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Bangladesh: Police target outspoken opposition leaders and beat them violently

Police officers have attacked at least five opposition leaders during street demonstrations in the past few days, and beaten them severely. Those targeted have sustained injuries, some seriously.

The injured include an Awami League leader, Saber Hossain Chowdhury; an Awami League Member of Parliament, Asaduzzaman Noor; the former Agriculture Minister, Mothia Chowdhury; a leading member of the Supreme Court Bar Association, Advocate Shaira Khatun; and the former Home Minister, Mohammed Nasim. Others injured are opposition activists taking part in demonstrations calling for electoral reforms.

Saber Hossain Chowdhury was injured on 6 September when more than a dozen police officers started to beat him. He identified himself as an Awami League leader in the hope that the police might stop the beating, but they reportedly became even more furious and beat him severely. He went into a coma and was rushed to hospital in Dhaka. He gained consciousness after about an hour, but doctors declared his condition as critical and advised that he needed specialist treatment for injuries to his head. His family had to fly him to Singapore for further treatment on 10 September.

Asaduzzaman Noor was attacked on 12 September. He was admitted to hospital with severe back pain caused by the beating he received. Mothia Chowdhury was attacked with an iron rod the same day. She was admitted to hospital for several hours. Police also attacked Advocate Shaira Khatun on 12 September causing injuries to her legs and head.

Mohammed Nasim was attacked on 12 September in the same place where Saber Hossain Chowdhury had been beaten a few days earlier. Nasim was beaten with rifle butts and iron rods. He was hit on the arm, head and back, and went into a coma. Doctors have declared his condition as critical.

According to eyewitnesses, none of these individuals were acting violently and they posed no threat to the police. They are believed to have been specifically targeted because of their leading role in the Awami League party.

An eyewitness told Amnesty International: "police surrounded us and began beating Saber. We told them who he was and that he had not done anything, but they became furious and beat him more severely until he fell unconscious".

According to reports, the police attacked these individuals in a specific and targeted manner. They were surrounded by police officers and were not able or allowed to disperse. They were then subjected to severe

beatings.

In Amnesty International's view, these attacks on persons under police control when they were not resisting the police in any way amount to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Amnesty International condemns these attacks. The organization is urging the Government of Bangladesh to set up an independent, impartial and competent body to investigate the attacks. Such investigation should identify the police personnel who carried out the attacks and the senior police officials under whose command the attacks took place. Its remit should also be expanded to identify any other government connivance in these attacks.

Those identified as perpetrators of these attacks should be brought to justice without delay in proceedings which meet international standards of fairness.

Amnesty International is also urging the Government of Bangladesh to ensure the safety and security of opposition leaders and activists taking part in rallies and demonstrations. Under no circumstances should the government allow law enforcement personnel to use excessive force or subject demonstrators to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

Background

Police attack on demonstrators started during recent opposition rallies and marches towards the offices of the Election Commission and the Prime Minister's Office to press demands for electoral reform. The opposition considers the Election Commission (which is to conduct the forthcoming general elections) and the coming caretaker government (which is to oversee the elections) to be biased towards the ruling coalition. Opposition parties have been calling for a change of the Election Commissioner and the head of the caretaker government, demands that the government has rejected. Some of the demonstrators reportedly pushed through the security barriers erected by the police and were involved in clashes with the police. Hundreds of such demonstrators as well as several police officers have reportedly been injured.

The tenure of the present government comes to an end in October 2006. A caretaker government is expected to take office in November, and elections to the new parliament are to take place in January 2007.

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