

OPINION

Human Rights Situation in Bangladesh

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Violation of human rights in Bangladesh is a major area of concern for human rights activists all over the world. This abuse takes place mostly against the minorities, however the majority Muslim population is also affected but to a lesser extent. Violence is perpetrated against women and children and their trafficking is rampant. The torture of army during the Operation Clean Heart led to many custodial deaths. Several opposition politicians were arbitrarily detained. Discontent continues to simmer in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where the tribal representatives demand implementation of the peace accord.

Bangladesh is a democratic country but with a strong tinge of Islamic nationalism. Islamist extremists have gathered strength after the country became independent and especially after its founder Mujibur Rahman was assassinated. The subsequent army rule gradually brought political Islam into focus. Islam was declared as state religion during the rule of General Ershad and since then Islam and democracy seem to be competing for influence in Bangladesh society and polity.

Violence against minorities

Violation of human rights of the minorities is too common a phenomenon in Bangladesh. But as Hindus are in large number among the minorities they bear the brunt. Moreover, Hindus are mostly placed among the majority Muslim population. Hence they have become easy targets over the years.

During the pre-independence era the socio-economic canvass in the hinterland was somewhat like this: the Hindus were landlords and most of the peasantry was Muslim. Islam was a rallying point to incite the Muslim peasantry against Hindu landlords. Even though the socio-economic situation has undergone a massive change since partition, the communal polarization has persisted. Riots are still incited with the express objective of attacking Hindus and capturing their properties. Threats are openly issued to Hindus to leave the country. Even Muslims who have tried to raise their voice against this have faced the wrath of the majority.

Recent Period

In recent years, systematic violence was perpetrated against the minorities after the October 2001 elections as they were taken as supporters of Awami League. No information was made public about an investigation promised by the government into widespread attacks against Hindus in 2001 that included rapes, beatings and the burning of property. Due to this persecution

minorities are increasingly fleeing the country, leaving behind everything including their land. But even the cross-border journey is not easy as many women disappear and people get attacked.

Custodial deaths during ‘Operation Clean Heart’

The deteriorating law and order situation in Bangladesh forced the Khalida Zia government to take some emergency measures. It decided to use army; paramilitary forces as well as police to improve the situation and launched the Operation Clean Heart on October 17. Some 40,000 army personnel were deployed across the country in a joint army-police crack-down on crime. By the end of the year 2002, more than 10,000 people, including members of opposition and ruling political parties, were arrested. Many were subsequently released.

The Operation did not improve the law and order condition significantly, but it definitely made the situation of human rights worse in the country. At least 40 people died in the army custody during interrogation. Amnesty International reported that prisoners were being tortured to death. The European Union passed a resolution on November 21, which condemned the Bangladesh government’s lack of respect for human rights. Despite international calls for independent inquiries into these deaths, no investigations were carried out.

What was worse, despite protests, the Bangladesh parliament passed the controversial ‘Joint Drive Indemnity Bill, 2003’, giving the Army immunity against legal action by civil courts for human rights violations committed during their 87 day countrywide anti-crime crackdown christened Operation Clean Heart. Under the new law, all Army men blamed for deaths, torture and cruelty in custody were to be tried only by military courts in accordance with Armed Forces laws.

Arbitrary Detention and Torture

The Government continues to arrest and detain persons arbitrarily, and to use the Special Powers Act (SPA) and Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which allow for arbitrary arrest and preventive detention. The Public Safety Act (PSA), enacted in early 2000, gives the police even greater opportunity to abuse their powers. At least eight people died reportedly after they were tortured in police custody.

Politically motivated detentions of journalists, politicians and others are regular in Bangladesh. On 20 January, 2002 Shahriar Kabir, a journalist detained in November 2001 after he had gathered information on attacks on members of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh, was released on bail. However, the politically motivated charges of sedition against him remained pending before a court. On 8 December Shahriar Kabir and Muntasir Mamun, a university lecturer and human rights defender, were arrested after they had given interviews to foreign journalists, and were detained without charge. Omar Tarek Chowdhury, deputy director of the non-governmental organization Proshika, a centre for human development, was detained between 13 March and 4 April for carrying documents relating to attacks against members of the Hindu minority.

Political persecution of the opposition leaders continue in the country. Several Awami League leaders were detained for long periods and reportedly tortured or ill-treated. They were not released even when courts issued orders. Among the prominent leaders detained were Kamal Ahmed Majumder, Mohiuddin Alamgir, Liaqat Shikder, Nazrul Islam Babu, Rafiqul Islam Kotowal, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Shafi Ahmed, Mukul Bose, Sheikh Bazlur Rahman and Tofael Ahmed.

The government is following a policy to suppress media. Police arrested five people in late November for making a documentary about the political situation in Bangladesh for a foreign media. Two of them Zaiba Malik and Bruno Sorrentino were foreigners. However, three others were local Bangladeshis. The authorities accused them of seeking to tarnish Bangladesh's image abroad, but no formal charges were brought against any of them. They were released later after the incident became an international issue.

In yet another attack on press freedom in Bangladesh, warrants of arrest were issued against editors of two leading dailies the Daily Star and the Prathom Alo in June 2003. These moves are aimed at coercing journalists so that they can be stopped from publishing articles deemed critical of the authorities.

A number of incidents of torture has also been reported. A 15-year-old boy, Kauser Mia, was detained by the police on 4 February, 2002 on suspicion of involvement in a bomb blast. He died due to torture in police custody on 15 February. Torture has also been used against the opposition leaders. Bahauddin Nasim, a senior Awami League official detained on 28 February, was reportedly subjected to inhuman torture for five days by army and police. Mohiuddin Alamgir, an Awami League leader detained on 15 March, was beaten by three masked men with sticks while in police custody.

Violation of Rights in the CHT

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) accord was signed in December 1997 with the hope that it will bring peace in the trouble torn region. But it has been only partially successful in this aim. Though a relative peace was achieved in the region after Shanti Bahini which was spearheading the insurgency signed the peace treaty. But unfortunately the other essential features of the treaty have not been implemented since then.

Violent clashes continue between members of the pro-peace accord Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) who signed the peace accord with the government in December 1997, and radical groups seeking more autonomy and opposing the peace accord. According to police sources at least 231 people had been killed and 400 injured in clashes between the PCJSS and radical groups between December 1997 and September 2002. Tribal representatives continue to demand implementation of the peace accord, including the withdrawal of army camps from the region.

Violation of Human Rights by Islamists

The rise of religious extremists and fundamentalists has also resulted into a violation of human rights. The Islamist extremist forces of Bangladesh have used explosives as a tool of terror unlike their counterparts in Pakistan or Afghanistan who have mostly relied on AK-47 or Kalashnikovs. Since 1999, 11 bomb explosions have claimed more than 100 lives and injured about 500 others. Most of these are suspected to be their handiwork.

Violence against Women

Incidents of violence against women are frequent. They face attacks in their homes and communities. They are also targets of rape, murder and acid throwing. At least six women committed suicide following rape. Sometimes, the raped women are also forced to marry the rapist. Though violence against women is difficult to quantify in the absence of reliable statistics, recent reports have indicated that domestic violence is widespread. A report released by the U.N. Population Fund in September 2000 asserted that 47 percent of adult women report physical abuse by their male partner. The Government, the media, and women's rights organizations have fostered a growing awareness of the problem of violence against women. Women face mostly violence as a result of dispute over dowries.

Acid attacks are another major problem. They leave their victims horribly disfigured and often blind. According to the Acid Survivors' Foundation, a local organization that offers assistance to acid attack victims, approximately 300 acid attacks occur each year. Nearly 80 percent of acid attack victims are female; more than 40 percent are under the age of 18. These attacks spoil the life of victims and make their social reintegration very difficult. The most common motivation for acid-throwing attacks against women is revenge by a rejected suitor; land disputes are another leading cause of the acid attacks.

There is extensive trafficking in women for the purpose of prostitution within the country and to other countries in Asia. Though it is forbidden by law, trafficking in persons is a serious problem. There is extensive trafficking in both women and children, primarily to India, Pakistan, and destinations within the country, mainly for the purpose of prostitution, although in some instances for labor servitude. Some children also are trafficked to the Middle East to be used as camel jockeys.

The exact number of women and children trafficked for purposes of prostitution is unknown; however it is estimated that more than 20,000 women and children are trafficked from the country for such purposes annually.

Due to the violation of human rights a grave situation exists in Bangladesh. This has led to a continuous decline in minority population. Minorities feeling unsafe in this country escape to the neighbouring states of India. Violence against women and children is common and political persecution continues. Ruling coalition which is too keen to protect its Islamist identity is unwilling to take any corrective step. This situation can be improved only under international pressure through Human rights organisations, donor agencies, donor countries and by creating an opinion against such atrocities.