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U.S. Department of State

Bangladesh Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1997.

BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, leader of the Awami League, which came to power in national elections in June. Major opposition parties include the previous ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Jatiyo Party and Jamaat-E-Islami. Elections under the BNP in February were boycotted by all other major parties (which demanded that the BNP hand over power to a neutral caretaker administration) and marred by rigging and violence. Faced with mounting antigovernment agitation, the Parliament in March passed a constitutional amendment requiring a caretaker regime for all future general parliamentary elections. The June elections, under a caretaker government headed by a retired Chief Justice, were deemed to be generally free and fair by domestic and international observers. Although the BNP blamed its losses on vote-rigging by the Awami League and partisan government employees, it nonetheless joined Parliament as the largest opposition party. The judiciary displays a high degree of independence.

The Home Affairs Ministry controls the police and paramilitary forces, which bear primary responsibility for maintaining internal security. The army and paramilitary forces are responsible for security in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), where a tribal group has waged a low-level insurgency since 1974. A cease-fire between government forces and insurgents generally held throughout the year; however, there were sporadic violations. Police officers committed a number of serious human rights abuses.

Bangladesh is a poor country. Annual per capita income is approximately \$250; about 43 percent of the country's 123 million people exist on incomes insufficient to meet minimum daily needs. Eighty percent

of the work force is involved in agriculture, which accounts for approximately one-third of the gross domestic product. There is a growing industrial sector, based largely on the manufacture of garments, textiles, industrial goods such as rerolled steel, cement, and jute. There is a small wealthy elite, and a middle class is emerging. Efforts to reform the economy have been hampered by political turmoil and the opposition of public sector enterprises, government bureaucrats, and other vested interests.

The Government continues to restrict or deny many fundamental rights. Police committed extrajudicial killings, and 17 detainees reportedly died in police custody. Police routinely use torture and other forms of abuse in interrogating suspects. The Government rarely convicts and punishes those responsible for torture or unlawful deaths. The Government continues to use national security laws to detain political opponents and other citizens without formal charge. A large case backlog slows the judicial process, and lengthy pretrial detention is a problem. The Government places some limitations on freedom of assembly. Women, minorities, the disabled, religious minorities, and indigenous people face societal discrimination. Violence against women and prostitution and trafficking of children remain serious problems. The Government continues to limit worker rights, and child labor is a problem.

RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom from:

a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were numerous extrajudicial killings during the year. In the western city of Bogra, from August 22 to 25, violence between police and students led to the death of three students and a police officer. The violence began when, following the death of a student in a traffic accident, other students staged a violent demonstration and attacked buses. Police then fired on the demonstrators, killing two students, and the demonstrators in turn shot and killed a police officer. During a confrontation the next day at the police station, police shot and killed another student. The firings wounded many other persons. The Government established a judicial investigation committee, which has yet to issue a report. While in this well-publicized case the Government compensated the families of those killed, and withdrew several police officers from the post, a general climate of police impunity from punishment remains a serious obstacle to ending police abuse and extrajudicial killings.

According to human rights monitors, 17 persons died while in custody in the first 9 months of 1996. According to the Government, six persons died in custody, but there was no evidence that any died from mistreatment. However, numerous press and human rights reports concerning police abuse and deaths of prisoners indicate that this claim is inaccurate and masks serious abuse. For example, in July police reportedly beat to death two men in their custody in Dhaka. In October police reportedly tortured to death an activist of the BNP youthwing, the Jatiyabadi Jubo Dal, in Dhaka.

Violence, often resulting in killings, is a pervasive element in the political process. Demonstrators from all parties, and even within parties, often clash with police and with each other during rallies and demonstrations. The year was marked by widespread political violence leading to numerous deaths. In June journalist and Awami League member S. M. Alauddin was killed, possibly due to factional fighting within the party (see Section 2.a.). BNP activists used deadly force to disrupt opposition party gatherings. The Awami League, and other opposition parties, used armed violence and intimidation to enforce their boycott of the February national elections and to enforce numerous general strikes. They similarly disrupted BNP gatherings and government activities. The violence perpetrated by both sides resulted in more than 100 deaths, hundreds of injuries, extensive property damage, and large business losses across the country.

Violence among student political groups, allied with the major national parties, is endemic and reportedly resulted in at least 12 deaths, hundreds of injuries, and the closure of dozens of educational institutions. For example, in August struggles between rival student groups for control of dormitories resulted in approximately 100 injuries and the closure of Dhaka University for 20 days. In September a clash between student activists of rival parties in Cox's Bazar led to one shooting death, and a day-long hartal (general strike) stopping commerce and movement in that town.

In 1995 the Government charged former President Hossain Mohammed Ershad with ordering the 1981 murder of the alleged assassin of President Ziaur Rahman. Previously held in Dhaka central jail, Ershad is currently held in converted quarters (a "subjail") within the Parliament compound. He was moved there by the new Awami League government in July, when Parliament convened. He enjoys periods of 24-hour parole to attend Parliament sessions (he was elected as a Member of Parliament for the second time in June), although he cannot leave the Parliament premises. The murder case is not being actively pursued by the Government. Ershad was already serving a 20-year sentence for corruption (see Section 1.c.).

In August the Government arrested under the Special Powers Act (SPA) retired Lt. Colonel Farook Rahman, the self-confessed organizer of the 1975 assassination of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Government initially told the press that Farook was suspected of illegal weapons possession and plotting to assassinate government officials; later, however, it officially accused him with the 1975 killings in Dhaka Central Jail of four Awami League leaders. Two alleged accomplices in the 1975 murders were arrested at the same time as Farook. Several diplomats were also recalled from abroad as suspected coconspirators (see Section 1.c.).

b. Disappearance

There was one possible incident of politically motivated disappearance during the year. On June 12, Kalpana Chakma, Central Organizing Secretary of the Hill Womens' Federation, an organization of tribal people in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, disappeared from her house. Witnesses and human rights monitors allege that the army abducted her, but one human rights group reported that she was alive in India. The Government formed an investigative committee which has yet to issue any findings.

c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Although the Constitution prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment, police routinely employ psychological and physical torture and other abuse during arrests and interrogations. Torture may consist of threats, beatings, and, occasionally, the use of electric shock. The Government rarely convicts or punishes those responsible for torture, and a climate of impunity allows such police abuses to continue.

Police brutality occurs regularly, and government inaction allows it to continue. In January police raided a dormitory at Dhaka University inhabited mainly by ethnic and religious minority students, ostensibly to search