

## **Bangladesh: Endemic torture since independence**

*Widespread and persistent torture has been routinely ignored by successive governments and major political parties since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, Amnesty International said today in a new report launched in Dhaka as part of the organization's global Campaign Against Torture.*

*"For too long torture has been accepted as normal behaviour by governments. Anyone can be tortured and it is usually only the politically well-connected who get any protection. The government should take determined action to protect everyone -- not just a select few," Amnesty International said.*

*Victims can be children, women, the elderly, political dissidents, criminal suspects, or innocent bystanders. Methods of torture include; beating with rifle butts, iron rods, bamboo sticks, hanging by the hands from the ceiling, rape, "water treatment" in which hose pipes are fixed into each nostril and taps turned on full for two minutes at a time, the use of pliers to crush fingers, and electric shocks.*

*Scores of people have died in custody as a result of torture. One Bangladeshi human rights organization, Odhikar, puts the number at 49 from January to September this year. After being beaten by police in Dhaka on 3 July 1999, Shah Mohammed Tiku fell into a pond. He was unable to swim and police watched as he drowned, preventing people from helping him.*

*Custodial rape has been a serious problem in Bangladesh. Victims of rape often have to rely on the support and resilience of their family to seek justice. Sadly, it has been mostly in cases where the victim has been*

murdered or there has been public outcry that any action has been taken. Many cases of violence against women take place at the hands of private individuals and it is common for police not to take action against alleged perpetrators on payment of a bribe.

Torture and ill-treatment is not always carried out behind closed doors. Police frequently attack demonstrators and in an attempt to hide their actions, they also beat the journalists reporting such protests.

On 9 August 1999, journalist Debu Prasad Das was taking photographs of a strike by truck transport labourers near Chittagong when several police officers beat him with sticks and rifle butts. Debu Prasad Das knows the names of the policemen who beat him but did not include them in his complaint for fear of retaliation. Police officers harassed him to withdraw the complaint and have offered to pay the medical bill of 40,000 Taka.

In Dhaka, 81-year-old Sheikh Shahabuddin Ahmed, was tortured by police on the day of his arrest, 7 July 1998. Sheikh Shahabuddin Ahmed was president of an association which worked against drugs and criminal activity. He said "The criminal gangs were working directly with the police who came to arrest me saying I was stopping business activity in the area. In fact we were only trying to stop criminal activity and drug abuse." After sending appeals to the Home Minister, Prime Minister and the Inspector General of Police seeking punishment of those who tortured him, he was told one of his torturers was dismissed, but should not expect any further action or compensation.

Police officials in Bangladesh admit privately that torture takes place but they take a lenient approach, blaming it mostly on the low income of police officers. In other cases, police officers may be involved in criminal activity such as trading in drugs or contraband, and torture

people to stop them taking action against them. Torture of political opponents is believed to be ordered by politicians. Police may also torture for personal gratification as is the case with rape. However, the majority of cases involve torturing people to confess to a crime they didn't commit. All of this continues because successive governments allow it to. It is rare that cases are investigated and even fewer are brought to justice.

Bangladesh ratified the Convention Against Torture in 1998. Torture is forbidden under the Constitution and it is a criminal act under the Penal Code. However legislation which facilitates torture, for example by allowing for detention without an arrest warrant, is still in place.

Amnesty International's report makes several recommendations to the Government of Bangladesh. These include; ensuring no law facilitates torture, that allegations of torture are investigated, that torturers are brought to justice, that police are trained in torture-free methods of interrogation and that victims are compensated.

"Torture should not be accepted as a necessary act or a part of life -- it is a human rights violation. The government should take up the challenge to make a difference in Bangladesh by ending years of endemic torture," the organization said.

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