Bangladesh’s "crime" crackdown results in the deaths of 24 detainees

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In the name of combatting crime, the Bangladesh government has mobilised some 40,000 soldiers alongside police in a huge nationwide dragnet that began on October 17 and has already resulted in the detention of more than 5,700 people. They include union officials, as well as politicians.

The ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP) of Prime Minister Khalida Zia claims to be fighting rising levels of murder, rape, extortion and gang-related violence. But the real purpose of “Operation Clean Heart,” as the military crackdown is known, is to instill a climate of fear and intimidation in response to growing signs of social instability and political opposition.

By last weekend, 24 detainees had died in military or police custody and scores more had been hospitalised. Army officials have absurdly claimed that all the deaths are the result of “heart failure out of panic” during interrogations. Relatives, friends and human rights organisations have accused the army of torturing its victims to death.

According to media reports, soldiers have blindfolded suspects, tied their hands behind their backs and brutally assaulted them—irrespective of their age or gender. An 85-year-old woman, Shahatunnesa, told reporters that soldiers kicked her in the stomach and clubbed her, when she tried to stop them dragging away her daughter.

The *New Nation* reported the treatment of two young men—Zenifer Sayed King and his friend Liton—after they were taken into custody on October 29. King died of torture and his friend was in a critical condition in hospital. The army alleged that it had arrested the two after complaints by two local businessmen. Both denied making any allegations.

The opposition Awami League has clearly been targetted. Among the detained are Saber Hossain Chowdhury, the political secretary to Awami League leader Sheik Hasina, and Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, an MP and former health minister. The army has arrested several local party leaders and raided the party’s documentation centre.

In late October, the army stormed into the home of local Awami League youth leader Masum Biswas in the early hours of the morning, demanding he hand over any “illegal firearms”. He was blindfolded and beaten, then dragged off to an army camp. His house was ransacked but no firearms were found. Masum was later admitted to hospital where he died from his injuries. The lower part of his body bore marks of severe torture.

None of the detainees have received legal assistance. Prior to the operation, the government promulgated a special ordinance to speed up legal proceedings. Under the new law, any case has to be completed within 125 days. Human rights organisations have expressed concern over the open flouting of democratic rights. The Bangladesh Supreme Court Bar Association has called for a judicial probe into the deaths.

However, Prime Minister Khalida Zia has defended the military crackdown. Speaking at a Business Awards 2002 function, Zia declared that the “strict enforcement of laws for establishment of social peace and stability has been ensured”. Attacking the political opposition, she said the government was curbing the “terrorism sponsored by the past Awami League government”.

Big business has enthusiastically backed the army operation. The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry issued a statement declaring that the deployment of soldiers to improve the deteriorating law-and-order situation had “rekindled hope in the business community”.

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Despite the arrest and death of Awami League members, party leader Sheik Hasina has been muted in her criticisms of the army crackdown. She called for the operation to proceed as long as it focused on fighting crime. She pledged not to call protests but to raise concerns about the infringement of democratic rights in parliament.

There are concerns in ruling circles in Dhaka over mounting opposition to the Zia regime. Since winning office in a landslide victory in October 2001, the BNP government has been plagued by the same political problem as its Awami League predecessor—how to push through the economic restructuring agenda demanded by the IMF and business leaders in the face of widespread hostility.

After just a month in office, the Zia government faced a countrywide general strike called by opposition parties to protest its plans to build a pipeline to export gas to India. Since then there have been nine major strikes and hartals [the closure of shops and businesses] against government policies. Student protests have closed the universities for 77 days during the 2001-2002 academic year. Unable to control student demonstrations, the government is planning to formally ban student involvement in politics.

Workers protests have also erupted against a growing number of factory shutdowns, including the closure of the world's largest jute mill, where 25,000 workers have been sacked. In July, dockworkers struck repeatedly against plans to build a private container terminal at the port of Chittagong port. The government was forced to suspend negotiations with a US company over the proposal.

Further unrest is inevitable. The government is planning to axe the jobs of 1,604 workers at the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation and those of another 9,500 government employees. Wages have remained stagnant while the price of essential items has continued to soar. In the Export Processing Zones, an apprentice or trainee earns only $US22 per month, while a skilled worker may earn up to $63.

Around 50 percent of the population is living below the poverty line, on less than one US dollar a day. There are an estimated 1.6 million street children, of whom 40 percent are under 10 years old. Health and education services are very limited. About 20,000 women die annually from problems related to pregnancy and childbirth. About 15 percent of children never enter school and only 7 percent of school entrants complete secondary level education.

While "Operation Clean Heart" was nominally directed against crime, it is a sharp warning of the type of police-state measures that will be employed in the future against workers, students and anyone else protesting against the acute social problems for which neither the government nor the opposition has any answer.

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