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Bangladesh: Investigate the killing and the violence during garment factory workers unrest

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities in Bangladesh to order an immediate inquiry into reports that four people have died during violent clashes between police and garment factory workers in Bangladesh on 12 December.

The inquiry must establish the causes of the deaths and find out if the deaths were due to police using excessive force against the demonstrators.

If police have used excessive force, the government should bring to justice the police officers responsible.

The workers had been demonstrating for the implementation of their wage increase, which the government had promised would come into force from the beginning of November. In clashes between the demonstrators and the police in the cities of Chittagong, Dhaka and Narayangangj, on 12 December, four people died and more than 200 people were injured.

The recent unrest is the latest in waves of garment factory unrest in the country in the last six months. Dozens of people were injured in June and August as police clashed with hundreds of striking textile workers calling for higher wages. At that time, the government agreed to introduce a pay increase, which would come into force from the beginning of November. Garment factory workers have told journalists that their wages have not increased accordingly.

To address the workers' grievance, the government of Bangladesh has decided to form a committee comprised of representatives from the government, workers and factory owners to implement the new pay scale. Amnesty International welcomes this move, which could address some of the grievances underlying the recent violence in the garment industry.

There has, however, been no news on how the government will investigate the use of force by the police to ensure that they have not committed human rights violations.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is quoted in the media as saying that action will be taken against those who created the unrest, but there has been no reference to the need to investigate the use of force by the police.

Most of those injured have been garment factory workers taking part in the unrest. Police have confirmed that their officers have fired tear gas and live ammunition during the clashes. Newspapers have reported that at least two of the four people who died have had marks of gunshots on their bodies. The identity of the other two has not been established.

Journalists say 10 garment factory workers, some of whom may have gunshot wounds, have been admitted to the intensive care units of hospitals in Chittagong and Dhaka.

Police sources say 56 police officers who were attacked by the demonstrators with brickbat and stones are among the injured, and that six of them have been admitted to hospitals with serious injuries.

Amnesty International acknowledges the responsibility of the police to maintain law and order. However, use of firearms by the police during the protests and the death of four people require a thorough and rigorous investigation in keeping with international human rights law, including the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials.

Amnesty International has documented a pattern of excessive use of force by police and other security forces in Bangladesh. Establishing the facts in the current incident through an independent and credible inquiry will show that the government is committed to ensuring that security forces do not violate human rights.

Any one found to have used excessive force should be brought to justice.

Police have announced that they have filed cases against a total of 33,000 people on charges of involvement in the violence. So far, more than 40 people are reported to have been arrested by the police. Some have been released but an unknown number remain detained.

Amnesty International is urging the authorities to release the detainees unless they can be charged with a recognizable criminal offence. At all times, the detainees should have access to a lawyer of their own choice and receive any medical treatment that they may need.

Among the detainees is Moshrefa Mishu, president of the *Garment Sramik Oikkya Parishad* (Garment Workers Unity Council), which promotes the interest of garment workers. Police arrested her on 14 December in connection with a complaint filed against her last June during an earlier wave of garment factories unrest. She was accused at that time that she had "ransacked" the office of a garment making business.

Given a pattern of use of torture in Bangladesh during interrogation, the government should ensure that the detainees are not tortured, and can have family visits.

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