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BANGLADESH: SEIZURE OF ILLEGAL ARMS NO EXCUSE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

On the eve of the elections in Bangladesh, Amnesty International is calling on the government to stop the wave of human rights violations committed by security forces against suspected opposition members.

“More than 10,000 people have been arrested without arrest warrants since last December, with many beaten or given electric shocks in police or army custody,” Amnesty International said today. “At least three men have reportedly died under torture.”

Troops have been deployed across the country since December 1995 to help police uncover unauthorised weapons ahead of the opposition-boycotted 15 February general elections. The opposition has charged that troops were harassing their supporters and should be sent back to the barracks.

Families of those suspected of keeping illegal arms are now being terrorised and abused. Those arrested are not told why they are being detained, and many are detained simply because they are related to someone wanted by the armed forces.

“The need to seize illegal arms is no excuse for wholesale violations of people’s rights,” Amnesty International said. “Actions of this kind will only add to the cycle of violence in Bangladesh.”

Amnesty International is urging the Government of Bangladesh to institute impartial and independent inquiries into all reports of human rights violations by security personnel.

One of the victims, Shahabuddin Saju, 28, died reportedly as a result of torture in a hospital on 27 January. He was arrested the day before when army and police personnel surrounded his home at about 11:30 pm. Soldiers reportedly dragged Saju out of the house, and began to beat him with sticks and rifle butts, while he was tied and blindfolded. The soldiers told him he would be killed unless he handed in his weapons. According to Bangladeshi press, he continued to be tortured in an army camp until the evening of 27 January, when he went into a coma from which he did not recover before his death at 11:30 pm.

Another young man arrested in mid-January by the security forces was reportedly beaten with rods by security personnel in a military camp; they asked him to show them where he kept his firearms. The army personnel reportedly covered his head with a cloth, splashed him with water and gave him electric shocks until he became unconscious. When he recovered he was tortured again.

His ordeal lasted 32 hours. He was subsequently released in a critical state and taken to hospital by the family.

On 5 February 1996, army troops reportedly went on a rampage in Syedpur village south of Dhaka, beating residents and ransacking 22 homes after a suspected criminal apparently from that village escaped custody. Troops reportedly arrived in about a dozen trucks and detained about 400 young men from across the village who were later released. The home of village chief Daulat Hossain was ransacked by the troops. The army, however, has denied that troops rampaged a village saying that security personnel had expressed their regret to the villagers for the inconvenience they had caused .

## **BACKGROUND**

The main opposition parties comprising the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina Wajed, the Jatiya Party of the former President Ershad and the Jamaat-i-Islami party are boycotting the elections. They have declared a program of protests and strikes during the election period and there are fears of further mass arrests without basic legal safeguards, torture or death in custody of those detained.

The Election Commission on 12 February announced further sweeping measures by law enforcement agencies. These included immediate arrest and punishment of up to seven years in prison and fines for those trying to disrupt the electoral process. The meeting explained that the punishment would be for “subversive activity and indisciplined conduct”. It is not clear what legal provisions would be invoked to arrest and try those charged with such activity. Political rallies and demonstrations have been banned for 48 hours beginning on midnight 13 February.

Violent clashes between rival political groups, as well as opposition activists and the security forces have occurred in at least 25 of Bangladesh’s 64 administrative districts. At least 14 people have been killed and scores injured during the past two weeks. They have included opposition activists, government supporters and police officers.

The opposition walked out of parliament in March 1994 and in December that year 147 deputies formally resigned from the 300-seat parliament. The opposition parties have demanded that Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) should step down and a neutral caretaker government be appointed to ensure an impartial election

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