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U.S. Department of State

Bangladesh Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1997

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1998.

BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a parliamentary democracy headed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, leader of the Awami League, which came to power in 1996 in national elections deemed generally free and fair by domestic and international observers. Major opposition parties include the previous ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Jatiyo Party, and the Jamaat-E-Islami. A 1996 constitutional amendment requires a neutral caretaker government to conduct all general parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, elections are often marred by violence and rigging. 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. In December government and rebel negotiators signed an accord to end the insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT). Police officers committed a number of serious human rights abuses.

Bangladesh is a poor country. Annual per capita income is approximately \$260; about 45 percent of the country's 124 million people exist on incomes insufficient to meet minimum daily needs. Seventy 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 endemic corruption, 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 some people died in police custody under suspicious circumstances. 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. Prison conditions are poor. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Government did not repeal the Special Powers Act (SPA), which allows for arbitrary arrest and preventive detention; it used the SPA to harass political opponents and other citizens by detaining them without formal charge. A large case backlog slows the judicial process, and lengthy pretrial detention is a problem. The Government sometimes infringes on citizens' privacy rights. 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 trafficking of women and children for prostitution remain serious problems. The Government continues to limit worker rights, and child labor is a widespread and serious problem. Vigilante justice resulted in numerous killings.

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 one instance in February, Ansars, a police auxiliary force, fired on a crowd of local villagers who had assembled outside the Ansar camp: 4 people were killed and 11 others wounded. The villagers, from the village of Sadhpur in Savar, had come to investigate the shooting of a local man who was attempting to stop his young niece from being molested by one of the Ansars.

According to human rights monitors, a number of persons died while in custody in the first 9 months of 1996. According to newspaper reports, 23 persons died in police custody through September. Most deaths appear to have been due to mistreatment, or illnesses aggravated by imprisonment. However, human rights reports concerning police abuse and deaths of prisoners indicate that this claim is inaccurate and masks widespread and serious abuse. For example, on February 7, Seema Chowdhury, a garments worker, died while in "safe custody" in Chittagong, 5 days after charges were filed against four police officers for raping her in custody in 1996. An autopsy reported that she died of typhoid, but women's rights activists and some politicians asserted Chowdhury was murdered to prevent her testifying against the police in the rape case. Acting against customary practice, authorities burned her body after the autopsy, destroying any possible physical evidence of murder. In July the four police officers accused of raping her were acquitted for lack of evidence; the Government has appealed the verdict.

In June a man was arrested for attempting to enter the grounds of the Prime Minister's office in Dhaka, and was later beaten to death by police. In August a man detained in Chittagong as a suspected thief died in custody; an autopsy report said that he died from torture (see Section 1.c.). These cases, and that of Seema Chowdhury, gained notoriety, and the Government initiated legal action against the police officers involved. Most abuses, however, go unpunished, and the resulting climate of impunity remains serious obstacle to ending police abuse and extrajudicial killing.

Violence, often resulting in killings, is a pervasive element in Bangladeshi politics (see Section 3). Demonstrators from all parties, and even within parties, often clash with police and with each other during rallies and demonstrations. The Awami League and opposition parties used armed violence and

intimidation to disrupt their opponents gatherings and rallies. Opposition parties also used armed violence to enforce general strikes. The violence perpetrated by both sides resulted in more than 18 deaths and hundreds of injuries. Five persons, including one policeman, were shot and killed in clashes that erupted near the end of a joint opposition rally in Chittagong on November 11, which was held to protest the draft peace agreement between the Government and the CHT insurgents (see Section 5). The BNP stated that two of those killed were its members. The police claimed that there had been a premeditated attack on police by BNP activists who used guns, Molotov cocktails, and small bombs. BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia asserted that "goons" from the ruling Awami League had been responsible for instigating the violence. After the initial clash at the rally site, violent encounters between police and opposition activists took place elsewhere in Chittagong. After the Chittagong clashes, the BNP and other allied opposition parties (chiefly the Jamaat-E-Islami) announced a half-day general strike in Chittagong in protest against the claimed attack by Awami League "goons." BNP activists also took to the streets in central Dhaka and reportedly set fire to more than a dozen vehicles.

More than 300 persons were reported to have been injured in clashes during an 8-hour road and rail blockage outside Dhaka called by opposition political parties on October 5. A BNP Member of Parliament (M.P.) was stabbed during the continued clashes on October 6.

Three people were shot and killed in Chittagong on November 27 During BNP-Awami League clashes, which occurred after Awami League student activists sought to disrupt a visit by BNP leader Khaleda Zia to console victims of an earthquake. The BNP portrayed the events as a deliberate attempt to kill Zia, who barricaded herself in a hospital ward. At least four persons died in November 29-30 violence, during general strikes called by the opposition to protest the alleged "assassination attempt" on Khaleda Zia. Arrest warrants on murder charges were issued against 23 BNP officials, including at least 2 BNP M.P.'s who were trapped along with Khaleda Zia during the November 27 incident.

Violence is also endemic among the student political groups allied with the major national parties. It reportedly resulted in at least 6 deaths by October, hundreds of injuries, and the frequent closure of educational institutions.

Murders of local-level political activists and activists of the student fronts of major parties are common occurrences; the distinctions, however, between politically motivated murders and purely criminal acts are blurred by the involvement of many politicians and political party activists in organized crime.

In 1995 the Government charged former president Hossain Mohammed Ershad with ordering the 1981 murder of the alleged assassin of President Ziaur Rahman. Ershad was granted bail in January and later allowed to travel abroad. 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 1995 police in Dinajpur abducted, raped, and murdered a 15-year-old girl named Yasmeen. The murder sparked riots in Dinajpur during which police killed seven people. The case went to trial in 1997, and in August three police officers were convicted of the mur