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Bangladesh: Indemnity Bill - A Human Rights Challenge for Parliament

As the Government of Bangladesh is about to present a bill to Parliament on Sunday to sanction torture and unlawful killings by army personnel over the last few months, Amnesty International calls upon all Members of Parliament in Bangladesh to oppose the bill.

"Bangladeshi parliamentarians must not allow such a severe blow to the future of human rights safeguards in the country," the international human rights organization said.

The "Joint Drive Indemnity Bill 2003" will be presented to Parliament on 26 January. If it is passed, no civil or criminal procedures can be invoked against "disciplinary forces" or any government official for "arrests, raid, interrogation and [other] steps taken" between 16 October 2002 and 9 January 2003.

"It is now up to parliamentarians to demonstrate their commitment to the future of human rights in Bangladesh by opposing this bill," Amnesty International continued. "If passed, it will provide impunity to army personnel for the death of at least 40 people after their alleged torture in army custody."

Everyone in Bangladesh has the right to a remedy against human rights violations and to truth and justice. This right should not be violated.

Bangladeshi parliamentarians are now facing a formidable human rights challenge. They must follow their own conscience and seek to safeguard the human rights of the people they represent rather than rubber stamping the bill.

Background

Far from acting to demonstrate its intention to observe its human rights obligations by withdrawing the "Joint Drive Indemnity Ordinance 2003", the Government of Bangladesh is seeking to enact it as law by putting it before Parliament. The ordinance gives immunity from prosecution to armed forces for their involvement in "any casualty, damage to life and property, violation of rights, physical or mental damage" between 16 October 2002 and 9 January 2003.

Following the issuance of the ordinance, over 40,000 army personnel deployed during this period under "Operation Clean Heart" to curb criminal activity and establish law and order began to return to their barracks.

The ordinance was issued by the President on 9 January and became effective from that date, but it can cease to have effect if Parliament, through a resolution, disapproves it. It can also be automatically repealed if Parliament does not pass the bill within 30 days (from 26 January).

More information can be found on Amnesty International's web site: www.amnesty.org

Please also note our previous public statement on Bangladesh: "Impunity for the army unacceptable" ASA 13/005/2003 from 17 January 2003

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