

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Bangladesh: Human rights under threat as election tensions intensify**

Amnesty International is gravely concerned that the maintenance of respect for human rights is under increasing threat in Bangladesh as the political crisis in the country deepens. As a nationwide strike called by an alliance of former opposition parties led by the Awami League continues and amid reports of excessive use of force by police and army personnel, more than 200 people are reported to have been injured, some seriously, in clashes between police and army personnel and the protesters since 7 January.

On 3 January, the Awami League-led opposition alliance announced a boycott of the scheduled 22 January parliamentary elections. The alliance accused the current caretaker government, which oversees the organisation and conduct of the upcoming elections, of bias towards the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the leading party in the former governing coalition. The opposition alliance has called for the resignation of the Chief Adviser to the Caretaker Government; reform of existing voter lists; and the postponement of the election date. The Awami League is reportedly planning to organize a strike on the day of elections.

The BNP on the other hand has expressed confidence in the caretaker governments and wants the elections to take place as scheduled, even without the participation of parties which are boycotting the polls.

The political divide between the major political parties has continued to widen as they have failed to agree a solution to their differences. Fears are mounting that violent clashes between rival party supporters will now escalate leading to further loss of life, serious injuries and destruction of property.

Dozens of people have reportedly been killed and hundreds more injured in violent clashes between former ruling alliance and the opposition activists over the past two months. Perpetrators of much of this violence are reported to have been the activists of the BNP and the Awami League. However neither party has condemned the violence carried out by their own members, while often only blaming their opponents for the violence.

The caretaker government announced that according to the Constitution, elections are required to take place within 90 days from when the previous parliament was dissolved on 28 October 2006. The caretaker government deployed the army and has extended the army's power of arrest and detention to ensure that the polls are open for voting on 22 January.

Amnesty International is concerned that the safeguards ensuring respect for human rights by police and military personnel when responding to actions by opposition alliance members appear, in the current context, to be particularly weak. In incidents of apparent excessive and unnecessary use of force, police and army personnel have used sticks to beat opposition activists, the majority of whom have reportedly been peacefully participating in street demonstrations. During some incidents opposition activists have also

used sticks, and have reportedly thrown bricks and firebombs at the police. Police have responded with teargas and rubber bullets.

Amnesty International recognizes the responsibility of the government to ensure law and order, but urges security personnel to respect human rights and to use force when only in a proportionate and necessary manner. The organisation is also concerned that the extended powers of arrest and detention given to the army might, as has happened in the past, be used by army personnel to commit serious human rights violations. Impunity for human rights violations in the context of maintaining law and order is a serious human rights concern in the country.

Despite the alleged involvement of the army personnel in the use of excessive force, extrajudicial executions, and torture during previous deployments, no soldiers are known to have been held to account or brought to justice. Amnesty International remains concerned that successive governments appear to have ensured that army personnel enjoy impunity. For example, in late 2002, more than 40 men reportedly died as a result of torture after being arrested by the army. Rather than investigating these deaths and bringing the perpetrators to justice, the then government provided the army personnel with legal immunity from prosecution.

In the current atmosphere of political tension Amnesty International believes it is imperative that all political parties and the caretaker government work together to ensure the effective protection of the human rights of every individual – whatever their political persuasion.

Amnesty International urges the caretaker government to state clearly and urgently that army and police personnel at all levels will be held personally responsible and accountable for their actions or omissions. The government should also ensure that under no circumstances will members of the armed forces or police be provided with impunity for human rights violations committed during their current deployment.

Amnesty International is gravely concerned that the right to participate in political life is being undermined by violence which includes serious human rights violations. It is urging leaders of all political parties to emphatically condemn such violence, address every report of the involvement of their members in acts of violence, and help ensure that those responsible are brought to justice in fair trials.