

# Bangladesh government crackdown on women engaged in prostitution

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In the midst of criticism of a witch-hunt launched by the government on women engaged in prostitution, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheik Hasina Wajed held a meeting with newspaper editors on August 20 to justify her government's stand.

While admitting that "poverty, hunger and social deprivation" forced women into prostitution, the prime minister said her government would impose harsh rules on brothels and attacked human rights groups which opposed the victimisation of prostitutes.

Prostitution is one of the foremost social questions in Bangladesh, where hundreds of thousands of women and children have been forced into the profession because they have no other means of survival.

For nearly three months Sheik Hasina's government has been taking steps to evict women from the 150-year-old Tanbazar and Nimtal brothels, where at least 7,000 women engaged in prostitution are housed. More than 700 women evicted from these brothels have been detained at three vagrant centres in Narayanganj and Gazipur. They are being kept in subhuman conditions.

Twenty-five women were injured when employees of the Kashimpur vagrant centre attacked a procession of detainees to protest against poor standards at the centre and inadequate food. A Bangladeshi newspaper reported that these attacks, which occurred on August 10, lasted for three hours and the women were mercilessly beaten and insulted. They received no medical care, which increased their suffering.

Human rights groups charge that officials of the Home Ministry in charge of eviction and "rehabilitation" have started to release some women back to the flesh traders.

The incidents at Kashimpur vagrant centre reveal the real face of the so-called "rehabilitation" campaign and expose the hypocrisy behind Sheik Hasina's rhetoric about morality.

Earlier, on July 30, representatives of human rights

groups were brutally attacked by police and thugs backed by government politicians when they marched against the forcible eviction and detention of women from the Tanbazar and Nimtal brothels. The *AFP* news agency reported that some 40 women activists were injured. The attack took place near the Narayanganj police station. After approvingly watching the assault by the thugs, the police joined in with sticks and tear gas.

On the same day the women detained at vagrant centres were attacked when they protested to demand their release. Some detainees threatened to commit suicide if they were not freed.

Some Islamic religious organisations have extended support to the government's move against these women in the name of protecting "moral values". The District Imart Association in Narayanganj demanded that the government not to give in to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) "supporting prostitution".

Recently, when a young woman in a brothel was murdered by her customer, the priests refused to perform the last rites. After three days her friends had to bury her decomposing body.

Oppressive conditions for women in Bangladesh have been exacerbated by the poverty and hunger which are pervasive in the country. Some 53 percent of the population live below the poverty line, 35.6 percent of the labour force is unemployed, 63 percent of the population cannot read or write, and annual per capita income is US\$270. According to a report of one NGO, 200,000 women and children have been smuggled across the country's borders to be sold into prostitution and slavery.

Details about the condition of children in Bangladesh, given in a report published by UNICEF—"Status of the World's Children 1997"—are revealing. In 1992 more than 75,000 children were working in the garment industry in Bangladesh, the majority of whom were girls. Of these children, 40 percent were 10 to 12 years old.

In 1992 the US Senate passed a resolution banning the import of garments whose production involved child labour. The following year Bangladesh businessmen eliminated 50,000 children from the industry. According to the UNICEF report, most of the retrenched children were forced to engage in "street jobs", stone breaking and prostitution.

According to another NGO report, Bangladesh police had by June 20 of this year raped 17 women, killed 72 and wounded another 207.

The witch-hunt against women involved in prostitution by the Bangladeshi government is not an isolated move. Together with the moral crusade against prostitution, the government has unleashed an attack on slum dwellers in the capital city, Dhaka. The government says it wants to clear slum areas in order to eradicate "drug peddlers, smugglers, killers and prostitutes".

There are 74 slum districts in Dhaka, home to 2.6 million poor people. According to official estimates there are 4 million slum dwellers in all of Bangladesh.

On August 9, Dhaka authorities, with the help of 800 police and paramilitary troops, bulldozed 2,000 slum dwellings, forcing 10,000 poor people to the street. When on August 12 hundreds of people barricaded a street in Dhaka to protest, the police attacked the people and arrested dozens.

Facing mass protests and media criticism, the Hasina government claimed it had plans to "rehabilitate" the slum dwellers by sending them to rural areas. This claim was absurd on its face, since most of the slum dwellers had migrated to Dhaka in the first place to escape crushing poverty in the countryside.

In reality Hasina is seeking to eliminate socially explosive concentrations of poverty in the capital city, while freeing up land that can be exploited by real estate interests and businesses, both local and foreign-based.



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