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Bangladesh: Impunity encouraging killings of human rights defenders

The failure of successive governments in Bangladesh to stop the assassination of people promoting human rights in the country has encouraged such killings to increase in a climate of total impunity, Amnesty International revealed in a report published today.

The report, *Bangladesh: Human rights defenders under attack*, highlights arbitrary arrest, torture and filing of unfounded criminal charges by government agents against those who dare to speak out on human rights abuses in the country. Such people are routinely subjected to death threats, physical attacks and sometimes assassination. Perpetrators are individuals or groups usually linked to armed criminal gangs, political parties or mercenary gangs thought to be linked to local politicians.

"The government's inaction has led to a climate of impunity in which physical harassment, torture and assassination go unnoticed and unquestioned," said Madhu Malhotra, Deputy Programme Director for Amnesty International.

"Only the authorities can rein in abuses committed by their agents and under their supervision, and curb those committed by armed gangs."

Human rights defenders or people who criticise the authorities are often arrested, tortured or ill-treated in custody, and charged with a range of apparently unsubstantiated criminal offences. They include journalists, writers, academics, staff from non-governmental organisations and lawyers.

At least eight people who spoke out against human rights abuses in Bangladesh have been assassinated since 2000 by assailants believed to be linked to armed criminal gangs or armed factions of political parties. Scores of others have been seriously injured, some permanently, and require continued medical attention. Several journalists have had their fingers or hands deliberately damaged to prevent them from holding a pen.

The prevalence of armed criminal gangs has provided impetus to a culture of gun violence. These armed groups are either "student" groups affiliated to major political parties or gangs identifying themselves as Maoist parties and allegedly linked to certain individual politicians. Those speaking against political parties or certain politicians risk their lives at the hands of these gangs.

"The authorities must introduce specific measures aimed at protecting people who dare to speak out about human rights abuses in the country. It is their responsibility to bring all those responsible to justice, whether they are state agents or members of the armed gangs," said Madhu Malhotra.

Amnesty International is calling on the Bangladesh authorities to implement safeguards against arbitrary arrest and torture of human rights defenders and ensure rigorous investigation of reports of death threats and attacks against people who expose human rights abuses in the country.

Public Document

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