elections (*Daily Janakantha* 18 Aug. 2001; *Statesman* 26 Oct. 2001; *tehelka.com* 14 Oct. 2001) and the BNP-led ruling coalition afterwards (*Statesman* 3 Aug. 2002). A *Daily Janakantha* report stated that armed thugs in the southwest of Bangladesh were

"awaiting offer for election works on behalf of various political parties" (18 Aug. 2001). While the AL was in power from 1996-2001, members of the party, including "MPs and ministers with their armed goons ... hijacked prime property, indulged in extortion and even smashed the limbs of journalists who exposed them," according to the *Statesman* (26 Oct. 2001). Moreover, both tehelka.com, a New Delhi-based independent online news site, and *The Independent* reported that BNP-backed goons were killing people and attacking the settlements of religious minorities because of their support for the AL party (tehelka.com 14 Oct. 2001; *The Independent* 22 Oct. 2001). According to *The Hindu*, "both the Awami League and the BNP have their mastans but the ruling party, having greater patronage to dispense with, is perceived as the fountainhead" (29 Mar. 2001).

Since the BNP coalition government's rise to power in 2001, reports of politically motivated violence have continued (*Daily Janakantha* 12 Mar. 2003; *ibid.* 24 Mar. 2002; *The Independent* 3 May 2002). According to the *Daily Janakantha*, "well-known local gangsters," allegedly backed by the BNP, gang raped a Hindu garment worker in Chittagangj (12 Mar. 2003). After the local police refused to assist the victim, a human rights group filed a court case demanding the dismissal of the police officer on duty (*ibid.*).

The acting President of the AL, Abdus Samad Azad, stated that AL "activists and supporters are being tortured and killed by [the BNP] regime" (*The Independent* 3 May 2002). Azad denounced the murders of a Buddhist monk and a Hindu priest by BNP goons in Chittagong region (*ibid.*). According to the *Daily Janakantha*, BNP activists were also allegedly responsible for the burning of a Buddhist temple in Ukyia and the confiscation of Hindu land at Chandgram village (*Daily Janakantha* 24 Mar. 2002). For additional information on the treatment of religious minorities in Bangladesh by the political and police authorities, please consult BGD41682.E of 5 August 2003.

University campuses are also reportedly subject to conflict instigated by goons and activists (Islam in Bangladesh Dec. 2002; *Asian Affairs* Aug. 2002; *Daily Star* 31 July 2001; *ibid.* 30 Jan. 2000). A 3 August 1999 *Daily Star* article stated that over 200 students at Jahangirnagar University ransacked rooms and demanded the arrests of the "killers and rapists"3/4who allegedly belong to the AL-supported Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL)3/4responsible for "capturing" the campus. Three people were arrested after hundreds of police raided the campus (*Daily Star* 3 Aug. 1999). However, without naming a specific incident, a 30 January 2000 *Daily Star* article stated that "the rapists of the JN University could not be touched despite the demand from all quarters as they ... happened to be the activists of the party in power."

Also in August 1999, rival factions of the BCL reportedly entered into an armed conflict at Chittagong University (*Daily Star* 15 Aug. 1999). According to the *Daily Star*, despite police raids and the arrest of 10 BCL members involved in the incident that left 50 people wounded, "such 'raids', in all probability, would make no difference and a handful of armed goons, in the name of student politics, would continue toying with the fate of general students" (15 Aug. 1999).

In 2001, students at the Asian University of Bangladesh were allegedly threatened by armed goons hired by the university authorities after making demands for a "separate certificate for distance-learning and regular students and [the] appointment of a permanent Vice-Chancellor" at their university (*Daily Star* 31 July 2001). Six students were arrested in the dispute that involved the boycotting of classes, an organized "agitation programme" and the ransacking of an administrative office (*ibid.*). The university's treasurer claimed that the majority of the 1,500 students wanted to attend classes and that only a small group of 40 to 50 students were creating the instability (*ibid.*).

According to a 2002 *Asian Affairs* article,

In spite of a very positive role played by a section of students in the movement against the Ershad autocracy in the 1980s, the campus nowadays appears to be held hostage by a minority of essentially apolitical, amoral, armed mercenaries. These commoditised student leaders tend to use the campus as a platform for their business activities and periodically engage in armed conflicts to occupy university halls of residence as an urban version of land-grabbing.

It is, thus, inconceivable for the better students to aspire to positions of leadership in the student movements so that student politics has become victim to a version of Gresham's Law where bad politics drives out good politics. It is not surprising that such mercenaries readily switch political loyalties from regime to regime in order to seek the political patronage necessary to secure immunity from the law (Aug. 2002).

With respect to the types of people targeted by goons, the *Daily Star* states that "Bangladesh has a history of repression on journalists" and provides as evidence examples of two journalists who were killed and many others who were arrested, detained, harassed or threatened by police and hoodlums in 2002 (*Daily Star* 17 Mar. 2001). In 2001, journalist Tipu Sultan was severely beaten "by the goons of a ruling party MP" (ibid.). Reporters Without Borders also documented the violent attack on Tipu Sultan, a journalist with the United News of Bangladesh, and Prabir Shikder, of the *Daily Janakantha*, by "henchmen" of the AL government in the last few months it was in power, as well as the "outburst of violence" against journalists instigated by supporters of the BNP after it took power in October 2001 (RSF 25 Apr. 2002). According to the report, "more than 50 reporters were attacked or threatened with death in the first three months of [the] conservative [BNP] government" coming to power (ibid.). A separate Reporters Without Borders report quotes the following statements made by a representative of the Dhaka Crime Reporters Association:

"Mafia groups are increasingly well-organised and never hesitate to threaten or assault anyone who stands in their way .... They always react very quickly whenever our newspaper prints an article about their activities. They call and threaten us on our cellular phones. I would not be at all surprised if some police officers were giving them our telephone numbers. ... In many rural towns, the interests of the mafioso's, and those of political militants, police officers and even journalists can become entangled ..." (17 June 2002).

Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, Executive Director of a local press freedom organization called Media Watch, commenting in the same report said that

"it is always hard to say whether the attacks [against journalists] have been ordered by the politicians or initiated by the perpetrators themselves .... The violence broke out anew in October 2001 because these lawless gangs were able to continue committing their crimes with total impunity just by switching their political allegiance" (RSF 17 June 2002).

According to AL opposition leader, Sheikh Hasina, "[s]ince the assumption of office by the present regime, three journalists have been killed and twenty-six press clubs have been forcibly occupied by the goons of the ruling parties" (*Daily Star* 23 Feb. 2003). Reporters Without Borders states in their 2003 annual report on Bangladesh that "Bangladesh is by far the world's most violent country for journalists"; "nothing seem[s] to be able to rein in the violence against the press ..." (RSF 2003).

For a comprehensive overview of corruption and its relationship to mastans among the police, the land administration, the media, private business, transport and other sectors of society in Bangladesh, please consult the attached report on Bangladesh entitled "Corruption As People See It" by Transparency International.

For additional information on goons in Bangladesh, please refer to BGD34075.E of 1 May 2000 and BGD33117.E of 28 October 1999.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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#### Attachment

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