

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Bangladesh: Investigations must comply to international human rights standards and extend to all those involved in human rights abuses regardless of their political links**

Reports in recent weeks of arrests of the leaders of two banned Islamist groups could point to a long-awaited shift in government policy to target the actual perpetrators of bombings in the country rather than conveniently accusing the political opposition.

Police arrested Shaikh Abdur Rahman, the fugitive leader of Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh, on 2 March 2006 when he surrendered after a 33-hour siege of his hideout in Sylhet. On 6 March, the deputy leader of Jama'atul Mujahideen and leader of another Islamist group, Jagrata Muslim Janata (Awakened Muslim Citizens) Bangladesh, Siddiqui Islam (known as Bangla Bhai [Bangla brother]) was arrested in Mymensingh District. There have been persistent allegations about these groups' involvement in a violent campaign of bomb attacks in recent years.

There have also been frequent allegations in the media that some politicians with close links to the ruling parties had been frustrating efforts to stem the rising tide of violence generated by these groups. Last year, an MP of the majority ruling party, Abu Hena, was reportedly expelled after he accused some government ministers of fostering the rise of Bangla Bhai in his constituency in northern Bagmara sub-district. He said, "I tried to stop them and I wanted help from the government but some ministers and some MPs, for their own political advantages, did not want to stop the Islamic extremists".

It is the responsibility of the government to investigate anyone against whom there are allegations of involvement in the bombings, including the two individuals named above, with a view to establishing the truth. However, such investigation must at all times conform to international human rights standards and be free from any act of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The investigation must extend to anyone in the government or linked to the ruling coalition parties likely to have provided political shelter to the bombers for personal or political gains. If those investigated can be charged, they should be brought to justice in compliance with international fair trial standards, without recourse to the death penalty.

According to media reports, the government has now admitted that these Islamist groups have also been involved in a number of other human rights abuses. These include attacks against individuals known to Amnesty International as human rights defenders.

The revelation by the government on 9 March 2006 that Jama'atul Mujahideen had been responsible for the attacks against Dhaka University professor Humayun Azad and Rajshahi University professor Dr Yunus in 2004 opens a new chapter in addressing these human rights abuses. However, it also highlights the government's unexplained failure so far to fully investigate these and other attacks against human rights

defenders and to bring those involved in the attacks to justice.

Similarly, the government's recent statement that the bomb blasts in four cinemas in Mymensingh in December 2002 were carried out by the Jama'atul Muhaideen group must be seen as a clear vindication of those writers, academicians and opposition politicians who were subjected to arrest and ill-treatment on allegation of involvement in the bomb blasts.

Amnesty International had at that time considered the detention of prominent writer Shahriar Kabir, university professor Muntassir Mamoon, Awami League politician Saber Hossain Chowdhury, and journalist Enamul Haque Chowdhury following the Mymensingh bomb blasts to be politically motivated. They were reportedly ill-treated while in police custody and had a series of unsubstantiated criminal charges framed against them. They have claimed that they were being forced to confess to involvement in the Mymensingh bomb blasts, a charge they have always refuted. Their detention and the government's persistent denial that Islamist groups were responsible for the blasts appeared to be not only a move by the government to intimidate its critics, but also helped to divert the course of justice and, effectively, provided impunity from prosecution to the actual perpetrators of the bomb blasts.

Amnesty International is urging the Government of Bangladesh to provide full redress to these and other people who were subjected to politically motivated detention at that time. Such redress should in the first instance include the withdrawal of the charges against them, including sedition charges.

Amnesty International further urges the Government of Bangladesh to recognize that under international human rights law, anyone who has been the victim of unlawful arrest or detention shall have an enforceable right to compensation.