

Bangladesh's government ends revolt by border guards

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A 33-hour mutiny by the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), the country's border guards, has shaken the government and the military. Having persuaded the mutineers to surrender, with the offer of a general amnesty and the threat of force, the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is ruthlessly reasserting its authority.

The army and police have rounded up more than 200 BDR soldiers who fled their barracks. Hasina has already backed off her amnesty promise, declaring that those involved in murdering army officers would be brought to justice. "They committed a heinous crime... Such acts cannot be condoned," she said yesterday.

The bodies of officers are still being found in shallow graves and sewers inside the BDR headquarters in the capital of Dhaka. By nightfall yesterday, 44 had been recovered, bringing the overall death toll, including four civilians, to 66. BDR commander Major General Shakil Ahmed was among the dead. Dozens more officers are missing.

By focussing attention on the murdered officers, the government and the media are creating the political climate for reprisals. The Bangladesh security forces are notorious for torture and extra-judicial murders.

The mutiny erupted on Wednesday morning. About 2,000 BDR soldiers, bitter about their conditions and the privileges of their army commanders, left their barracks at the BDR headquarters in Dhaka and stormed into a hall where an annual high-level BDR conference was being held.

The immediate trigger for the revolt was the failure of the top officers to inform Prime Minister Hasina of the

soldiers' grievances when she was present on Tuesday. The mutineers took about 100 high-ranking officers hostage, including Major General Ahmed, barricaded nearly roads and issued a series of demands.

BDR camps across the country, including at Chittagong, Rangpur, Chapainawabganj, Satkhira and Jessore, joined the rebellion. The mutiny does not appear to have been pre-planned nor an attempt to unseat the government. Rather it was the result of pent-up resentment over poor conditions and the second class status of the BDR within the armed forces.

The BDR is a 67,000-strong force primarily responsible for patrolling Bangladesh's lengthy borders, and an auxiliary to the army. To ensure that it remains firmly under the control of the military high command, army officers occupy all the top posts and as a result became the target of the soldiers' anger.

Among their demands were higher pay, better allowances and commanding officers chosen from their own ranks rather than the regular army, with the right to deal directly with the Ministry of Home Affairs. The soldiers also demanded the right to serve in the well-paid deployments for UN peacekeeping missions abroad.

BDR troops receive a monthly salary of just \$US70, along with a ration of rice, wheat and sugar. One BDR soldier interviewed by ATN television said: "Everybody knows how miserably we live. We cannot work independently. We don't have a department of our own... We want to tell them [the government] that we need freedom."

BDR personnel receive rations for just three months of the year, while army staff enjoy their rations and other

privileges throughout the year. The soldiers wanted this anomaly ended and accused their army commanders of being corrupt and of abusing them. "We were tortured and deprived by the army officers. We are not getting our proper pay and facilities, rather the army officers humiliated and tortured us," one BDR member said.

One reason that the government did not order the military to immediately suppress the mutiny was that the rebels enjoyed considerable public support. The Associated Press published images of ordinary people cheering the mutineers on. The soldiers' demands no doubt struck a chord with working people confronting the same problems of rising prices and deepening poverty. There is also popular hostility to the army, which effectively ruled the country from January 2007 to last December.

In an open letter to the prime minister, the BDR rebels appealed to the broad resentment toward the military, stating: "What kind of nation are we that we need army officers everywhere? Why are all the country's people held hostage by them? Why do we even need a home ministry when BDR, Ansar [village guards], the fire brigade, jail guards and RAB [Rapid Action Battalion] are under their command and control?"

In elections last December, people voted overwhelmingly for Sheik Hasina's Awami League and her allies as a means of expressing their hostility to the previous military-backed regime and its repressive methods. The government, which has 260 seats in the 300-seat parliament, clearly has been shocked by the outbreak of the mutiny just two months later.

Treading warily, Hasina took part in a video conference with 14 rebel BDR members to discuss their demands. She promised a general amnesty, better pay and a qualified end to army control over the BDR "in phases". In a letter address to the nation, however, she warned: "We don't want to use force to break the standoff. But don't play with our patience. We will not hesitate to do whatever is needed to end the violence if peaceful means fail."

The army dispatched troops and tanks to the area surrounding the BDR headquarters, but the BDR mutineers accepted the surrender terms. Notwithstanding Hasina's promises, hundreds of BDR soldiers fled their

barracks in Dhaka and other camps. Police and army troops have set up roadblocks across the country, searching buses and ferries.

Speaking to widows of dead officers in company with army commander General Moeen Uddin Ahmed, Prime Minister Hasina declared: "Nobody could have staged the rebellion alone. A certain quarter must be involved behind the incident. Everyone was not involved but a group was." Her comments indicate that a witch-hunt and reprisals are being prepared.

Reflecting the broader fears in ruling circles throughout the region, Bhaskar Roy, a security analyst with the South Asia Analysis Group in New Delhi, commented to the *Los Angeles Times*: "These events should remain contained within Bangladesh's borders, but the instability is worrying."

Under the impact of the global economic crisis, unemployment and poverty is on the rise across the subcontinent. Bangladesh is already one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per-capita annual GDP of \$450. About 40 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line. Tens of thousands of jobs have been lost in recent months as the international downturn has hit Bangladesh's key textile and clothing export industries.

While the rebellion erupted inside the Bangladesh security forces, it is a sign of far broader discontent that will grow as working people find their conditions of life intolerable.



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