

AI Index: PRE 01/650/2013
12 December 2013

Bangladesh: Protect against reprisals after Islamist leader's execution

Today's hanging of Islamist leader Abdul Quader Mollah is a disgrace, and Bangladeshi authorities must now ensure that people are protected against reprisal attacks, said Amnesty International.

"The execution of Abdul Quader Mollah should never have happened. The death penalty is a human rights violation and should not be used to punish other alleged human rights violations," said Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International's Bangladesh Researcher.

"The country is on a razor's edge at the moment with pre-election tensions running high and almost non-stop street protests. Mollah's execution could trigger more violence, with the Hindu community bearing the brunt."

Mollah, a key figure in the Islamist opposition party Jamaat-e-Islami, was executed in Dhaka today. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in February for crimes against humanity by the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), a court investigating Bangladesh's 1971 independence war.

The Supreme Court increased his sentence to death in September on appeal from the government after a change in the law. This left him with no chance to appeal his sentence as is required under international law.

At this volatile time many people including minority Hindus are at risk of reprisal attacks. People connected to the ICT trials have been attacked, with one ICT witness killed on 6 December.

"Bangladesh's minority Hindu community has been targeted in attacks this year following an earlier ICT verdict, they are at particular risk of violence now the execution has been carried out," said Faiz.

"The authorities must ensure that anyone at risk, especially Hindus are given the protection they need at this tense time. Whole villages were burned down in the violence against Hindus this year and no one has been brought to justice."

"It is also crucial that all politicians in Bangladesh make it crystal clear to their supporters to refrain from human rights abuses, and that attacks on Hindu communities are unacceptable."

Background

Jamaat-e-Islami organized a day-long hartal (general strike) today to protest against the execution which has already resulted in violence between protesters and security forces. Adding to the tensions is a dispute over the next general elections, set for 5 January, which has led to violent demonstrations involving government and opposition supporters.

Protesters have targeted Hindus over the ICT trials of Jamaat-e-Islami leaders relating to the 1971 independence war. Many of the prosecution witnesses have been Hindus. In 1971, more than one million people were killed, tens of thousands of women raped and millions fled the country during an all out attack on the civilian population by the Pakistan army and armed groups allied to them.

Attacks intensified between February and April this year following the ICT death sentence for another Jamaat-e-Islami member, Delwar Hossain Sayedee. Hindu homes, shops and temples were burned down and looted, and scores of families forced to flee.

The latest wave of violence against Hindus in November was triggered by a rumour that a Hindu youth had denigrated Islam on social media, and led to more homes and temples being torched.

Amnesty International is concerned about the police's apparent inability to provide adequate protection during these attacks, despite pleas for increased police presence by Hindus.

Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases without exception, regardless of the nature or circumstances of the crime; guilt, innocence or other characteristics of the individual; or the method used by the state to carry out the execution.