

Amnesty International UK

MEDIA BRIEFING

COMMONWEALTH GAMES GLASGOW 2014 BANGLADESH: WHERE TORTURE AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES RUN RAMPANT

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“Amnesty International has raised serious concerns about the worrying levels of human rights violations taking place in Bangladesh. These include widespread torture and other forms of ill-treatment carried out with impunity by the police and security services; the use of the death penalty; violence against women, girls, minorities and indigenous people; as well as the conditions faced by workers, particularly in the garment industry.

“The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory building last year, which left more than 1,100 workers dead and many more injured, is one of the most shocking recent example of business-related human rights abuse. It illustrates the urgent need for human rights reform in Bangladesh, ensuring workers’ safety and their protection against unacceptable working conditions.

“Whilst spotlighting how human rights are treated in Bangladesh, the disaster also highlights the need for governments and business around the world to ensure that human rights are protected and safeguarded, rather than traded away in the quest for profit.”

Siobhan Reardon – Programme Director, Amnesty International Scotland

Amnesty International’s statements and reports into the state of human rights in Bangladesh can be found here: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/bangladesh>

Amnesty spokesperson available throughout the Games
Daily media briefings available throughout the Games

BANGLADESH

Population: 154,695,368

President: Abdul Hamid

Games debut: Auckland, 1990

National sport: Kabaddi, cricket

Delhi 2010 medal tally: Bangladesh participated in 7 sports

Human rights concerns:

Issues of concern include: enforced disappearances; restrictions on the right to freedom of expression; widespread torture and other ill-treatment committed in the vast majority of cases with virtual impunity by the police and intelligence agencies; use of the death penalty; violence against women and girls; violence against minorities; the unsafe places of work for ready-made garment workers and undue delays in providing compensation to workers or their families affected by the collapse of Rana Plaza building, which housed numerous garment factories supplying international clothing companies .

Enforced disappearances

Enforced disappearances have continued to take place with dozens of people having been forcibly disappeared in recent years. Eyewitnesses have reported seeing people being abducted by the police or Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) personnel, but these two forces have denied being involved. No one has been brought to justice for the enforced disappearances.

The only exception is the enforced disappearance and murder of seven people in Narayanganj in April 2014. For the first time since the formation of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in 2004, three of its officers have been removed from active service, detained and are being investigated for their alleged involvement in the abductions and murders in Narayanganj. There is, however, a danger that the investigation might slow down or even be abandoned under possible pressure from RAB.

Amnesty International is urging the government of Bangladesh to carry out thorough and rigorous investigations into all cases of enforced disappearance, and to bring to justice those responsible.

Freedom of Expression

There are strong indications that the right to freedom of expression is being curtailed in Bangladesh. Of particular concern is the government's use of Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act, against journalists and human rights defenders. It allows the government to bring charges against people who write or say something that is critical of the authorities or security agencies. At least four bloggers and two human rights defenders have been charged with disseminating "fake", "obscene", "defaming information" whose effect may be to "deprave" or "corrupt" persons, or "hurt religious belief". They are facing trial and a maximum sentence of 10 years imprisonment.

Amnesty International considers Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act to be incompatible with the provisions of Article 19 of the ICCPR. It urges the government to repeal this section and to ensure that all other provisions in the Act comply with the ICCPR.

Amnesty International is urging the government to drop all charges brought against people under this act.

Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment

Torture and other ill-treatment has long been rampant in Bangladesh and the practice has continued into 2014. Torture methods have frequently included beating, kicking, suspension from the ceiling, electric shocks to the genitals and, in some cases, shooting the detainees in their legs.

Investigation into torture complaints is rare and take place only in cases where the victim has died in police custody or in prison. Even so, only in a few of the many cases of deaths in custody have the police officers involved been ever brought to justice.

Amnesty International is urging the government to ensure that all complaints of torture or other ill-treatment are investigated promptly, impartially and effectively and those responsible for torture or other ill-treatment are brought to justice.

Death Penalty

Bangladesh is one of only nine countries which has continuously executed over the past five years. It also sentenced more than 220 people to death in 2013, a considerable rise on 2012. Of the death sentences, 152 were handed down in a single case related to a 2009 mutiny, following which the accused were allegedly tortured during their pre-trial detention. At least 1,100 people were reported to be on death row at the end of the year.

The scope of the death penalty was reportedly expanded on 16 June, when the Parliament adopted the Children Act 2013 allowing for the death penalty to be imposed against adults using children to carry out terrorist activities, as defined under the Anti-Terrorism Act 2009.

In 2013, the International Crimes Tribunal, a Bangladeshi court set up to try people accused of killings and other human rights abuses during the 1971 independence war, sentenced seven people to death. The sentence in one of the two cases in which the defendants had initially been awarded life imprisonment, that of Abdul Quader Mollah, a key figure in the Islamist opposition party Jamaat-e-Islami, was appealed by the prosecution and was increased to a sentence of death by the Supreme Court on 5 December. Without legal avenues available to appeal his death sentence, Abdul Quader Mollah was executed on 12 December 2013. On 29 April 2013 Bangladesh was reviewed under the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the UN Human Rights Council. The government rejected recommendations to reconsider its position on capital punishment; establish a moratorium on executions; and abolish the death penalty.

Amnesty International is urging the government of Bangladesh to put a moratorium on executions, with a view to abolishing the death penalty.

Violence against Women and Girls

Women have continued to be subjected to various forms of violence. These have included acid attacks, murder for failing to pay the requested dowry, flogging for religious offences by illegal arbitration committees, domestic violence, and sexual violence.

Violence against Religious Minorities

In 2013 and since the country's elections in January 2014, more than 100 have been killed during street protests, which have been usually violent. The country's minority Hindu community - Hindus comprise around 10 per cent of the population - are hidden victims in this political crisis.

Hindus have been terrorised, their homes and shops set on fire, their belongings looted and their temples vandalised. Many have left their homes and some have fled to India.

The authorities must do more to protect Hindus and provide access to justice for the victims of attacks.

Business-related Human Rights Abuse

The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory building in Bangladesh, on 24 April 2013, left more than 1,100 workers dead and many more injured.

The Rana Plaza building housed numerous garment factories supplying international clothing companies. Over the past year, there have been various initiatives to provide compensation to the victims, involving government, global brands, and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). However, these efforts have so far proved insufficient, and survivors continue to suffer and struggle to support themselves and their families.

The high degree of political influence by the garment industry in Bangladesh is apparent. It is estimated that 10 per cent of the country's members of parliament are directly involved in the sector, including members of key committees. A recent report by New York University highlighted how the garment industry's close relationship with government is a primary reason why labour laws are so badly enforced in Bangladesh.

Amnesty International's own research has highlighted the pervasive problem of undue corporate influence on governments. The private sector is of course entitled to engage with

governments, and can legitimately influence state policy; however, all too often business interests and profits are prioritized over human rights and can prevent victims from obtaining justice.

Case - Kalpana Chakma

Kalpana Chakma was one of the leaders of The Hill Women's Federation, an organisation campaigning for the rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh. In 1996, at the age of 23, she was abducted from her home by plain clothed security officers. Two of her brothers were also abducted. However while her brothers escaped, Kalpana Chakma has never been found.

Kalpana's disappearance has been linked to her support of a candidate representing indigenous people in the elections that were proceeding at the time of her abduction. Prior to her disappearance there had been long-running conflict between indigenous and non-indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Vital information was omitted from the information that the police filed about Kalpana's case immediately after her abduction, including the names of alleged assailants.

In addition to the first investigation in February 1998, 2 further investigations have been carried out in May 2010 and in September 2012. But in each of these the investigators did not visit the area, they did not interview the key witnesses and the reports did not mention the 3 alleged culprits who witnesses report seeing taking her away.

The deadline the Superintendent of Police to submit her investigation report into this case has been missed yet again, despite the deadline having been extended several times since December 2013.

On the 8th June this year, over 5000 messages from Amnesty International activists were received by Kalpana's brother Kalindi ahead of the 18th anniversary of Kalpana's disappearance. Seeing the letters, he said, "I am very happy that young children across the world expressed their concerns for my family; at the same time, these letters remind me of my sister, whose fate remains unknown to us".

Her disappearance is still not being adequately investigated, and vital information is still being excluded from the authorities' reports.

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