

Striking dock workers shot dead in Bangladesh

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9 December 2000

Bangladeshi police shot dead four striking dock workers and wounded more than 100 on December 5 during a demonstration in the port city of Mongla, 160 kilometres southwest of Bangladesh's capital Dhaka. In defiance of their trade unions, the workers were striking for improved working conditions and the release of a co-worker arrested for campaigning for a hartal (strike and shop closures).

In an act of provocation, the police blocked the progress of the demonstration of over 2,000 workers and their supporters through Mongla, firing teargas and launching baton charges into their march. When workers stood their ground, the police opened fire indiscriminately with rifles and shotguns on the march, which included women and children. Police have admitted to firing 40 teargas canisters and 141 bullets into the demonstration.

Those killed by the police were a 27-year-old dock worker, the 16-year-old brother of a dock worker, a 15-year-old tailor and a 22-year-old student who was observing the workers' protest from the roof of a hotel. Another seven dock workers were hospitalised and remain in a critical condition. Workers claim that three others were killed, including a woman and child, and that police took their bodies.

On December 6, most of the shops and business establishments in Mongla were closed, no transport was operating and the docks remained idle. Over 5,000 workers and their families rallied to denounce the killings and to demand the punishment of the police culprits. "I want the trial of the police who killed my son," the mother of one of the dead said.

Workers declared they had no confidence in the president and the secretary of their trade union, the Mongla Port Shramik Sangha, declaring them "people of the ship owners".

The workers are employed at Mongla port, Bangladesh's second largest. In July 1999 the union signed agreements with the port companies permitting them to use only 12 men on a crew to unload clinker—a material used in cement production. Outraged, sections of workers formed their own committee and agitated for strike action to demand that 18 men make up a crew. When workers initiated a strike on December 1, the trade union leadership denounced it as "illegal" and openly solidarised themselves with the port authorities.

With 14 ships already stranded in the port, there were signs that the government of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina was preparing to use even greater force against the workers. Army units, riot police and police were deployed on Mongla dock. Cement importers threatened to have ships unloaded at Chittagong port.

In an attempt to pacify the workers, two government ministers, State Minister for Relief Talukder Abdel Khalek and Shipping Minister Moffazzal Chowdhury, addressed the rally and promised that action would be taken against those responsible for the killings.

The ministers were also seeking to secure an agreement to end the strike. The shipping minister told the rally only that their demands would be met if they were legitimate. Workers returned to work on December 7 after receiving "assurances" from the minister that their demands would be resolved within a month.

A one-man police inquiry has been established into the shootings. At the same time, however, police have filed charges of assault against 18 workers involved in the December 5 demonstration.



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