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Bangladesh: Security forces used excessive force during raid

Bangladeshi security forces used excessive force during a raid on the house of a senior opposition politician on 27 June, Amnesty International said today.

The Bangladesh Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) carried out a violent attack on those gathered peacefully inside the house of Mirza Abbas, a leading Bangladesh National Party (BNP) politician and former mayor of Dhaka, according to testimony given to Amnesty International.

Victims of the raid described sustained and unprovoked beatings of activists and Mirza Abbas' family members, denial of medical treatment after arrests, and the eliciting of signatures on blank forms as a condition of release, which Amnesty International suspects are for the purpose of falsifying confessions.

Amnesty International has photographed injuries to male and female victims of the beatings.

More than twenty people were injured during the raid, including Mirza Abbas' wife Afroza Abbas and his 85 year old mother.

BNP supporters had gathered at Mirza Abbas's house after he been arrested and accused of involvement in violence during a general strike called by the party.

"The government should immediately investigate the circumstances surrounding this violent raid and ensure that any people hurt by security officials receive justice and appropriate compensation," said Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International's Bangladesh researcher, from Dhaka.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities to order security forces to comply with their obligations to exercise restraint and avoid the use of excessive force as the country faces a series of clashes during protests.

At least 80 people have been injured over the past two days as police clashed with striking textile workers and protesters contesting the arrest of three top leaders of the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami party.

The main opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), called for a national strike on 27 June. The strike, which was generally orderly, sparked off clashes between the police and demonstrators in some parts of the country, including in Dhaka.

Hundreds of people have been arrested on allegations of involvement in violence, including Mirza Abbas.

"There has been no evidence that the people in Mirza Abbas' house were violating any law or in any way threatening anyone, so the violent actions of RAB seem totally unjustified," said Abbas Faiz. "Given RAB's

history of using of excessive, even lethal, force, this incident demands an immediate and strong reaction from the authorities.”

The RAB claims that the security forces entered the ground floor office of Mirza Abbas after people had thrown pieces of bricks at them from that direction.

However, video footage taken by journalists and viewed by Amnesty International shows no sign of people attacking RAB officers in or around the house, but rather, shows RAB personnel attacking people inside the house.

One woman told Amnesty International that she was in the courtyard fetching water when RAB personnel stormed in and grabbed her: "They beat me on my back, the back of my thighs, my arms and my shoulders with a baton. I fell on the ground but the RAB people continued beating me."

She said four or five men beat her until she lost consciousness, and that she did not go to hospital out of fear of arrest there.

Another woman said she was handcuffed in front of the house, then was tied up with a rope and dragged into the courtyard where she was beaten.

She was detained for eight hours by police, denied medical treatment, and only released on condition that her husband sign a blank piece of paper that they feared would be used to manufacture false evidence.

A woman who ran to the bathroom to hide from the security forces told Amnesty International that the RAB chased her, forced the bathroom door open, dragged her out and began to beat her. "I kept asking why they were beating me, but they did not stop and did not answer."

A RAB official who spoke to Amnesty International said "perhaps there should have been more restraint; if there have been excesses, these would be investigated."

However, the government has so far ignored calls from BNP politicians and at least one MP of the governing Awami League to address RAB excesses in the raid.

"The government of Bangladesh must stop praising security forces for carrying out human rights violations, and instead make them accountable to the rule of law," said Abbas Faiz.

Amnesty International also calls for investigations into any criminal attacks carried out by demonstrators during the general strike to be carried out through the criminal justice system, not punished by security forces outside of the due process of law.

Background

The current ruling party, the Awami League, and the opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have alternated in government since the early 1990s. When in power, they have both allowed security forces to carry out raids on opposition rallies, beat demonstrators, arrest opposition members, bring politically motivated criminal charges against opposition politicians, and to commit acts of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, with impunity. Although some police personnel have been prosecuted for committing human rights violations, members of the Rapid Action Battalion have never been prosecuted for allegations of excessive use of force or torture.