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UN member states must demand accountability from Bangladesh for gross violations of human rights in upcoming UPR

Bangladesh

UN Member states must use the UN's upcoming Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Bangladesh to hold the authorities to account for the gross human rights violations and rapidly deteriorating human rights situation in the country ahead of its general elections, said Amnesty International today.

“Bangladesh’s fourth UPR is taking place at a time when human rights and critical institutions, opposition leaders, independent media houses and civil society are facing systematic attacks ahead of national elections. This assessment presents an important opportunity for UN Member States to scrutinize Bangladesh’s human rights records and to hold the authorities accountable for violations of their international human rights obligations and commitments,” said Livia Saccardi, Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional Director for campaigns for South Asia.

The UN Human Rights Council’s UPR offers an opportunity to review the human rights record of all UN Member States once every four years. Amnesty International’s submission of information¹ for Bangladesh’s UPR evaluates the implementation of recommendations made to Bangladesh in its previous UPR and raises concerns about the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly, and other human rights issues such as enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, minority rights, death penalty, and rights of refugees.

Freedom of expression

In the last UPR in May 2018, the government accepted recommendations to safeguard the right to freedom of expression; however, in the past five years it has persistently undermined the right

including through perfunctory reform and weaponization of various laws. The new Cyber Security Act 2023 retains the draconian features of the former Digital Security Act.

The Government of Bangladesh must bring the Cyber Security Act 2023 in line with international human rights law and ensure it is not used to target human rights defenders, activists, critics and crackdown on peaceful dissent. Further, the Bangladeshi authorities must immediately and unconditionally release those detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their human rights including the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly ahead of the next general elections scheduled to be held in January 2024.

Enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions

Extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances have persisted in the last five years with alarming frequency, even though the Government of Bangladesh supported recommendations to enhance efforts to prevent, investigate and bring those suspected to be responsible for these human rights crimes to justice in the last UPR. Since then, Amnesty International has investigated and documented a clear pattern of enforced disappearance followed by extrajudicial executions by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) who reportedly² killed at least 466 people under the guise of an anti-drug campaign in 2018.

The Bangladeshi government should immediately ratify the Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and accept the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances' request to conduct an official visit to Bangladesh. The government must also promptly, thoroughly, impartially, independently, effectively and transparently investigate allegations of enforced disappearances made against members of law enforcement agencies, particularly the RAB, before the general elections in January 2024.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

The police have continued to suppress peaceful protests on a range of civic issues, including those organized by university students, schoolchildren, workers, and political activists. The authorities have been using tear gas, rubber bullets, batons, stun grenades and water cannon, and in some instances, lethal force.

The Government of Bangladesh must promptly, thoroughly, impartially, effectively and transparently investigate the excessive use of force against protestors and take appropriate disciplinary action against relevant law enforcement officials, including those with command responsibility, and immediately release all those arbitrarily arrested and detained.

Death penalty

Between January 2018 and December 2022, Amnesty International recorded at least thirteen executions, with 912 death sentences imposed. As of December 2021, at least 2,000 individuals were believed to be under the sentence of death. The death penalty continues to be imposed in

violation of international law and standards. While most individuals are sentenced to death for murder, there is a notable trend of death penalty being imposed for non-fatal offences such as rape and drug possession. Additionally, the controversial International Crimes Tribunal, continues to sentence individuals to death, even in absentia, despite concerns about lack of due process.

Death penalty must be restricted to the 'most serious crimes' and the government must establish an official moratorium on executions as first steps towards full abolition of the punishment.

Minority and refugee rights

There have been at least five large-scale orchestrated attacks against Hindu minorities since 2019 that typically involve looting and then violent destruction ostensibly in response to a social media post, which would often turn out to be fake.

Twenty-five years since the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord was signed by the Bangladeshi government & the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti, militarisation of the region persists, violating the Accord.

Dwindling funding and collapsing security in the Rohingya refugee camps, is causing further psychological and physical trauma for the Rohingya community in Bangladesh.

The Bangladeshi government should adopt a rights-respecting policy towards religious and ethnic minorities and Rohingya refugees.

"Amnesty International strongly urges UN Member States to engage in meaningful discussions with Bangladesh, including by following up on their past recommendations and offering concrete recommendations to improve respect for human rights in the country," said Livia Saccardi.

Annotations

1 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/6649/2023/en/>

2 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/11/bangladesh-killed-in-crossfire/>