

Widespread repression in Bangladesh countryside

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The government of Prime Minister Shiek Hasina Wajed in Bangladesh has unleashed a massive military-police crackdown against guerrilla groups and the rural poor. Repression on this scale has not taken place since the end of military rule in 1990.

On June 10 Home Minister Mohammed Nagim, giving details of the military-police operation to the Bangladesh parliament, said, "Law enforcement agencies have rounded up 47,000 terrorists and recovered 1,500 weapons over the past 46 days." Demanding the support of the opposition parties, he declared, "At least we can be united on this point."

The assault on underground groups began on April 21 in the southwestern region of the country, bordering the Indian state of West Bengal. Thousands of police, Bangladesh Rifles Regiment troops, border police and paramilitary units have been mobilized for the operation. Most of the targeted groups are Maoist organizations or splinter groups that broke away from a pro-Peking wing of the Bangladesh Communist Party. One prominent group is called the Purba Bangla Communist Party. According to some reports, a few Muslim fundamentalist groups are also involved. All of these organizations have been outlawed since the period of military rule.

Home Minister Nizam told the police in Jessore on April 22 that he "doesn't want to hear the names of Srahaboi and extremists. They will have to be crushed.... I will hear no excuses for the failure of the law enforcement agencies" (*Bangladesh Observer*).

Earlier these groups rejected a call by the government for their surrender. Subsequently police said a few hundred had surrendered. Speaking on June 7 to 201 of those who had given themselves up to the authorities, the Home Minister once again said the guerrillas had to "surrender or face annihilation".

Arrests are still continuing. The government has drawn up a bill to establish special courts for summary trials. Many of those detained would face murder charges.

The government crackdown is not only directed against the underground groups. It has become a widespread effort to terrorize the rural poor. Halabuddin, a human rights activist, told *Reuters* he had doubts about government claims that all of those arrested belonged to proscribed organizations.

A major aim of the Hasina government is to intimidate the rural masses, who live in dire poverty, suffering from malnutrition, unemployment, landlessness, homelessness, illiteracy, epidemics and natural calamities. There exists an explosive situation in rural Bangladesh, where the people see their conditions worsening day by day.

Ninety percent of the 125 million population of Bangladesh live in 68,000 villages. A report by the British Department for International Development ("The Country Strategy Paper") published last December said: "Around half of Bangladesh's 125 million people are poor, with a lack of education and access to land being key determinants. An additional 20 percent are on the margin of poverty."

According to another study "about 25 percent of rural households fall into category of the hard-core poor, lacking land as well as non-land assets." In other words, they have nothing!

So-called poverty alleviation programs instituted by successive governments have not lessened the burden on the poor. Instead, these programs have assisted the rich in becoming richer. The Bangladeshi ruling class has exploited the spread of rural poverty to attract foreign transnational corporations with the lure of cheap labor.

With the present police action, Shiek Hasina's government is making a sharp rightward turn. Ironically, she was chosen to address the World Peace Conference on May 15, and recently received the UNESCO Peace Prize for 1998. Her “peace achievement” was the conclusion of an agreement with the Shanthi Bahini guerrilla movement in the Chitagong Hill Tract region. The Shanthi Bahini have demanded separate rule for the area.

After years of government repression, the petty-bourgeois guerrilla movement and the Hasina regime reached a settlement on the basis of establishing a Regional Council under the auspices of the central government. This is seen as a move towards “stable rule” by Western investors, who demand tight control over the Bangladeshi labor pool. The wave of repression unleashed by the government in the rural areas is aimed at meeting this demand.

The Hasina government increased its defence expenditure by 17.6 percent in its most recent budget for 1999/2000. Part of this increase was to satisfy calls from police authorities for modern weapons to conduct the campaign of repression. Last year the defence budget was increased by 18 percent.

The government seized on terrorist actions by outlawed groups to launch its police-military crackdown. According to Bangladesh newspapers, terrorist groups have carried out some 200 killings as well as kidnappings over the past five months. They have directed their attacks on rich peasants, businessmen, ruling party politicians and the police. The guerrillas compel the poor peasants to provide them with support and shelter while they engage in these activities. Over the years these groups, whose ideological origins are in Maoism, have increasingly resorted to individual terrorist acts.



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