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Bangladesh: Young boy among six killed in electricity protests

The Bangladeshi government must immediately set up an independent investigation into the killings of farmers protesting electricity shortages in the northern town of Kansat, said Amnesty International today. Six more deaths were reported overnight as police clashed with farmers.

Ten-year-old Anwar and 63-year-old Abdur Rahman, a teacher, were among those killed by police yesterday as up to 12,000 people took to the streets, according to local officials. People at the scene said police fired live ammunition with AK47s, rubber bullets and tear gas to dispel the crowd, which responded with sticks and machetes. Local news reported around 300 people were injured, including nearly 20 police officers.

"At least twenty people have been killed in these electricity protests since January," said Abbas Faiz, South Asia researcher at Amnesty International. "There must be an impartial investigation into these deaths and anyone found responsible for illegal killing should be brought to justice without delay. Any police officers suspected of shooting civilians should be removed from active service pending investigation."

According to local news reports, police also vandalised and looted houses in a number of villages, beat up villagers and arrested dozens of people. The reports also said that police prevented journalists going near the scene, and threatened them with a gun when they asked for the names of victims.

There are severe shortages in the supply of electricity and fuel to the area, affecting the pumps that farmers use to irrigate their crops. The resulting lack of water is seriously threatening the current rice crop and farmers' livelihoods. Local people fear food shortages in the coming year.

It is the responsibility of governments to ensure people have the necessary means to prevent the destruction of their livelihood.

"The authorities must ensure the means for farmers to grow their food and maintain their livelihoods," said Abbas Faiz. "A regular supply of electricity is urgently needed for irrigation to prevent the destruction of the current paddy crop, on which these farmers depend for their survival."

Most of those protesting are electricity customers who pay the government-owned Rural Electrification Board for supplies they say they do not receive. Farmers report not receiving electricity for days, and then when they do get a supply it is only for a maximum of four to five hours. Farmers are demanding that electricity supplies be continuous, and that they should pay only for the electricity that they actually

receive.

Background

On 4 January 2006 two men were killed and 50 received bullet wounds when police opened fire at demonstrators in Kansat, Chapainawabganj district. The killings triggered further protests. On 23 January 2006 seven people were killed and more than 100 injured by police firing at demonstrators. A 12-year-old boy died the following day from his injuries.

On 5 April 2006 at least four people were killed when local Bangladeshi Nationalist Party members mounted bomb attacks on the farmers' rally.

The Bangladesh Bar Council's Human Rights Committee feared police would resort to arresting large numbers of people and filed a public interest litigation before the High Court. On 10 April the High Court ruled that none of the protesting farmers should be arrested or harassed except in compliance with the law. It also gave the government three weeks to explain why the killings on 4 and 23 January should not be considered unlawful; why compensation should not be paid to the bereaved families; and why the authorities should not be directed to provide electricity to the area for a specified period.

Public Document

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