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BANGLADESH: POLITICALLY MOTIVATED ARBITRARY ARRESTS HAMPER IMPARTIAL INVESTIGATION OF CAMPUS VIOLENCE

The government of Bangladesh must refrain from arbitrary mass arrests, which appear to have been directed only at the opposition student activists. Criminal investigations must be impartial, regardless of the suspect's political affiliation or party membership. Moreover, the authorities must ensure that the detainees are brought promptly before a court and allowed to challenge the legality of their detention, that they are not at risk of torture or other ill-treatment, and that they have access to their lawyers, families, and proper medical care.

Last week more than 300 supporters of Islami Chhatra Shibir, the student wing of the opposition party Jamaat-e-Islami, were arrested in Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong and other cities. The majority of them were picked up from dormitories or rented accommodation in and around university campuses. It is not known if any of them have been charged with a recognizable criminal offence.

The arrests followed a wave of violence at major university campuses in Bangladesh, where rival student activists of the ruling Awami League party and opposition parties have fought each other over control of university halls of residence. At least four students, one from Dhaka, two from Rajshahi, and one from Chittagong universities have been killed in the midst of these clashes since early February.

The death of the first student on 2 February at Dhaka University was due to violent clashes between two rival factions of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the Awami League. No members of this group appear to have been investigated for his death. The government's apparent reluctance to investigate in this case further highlights the political motivations underlying its response to the violence at the universities.

Bangladesh Chhatra League members have also been involved in clashes with the Islami Chhatra Shibir at Rajshahi, Chittagong and other university campuses. While members of the Islami Chhatra Shibir have been the main targets of the mass arrests, Bangladesh Chhatra League activists have continued to clash and attack opposition supporters, with no accountability.

Amnesty International acknowledges the responsibility of government authorities to prevent violence at the university campuses and bring those responsible for the killings to justice. However, the one-sided manner in which the police have carried out the arrests so far indicates that criminal investigations into the violence are unlikely to be impartial or fair.

Raids on student residences have been carried out at random and any Islami Chhatra Shibir supporters found there have been detained. People have reportedly been arrested arbitrarily as police have made no efforts at the time of arrest to separate ordinary student members of the Islami Chhatra Shibir from those suspected of involvement in the attacks.

The majority of the detainees are being held in jails. More than 70 of them are detained at the Dhaka Central Jail; up to 100 at the Rajshahi Central Jail; and up to 70 at the Chittagong

Central Jail. More students have been picked up from other cities. According to reports, lawyers were not allowed to meet them, so they have effectively been deprived of the right to appoint legal counsel and apply for release on bail.

Between 30 and 35 of the Islami Chhatra Shibir detainees are reportedly in police custody under interrogation. Torture in police custody is widespread in Bangladesh. Detainees in police custody have no access to lawyers or family visits during the period of their remand even though there are legal provisions for such access.

The government's politically motivated response to the violence has allowed attacks by members of the ruling party's student wing to continue, including against news reporters covering these attacks. Bangladesh Chhatra League activists attacked and injured 11 journalists working for different Bangladeshi dailies who were covering Bangladesh Chhatra League's incidences of beating of other students on the Rajshahi university campus on 11 February.

Background

Violence at university campuses is a frequent occurrence in Bangladesh. Groups involved in the violence are student wings of the main political parties. These student groups are mainly Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL, affiliated to the Awami League, which has the majority of seats in Parliament but rules in coalition with 13 much smaller parties); Islami Chhatra Shibir, (Shibir, affiliated to Jamaat-e-Islami, currently in opposition), and Bangladesh Chhatra Dhal (BCD, affiliated to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, currently in opposition). These groups have in the past reportedly kept arms and have used violence leading to deaths and injury of people. Political parties have pledged, but failed, to disarm them. None of the political parties has condemned the violence carried out by their own members, while often only blaming their opponents for the violence.