

PUBLIC

AI Index: ASA 13/019/2002

9 December 2002

UA 354/02 Possible prisoners of conscience/Fear of torture/
Incommunicado detention

BANGLADESH	Hossain Chowdhury (m)]	
	Shafi Ahmed (m)]	
	Mukul Bose (m)]	politicians
	Sheikh Bazlur Rahman (m)]	
	Tofael Ahmed (m)]	
	10 other opposition politicians (names unknown)]	
	Muntasir Mamun (m)]	journalists
	Shahriar Kabir (m)]	

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of some 15 opposition politicians and two journalists held incommunicado since 8 December. They were all arrested without a warrant, and are at risk of torture. They may be prisoners of conscience, detained for propagating views critical of government policies.

All those named above except Tofael Ahmed were arrested on 8 December from their homes. On the same day, Tofael Ahmed was arrested from the airport on his return home from Singapore. The detainees were all arrested under legislation that allows detention without a warrant for 24 hours. Police sought an extension of the interrogation period and the court granted this for three days until 11 December. Amnesty International believes they may be at risk of torture during interrogation.

The politicians are all members of the opposition Awami League party. Police have reportedly visited the houses of several more Awami League leaders but could not arrest them as they were not at home.

The reasons for the arrests are not known. However, Bangladeshi press articles have quoted police sources as saying the prisoners are suspected of involvement in "anti-state activities" in the country.

Two of those detained on 8 December have been detained as prisoners of conscience in the past. Journalist Shahriar Kabir was detained on 22 November 2001 after he had gathered information on attacks on members of the Hindu minority. He was released on bail on 20 January 2002 under a court order. However, the charges of sedition against him were not withdrawn. Saber Hossain Chowdhury was arrested on 20 October 2002 and was charged with a series of politically motivated criminal charges. He was released on 20 November after the court ordered his release on bail and his detention under the Special Powers Act unlawful.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There is a pattern of arrest of opposition politicians in Bangladesh. They are arrested under a legislation that allows arrest without a warrant on suspicion of involvement in a criminal act. They are often subjected to torture while under interrogation, and a series of criminal charges are usually brought against them. When the court orders their release on bail, the government secures their detention under the Special Powers Act, the provisions of which are contrary to international fair trial standards. Several Awami League leaders detained this year under the Special Powers Act have been released after the courts have found their detention unlawful.

The Government of Bangladesh has been particularly keen to portray the country internationally as a moderate Muslim state. It has reacted strongly to an article in the Far Eastern Economic Review in April

2002 and another in the Time magazine in October 2002 alleging that the country is becoming a base for Islamic extremists. In late November 2002, it arrested two European journalists, their interpreter, their driver and their local guide, accusing them of sedition. The authorities alleged that the film they were making for British Channel 4 television would tarnish the country's image abroad. Similar charges have been made against opposition politicians who have criticised the government's policies in international forums.

The arrests follow a series of bomb blasts in four packed movie houses in the northern city of Mymehsingh on 7 December 2002. At least 17 people were killed and more than 100 others were injured. Arrest of the Awami League politicians raised suspicion that the authorities may seek to implicate them in the bombing. However, there has been no official indication so far that the opposition politicians were involved in these blasts. Their arrests therefore appear to be a measure by the government aimed at keeping them out of active politics.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of some 15 opposition Awami League politicians and two journalists, detained since 8 December;
- urging the authorities to ensure that they are not subjected to torture or ill-treatment while in detention;
- calling on the authorities to ensure that the detainees have full and unrestricted access to lawyers, family visits and medical attention;
- calling on the authorities to ensure the detainees are held in conditions which conform to international standards for the treatment of prisoners;
- urging the authorities to ensure the safety of other opposition politicians and respect their fundamental human rights.

APPEALS TO:

Begum Khaleda Zia
Prime Minister and Minister of Defence,
Establishment, Power, Energy and Mineral
Resources, Armed Forces Division
Office of the Prime Minister

Gona Bhaban
Sher-e Bangla Nagar
Dhaka, Bangladesh

**Telegram: Prime Minister Zia, Dhaka,
Bangladesh**

Fax: + 880 2 8113243 / 9133722 / 8113244

Telex: 672802 PSEC BJ / 632220 RAPA BJ /

672803 PM SEC BJ

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

**Telegram: Home Affairs Minister, Dhaka,
Bangladesh**

Fax: + 880 2 8619667

Salutation: Dear Minister

M. Morshed Khan
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Segun Bagicha
Dhaka, Bangladesh

**Telegram: Foreign Affairs Minister, Dhaka,
Bangladesh**

Fax: + 880 2 9555283

Salutation: Dear Minister

Altaf Hossain Chowhury
Minister of Home Affairs
Ministry of Home Affairs
Bangladesh Secretariat
Building 4
Dhaka, Bangladesh

COPIES TO: Diplomatic representatives of
Bangladesh accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.

Check with the International Secretariat, or your
section office, if sending appeals after 20 January
2003.