

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Bangladesh: Accountability needed in 'Operation Clean Heart'**

Amnesty International urged today the Government of Bangladesh to investigate immediately all allegations of deaths in custody and torture by the army and the police since a "crackdown" on crime - known as 'Operation Clean Heart' - began on 17 October.

"The government must bring to justice any army or police personnel involved in the torture of detainees, and clarify the legal status of the army's involvement in arrests of civilians", said Amnesty International.

Over 2000 people have been arrested and at least five people have died in custody since the government called in the army to "assist" in 'Operation Clean Heart'. More than a dozen detainees have been sent to hospital with severe injuries reportedly caused by beatings while in army custody. They include both members of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the opposition Awami League.

Abul Khair Ratan died while in custody following his arrest on 18 October, reportedly as a result of torture. Two other men, Yakub Ali and Jahangir Alam also died while they were in custody. The Home Ministry has said the deaths were caused by heart failure but family members reportedly believe they were tortured to death. The bodies of the dead were reportedly not handed over to their relatives fuelling doubts about the official post mortem examination results on those who died in custody.

Some of the detainees are possible prisoners of conscience. Two Awami League leaders - Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Political Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition, Sheikh Hasina, and Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, member of parliament and former health minister - were arrested by the army on 20 and 21 October, and were held initially incommunicado. No details have been made public about the possible charges against them, and Amnesty International fears they may be detained solely for their peaceful opposition to the government.

Amnesty International urges the government to ensure that all those detained on account of their peaceful political activities are released immediately and unconditionally. In the past, the Government of Bangladesh has filed criminal cases against opposition politicians effectively securing their detention and removal from active politics.

"It is every government's duty to ensure law and order for the benefit of all citizens, but

this cannot be imposed at the expense of the basic rights of the people", Amnesty International said.

## **Background**

'Operation Clean Heart' is the government's response to growing concern within Bangladesh and the international community about continued deterioration in law and order including a rise in criminal activity, murder, rape and acid throwing. While Amnesty International acknowledges the government's efforts to improve law and order, it urges the government to ensure that the army's activities are conducted within the rule of law and with respect for human rights.

The legal status of the army's involvement in 'Operation Clean Heart' is not clear. Many of the detainees have been arrested under Section 54 of Code of Criminal Procedure which allows the police rather than the army to detain people on suspicion of involvement in criminal activity. Amnesty International has serious concerns about the use of this law in Bangladesh. Prisoners detained under Section 54 have frequently been tortured while in custody.

In the initial wave of army operations, many members and supporters of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party were detained. These included a number of BNP local leaders. Members and supporters of the Awami League were also later detained. Many senior party figures have gone into hiding. Others are afraid of entering Awami League offices for fear of arrest. The Awami League's documentation centre has been raided by the army. Documents and equipment were taken away.

Following interrogation by the army -- which reportedly often involves torture -- the detainees are handed over to the police who then decide whether to release them or hold them in custody for further interrogation. Many of those arrested in recent army operations have reportedly been released but many hundreds are believed to remain in detention. They include both members of the ruling and the opposition parties.

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