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Bangladesh: Man Released From Long Secret Detention

Two Others Held Incommunicado Should Be Released or Charged

The release this week of a man held incommunicado for more than six months after his apparent abduction by security forces is a step forward, but Bangladeshi authorities need to immediately reveal the fate and whereabouts of two other men held in secret detention, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch said today.

Humam Quader Chowdhury, who was taken away by men in plainclothes on August 4, 2016, was released March 2, 2017, near his family home in Dhaka. Two other men – Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem and Abdullahil Amaan Azmi – were also taken in August 2016 in separate incidents and have not been heard from since. They should either be charged or released without delay.

The three men are all sons of prominent opposition politicians tried and convicted by the International Crimes Tribunal set up to prosecute war crimes committed during Bangladesh's 1971 war of independence. They have been denied access to lawyers and their family members.

“The release of Humam Quader Chowdhury is one positive step, but he should never should have been held in secret detention in the first place,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The Bangladeshi authorities need to now come clean about what has happened to Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem and Abdullahil Amaan Azmi, and provide their families with answers. They were picked up in front of relatives and other eyewitnesses and there is little room for denial that security forces were involved in their enforced disappearances.”

International pressure has mounted on the Bangladeshi authorities over these and other cases. Last week, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances called on the government to reveal the whereabouts of the three men and all other victims of enforced disappearances in the country. The working group's statement, citing concern over a rise in enforced disappearances over the last few years, was endorsed by several other UN experts.

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have been raising concerns about these disappearances for many months.

Authorities have denied holding the men in custody, although family members cite multiple credible sources to confirm the men were held by different branches of security forces since their abductions, including the Rapid Action Battalion and the military intelligence Directorate General of Forces Intelligence.

Enforced disappearances, particularly targeting supporters of opposition parties, are routinely conducted by security forces in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi human rights group Odhikar reported that in 2016, at least 90 people were arrested by security forces and not heard from again. Enforced disappearance is defined under international law as the arrest or detention of a person by state officials or their agents, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or to reveal the person's fate or whereabouts.

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have both highlighted Bangladeshi security forces' extensive and well-documented history of custodial abuse, including torture and other ill-treatment.

“Enforced disappearances have become a scourge in Bangladesh. For far too long, far too many families have lived with the grief of not knowing where their loved ones are,” said Biraj Patnaik, South Asia director at Amnesty International. “The Bangladeshi authorities need to put an end to this criminal practice immediately. They should bring those suspected of criminal responsibility to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty.”

Background

Humam Quader Chowdhury

Humam Quader Chowdhury, 33, is the son of Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, a prominent leader of the opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) who was executed in November 2015 following his conviction for war crimes. Humam Chowdhury is also a senior member of the BNP. On August 4, 2016, he was pulled out of his car while traveling with his mother to a courthouse to attend a hearing. His mother said that several men in civilian clothing forced Chowdhury into another vehicle. They were surrounded by other armed men in uniform.

The family had previously reported that on several occasions security force members had harassed and threatened security staff at the family home. Staff members eventually quit out of fear. Several family members went into hiding as a result of the repeated threats and intimidation. Humam Chowdhury had not been allowed to leave Bangladesh for the last seven years and had been turned back with no explanation at the airport each time he tried to leave.

Until March 2, 2017, the family had no news of Humam Chowdhury's whereabouts.

Immediately after his abduction, his mother tried to file a general diary complaint, the standard first report of transgressions filed with the police, but the police said they would need permission “from above” to accept the report. A well-placed diplomatic source told the family that the government had confirmed it was holding Humam Chowdhury and that he had not been harmed. Another source told them that he was being held by the Detective Branch's counterterrorism unit.

Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem

Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem, 32, is the son of Mir Quasem Ali, a prominent leader of the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami party. Quasem Ali was convicted of war crimes in November 2014 and was facing execution when Bin Quasem was abducted.

Bin Quasem is a Supreme Court lawyer who had also served as his father's lawyer. He was abducted at his home at around midnight on August 9, 2016, by several men in civilian clothes. The men said they were members of the administration but did not identify themselves as being with any specific branch of the security forces. His wife and cousin were present at the time. Bin Quasem told the security forces that as a lawyer he knew his rights and demanded to see an arrest warrant. The men said they did not need a warrant and dragged Bin Quasem away, refusing even to let him put on his shoes.

Mir Quasem Ali was hanged in September. The government denied the family's entreaties to allow Bin Quasem to see his father before the execution or to attend to his father's funeral.

In the weeks before his abduction, Bin Quasem had told Human Rights Watch that he was worried about his safety. He had ruled out leaving the country because he wanted to support his family in the period before his father's execution. His family was subsequently told, but has not been able to confirm, that he was initially held along with Humam Chowdhury at the headquarters of the Rapid Action Battalion, and was later moved to the headquarters of the Detective Branch. Bin Quasem's wife has filed a general diary complaint. As with Chowdhury's family, a diplomatic source confirmed that the government admitted to holding Bin Quasem but was unable to offer any further information.

Abdullahil Amaan Azmi

Abdullahil Amaan Azmi, 57, a retired brigadier general in the army, is the son of Ghulam Azam, a leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami party who was convicted of war crimes and sentenced to death in 2013. In light of his 90 years of age, the court ruled that Azam would serve a life sentence rather than face execution. He died of a heart attack in prison in October 2014.

Amaan Azmi was abducted on the evening of August 22, 2016. About 30 men in civilian clothes entered the grounds of his apartment building, telling staff they were from the Detective Branch. They assaulted the building caretaker, leaving him unconscious, then went apartment to apartment until they found Azmi. His wife, mother, and several staff who were present confirmed that the men said they were from the Detective Branch and told Azmi he had to come with them.

Azmi asked to see an arrest warrant. They said they didn't have one and grabbed him and blindfolded him. He asked to take some clothes, but they refused. They took him away in an unmarked car, and the family has had no news of him since.

Like Chowdhury and Bin Quasem, Azmi had been concerned about his safety in the months before his abduction. Police, both in uniform and civilian clothes, had regularly parked outside his building and would occasionally go to the apartment to ask about him and his whereabouts. Immediately after he was taken, Azmi's mother went to the nearest police station to file a complaint. The police took it but told her they would not register it officially. The family has heard rumors that Azmi is being held at the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence.