

£BANGLADESH

@Reports of torture and possible extrajudicial executions

Introduction

Amnesty International has received reports that during 1991, at least 10 people died and more than 100 were injured in Bangladesh a result of unlawful or unnecessary use of lethal force and severe beating by security personnel in three separate incidents. Amnesty International is concerned that those killed may have been victims of extrajudicial executions, and those surviving bullet injuries may have been victims of attempted extrajudicial killings. Amnesty International is further concerned at several reports of torture during these incidents.

In March, about 100 people were injured in Kushtia when the police attacked a gathering of unarmed civilians with sticks, glass bottles and chains. The police then reportedly opened fire at the crowd and at least five persons received bullet wounds. Those with bullet injuries were reportedly taken into police custody and severely beaten. One person with serious bullet injuries was reportedly beaten to death in police custody.

In August, the police reportedly shot three men dead and injured several others in Chotodarogahat near Chittagong when officers opened fire on people gathering at a tea-stall.

In April, during a wave of jail riots, the security forces were reportedly responsible for the death of at least seven prisoners in Dhaka Central Jail. Evidence available suggested that some of these deaths may have been extrajudicial executions. Amnesty International raised its concern with the government about these deaths in April 1991 but received no response.

Reports of the killings in Kushtia and Chotodarogahat have been published by local human rights groups in Bangladesh. Amnesty International does not know if the incidents in Kushtia and Chotodarogahat have been investigated by the government; to its knowledge no police personnel alleged to have been responsible for these killings been brought to justice. The deaths in Dhaka Central Jail were reportedly investigated by the government. Amnesty International does not know if the findings of this investigation has so far been made public, but it knows that to date no action has been taken to bring to justice any police personnel in connection with these deaths.

The Kushtia incident - March 1991

According to unofficial reports, some 220 members of the Range Reserve Police Force (RRPF) temporarily sent to Bheramara in Kushtia District to maintain law and order during a by-election in March 1991, arrived in Bheramara on 24 March and used the local high school as their temporary base. Some members of the local population reportedly resented the police presence because of alleged police involvement in a number of petty criminal offences.

Tension between the police and the local population deepened on 25 March when a woman was allegedly harassed by a group of about seven police officers. Shameem Reza, a male college student who was standing by, protested against the police conduct and was joined by dozens of people. The police party then withdrew.

On 25 March at about 11 am, the police returned to Bheramara Railway Station to arrest Shameem Reza on charges of pick-pocketing. Local residents and shop-keepers protested as they thought the charge against Shameem Reza was fabricated. They surrounded the police party and forced it to release Shameem Reza. The police withdrew but soon after, about 100 RRPF personnel came to the railway station from their temporary camp. The police, armed with sticks, glass bottles, chains and guns, began to beat the shop-keepers and unarmed by-standers in the area. As a result about 100 people were injured. Then, the police reportedly went on a rampage setting at least one shop ablaze. In the course of these attacks, some police personnel were also reportedly injured.

According to reports, the police then fired deliberately at the crowd. Five people, Shukchand, Atiar, Ripon, Biplab and Mannan, were wounded. The police arrested the injured persons and took them to the temporary police camp where they were reportedly subjected to severe beating. According to reports, Biplab's leg was broken and Shukchand was repeatedly beaten and kicked until he died.

The Bheramara and Kushtia police superintendents arrived at the scene of the shooting and went to the police camp at about 2 pm. They reportedly stopped the beating of the injured detainees who were by now in a critical condition, and ordered that Biplab, Atiar, Mannan and Ripon should be sent to the local hospital for treatment.

According to reports, the Bheramara railway workers and shopkeepers staged a general strike to protest against the shootings and the death of Shukchand. The Minister for Social Welfare, Tarikul Islam, was reported to have visited the strikers, promising free medical treatment for the injured and appropriate action against the police personnel involved.

According to Amnesty International's information, the family of Shukchand received some money in compensation for his death, but the cost of treatment of the injured has not yet been met by the government. Amnesty International does not know if the government

has initiated any official investigation of the incident; to its knowledge, no action has yet been so taken to bring to justice the police personnel responsible for the alleged unlawful use of lethal force, subsequent beating of the injured or the killing of Shukchand.

The Chotodarogahat incident - August 1991

Police shot three men dead and injured others on 18 August 1991 at Chotodarogahat near Chittagong. The police had apparently attacked a crowd in order to rescue a policeman who had been seized because of his alleged involvement in an attempted robbery. According to Amnesty International's information, those targeted by the police were not involved in the seizure of the policeman or his captivity.

The killings occurred following an incident in which some men blocked the Dhaka-Chittagong highway at Chotodarogahat about 2.5 miles north of Shitakunda near Chittagong, robbing trucks carrying consumer goods. As the news of the road-block spread angry citizens rushed to the scene to stop the robbery.

However, the presence of three police personnel at the scene of the robbery, and their alleged attempt to keep the crowds away and help the robbers flee, led people to believe that the police personnel themselves might be involved in the robbery. Some members of the crowd advanced defiantly towards the police and seized one of the three policemen as they were trying to escape.

Soon after, armed police arrived on the scene and demanded the release of the policeman who was being held captive in a nearby shop. Many more people gathered in the area around the shop, including some at a nearby tea-stall. The captors demanded that the policeman be tried for robbery. The police refused to enter into any negotiations, and opened fire, reportedly at random, on the people around the tea-stall, killing three and injuring several others. According to Amnesty International's information, the people who were the target of this attack were not directly involved in the seizure of the policeman or his continuing captivity. The captors reportedly released the policeman as the shooting began.

The police has apparently stated that it resorted to shooting in self defence. As yet, Amnesty International has not received any evidence to substantiate this claim. Amnesty International is not aware of any official investigation of this incident; to its knowledge, no police personnel allegedly involved has been brought to justice.

Prison killings - late 1990 and early 1991

A large number of prisoners were reportedly killed by security forces during a wave of jail riots in late 1990 and early 1991 in several jails, including those in Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Comilla. The jail riots followed the announcement in December 1990 of plans

to release certain categories of prisoners after the interim government of Acting President Shahabuddin Ahmed granted an amnesty. Under the terms of the amnesty, prisoners serving sentences of two years' imprisonment or less and those under 16 years of age would be freed, and sentences of those serving life terms would be reduced by a third.

Unrest spread throughout the prisons as hundreds of prisoners who did not benefit from the amnesty demanded concessions and a review of their cases by the then interim government, and later the newly elected government of Begum Khaleda Zia, claiming that their convictions under the government of former President Ershad had been politically motivated. Over 20 prisoners reportedly died in various jails when the security forces opened fire on the rioters. Amnesty International has been unable to establish whether these were deliberate killings.

However, during another jail riot in April 1991, the security forces were reportedly responsible for the death of at least seven prisoners and Amnesty International is concerned that some or all of the deaths may have been deliberate killings.

The seven prisoners were reportedly killed in Dhaka Central Jail on 8 and 9 April 1991 when members of the police, the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles and the army entered the prison after five prisoners had attempted to escape.

One detainee, describing events at the prison to a local human rights organization after his release, said that the police arrived at the jail one hour after the escape attempt and sprayed tear gas through the windows of the prison cells. Police and Bangladesh Rifles personnel reportedly entered prison cells and beat prisoners indiscriminately. They then sprayed hot water into the cells. Hundreds of prisoners reportedly suffered blistering burns from the hot water. According to reports, at least 30 prisoners identified as riot leaders were later taken out from the cells and were beaten severely. Seven of them were allegedly beaten to death.

Those who did not die from the beating sustained serious injuries, including broken arms and legs, as a result of this action. According to one witness, among prisoners whose limbs were broken was Akhtar, one of nine prisoners taken out of cell number one; his legs were reportedly broken deliberately outside the cell over pieces of wood. The head of one prisoner, reportedly named Arif Mia son of Moksed Mia, was broken open. Another witness said he saw two prisoners who had been taken from his cell being beaten and having their arms broken.

In April 1991, the government announced that it had set up a commission headed by the District and Sessions Judge of Comilla to investigate the incidents on 8 and 9 April at Dhaka Central Jail. However, to Amnesty International's knowledge, no security personnel

involved in these alleged human rights violations has so far been identified by the authorities or brought to justice.

Amnesty International Recommendations

1. The instances of possible extrajudicial executions and beatings documented in this report call for the government's prompt and immediate action. Amnesty International urges the Government of Bangladesh to initiate full, independent and impartial inquiries into the Kushtia and Chotodarogahat incidents to establish whether any of the injuries and deaths were the result of unlawful or unnecessary use of force by the security forces.

The terms of reference and findings of such inquiries should be made public at the earliest opportunity and any member of the security forces found to have been responsible for extrajudicial killings or injuries deliberately inflicted on unarmed civilians in Kushtia and Chotodarogahat should be promptly brought to justice.

2. Amnesty International is also concerned about the government's apparent failure to bring to justice the police personnel allegedly responsible for the deaths in Dhaka Central Jail in April 1991. Although the government announced at the time that it had set up a commission to investigate the deaths in Dhaka Central Jail, Amnesty International is not aware of any government statement about the working methods or the findings of this commission, and it is not known whether any police personnel involved in these killings or responsible for injuries deliberately inflicted on other prisoners during this incident, have been brought to justice.

Amnesty International urges the Government of Bangladesh to make public the outcome of the commission of inquiry and announce whether any security personnel has been charged in connection with the April 1991 incident in Dhaka Central Jail.

3. Amnesty International further urges the Bangladesh Government to review the training program of its security personnel to ensure that it includes education in basic human rights law including safeguards against unlawful or unnecessary use of lethal force and internationally accepted minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners; and that all law enforcement personnel understand and respect these safeguards.