

Bangladeshi government authorises arrest of 1,000 mutineers

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Despite promises of an amnesty, the Bangladeshi government has launched a massive manhunt for members of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) who mutinied last week and murdered their army commanders. Prime Minister Sheik Hasina told parliament on Sunday that the rebels had been given 24 hours to surrender and she had authorised the army to launch "Operation Rebel Hunt".

Arrest warrants have been issued for 1,000 BDR members. According to Hasina, warrants have also been issued for BDR supporters "who organised cars, boats to help [the mutineers] to flee". The army's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), which is notorious for arbitrary arrests and extra-judicial murders, has been deployed alongside police to track down the BDR soldiers.

According to media reports, 700 men had been arrested as of yesterday, including six BDR soldiers who were branded ringleaders. Touhidul Alam, a BDR deputy assistant director, who led last week's negotiations with the prime minister, has been singled out as the leader of the mutiny. The BDR functions as the country's border guard and is effectively controlled by the army.

The detainees face a long list of charges, including murder, conspiracy to kill officers and civilians, using weapons and explosives, creating panic, looting and hiding bodies. Following a meeting between Prime Minister Hasina and army chief General Moeen U. Ahmed last Friday, the government said it would establish special tribunals to try the BDR soldiers. Army spokesman Lieutenant General Muhammad

Abdul Mubin said "exemplary punishment" was expected.

BDR members mutinied on February 25, seizing control of their headquarters in Dhaka and taking their army commanders hostage. Their list of demands included higher salaries, and food rations equal to those of the army. Resentful at being treated as a second-class outfit, they also demanded an end to the practise of installing army officers in senior posts and the right to serve in lucrative UN missions abroad.

The BDR rebels called off their mutiny last week after talks with the prime minister and the threat of an army crackdown. Fearing reprisals, many fled after surrendering their arms. At least 70 people were killed in the course of the revolt, mostly army officers. Their bodies, some mutilated, were found buried inside the BDR headquarters or hidden in sewers.

The government has announced an investigation into the rebellion. The prime minister has requested the assistance of the FBI as well as the UN and British police. On Tuesday, however, the army announced its own inquiry. Army chief of staff, Lieutenant General Sina Ibne Jamali, told reporters: "We want a neutral investigation to take place."

The army's decision to establish its own investigation is a sign of sharpening tensions between the government and the military. According to the BBC, sections of the officer corps were hostile to Hasina's handling of the mutiny and insisted that it should be crushed by force. Soldiers backed by tanks took up positions around the BDR headquarters last week, but were pulled back after the rebels accepted Hasina's

promises.

Hasina's Awami League overwhelming won national elections last December that followed nearly two years of an army-backed administration. The election outcome reflected widespread hostility to military rule and its repressive methods. The demands of the BDR rebels reflected this antagonism toward the army chiefs, as well as the impact of the global economic crisis on living standards.

The army's decision to conduct its own separate investigation may be an attempt to reassert its own authority. Backed by the media, the military has exploited the grisly details of the murdered officers to whip up a lynch mob atmosphere toward the mutineers and bolster its own standing. The military and the government accorded full state honours to the dead officers, describing them as "martyrs". A three-day period of national mourning has been announced.

The *New Nation* chimed in with an editorial on Tuesday, declaring: "The tragedy at Peelkhana BDR headquarters in its depth and enormity surpassed all such killings since the liberation of Bangladesh." The *Daily Star* commented on Saturday: "These were the work of premeditated murderers who planned, prepared and then executed what amounts to the biggest loss of life of our well-trained officers corps of our armed forces."

Having abandoned all her promises to the rebels, Hasina has now declared that the revolt was a conspiracy against her government. Speaking at a seminar yesterday in Dhaka, she condemned the rebels, saying: "The mutiny is part of a wider plot. Conspiracies against Bangladesh are not over yet. There is still a plot to foil the country's democracy, independence and sovereignty."

The prime minister provided no details. However, the *Times of India* referred to claims made by detained BDR soldiers that businessman Salauddin Qadeer Chowdhury was involved in instigating the revolt. Chowdhury is a close aide to opposition leader Khaleda Zia—a long-time, bitter rival of Hasina.

On Tuesday, the new BDR chief, Brigadier General Mohammed Mainul Islam, told the *Daily Star* that "outsiders wearing BDR uniforms" were involved in the mutiny. Another officer, Brigadier General Ziaul Hassan, was more cautious yesterday in comments to the *Gulf News*, saying: "I can't confirm if outsiders took part in the massacre in uniform until we are sure or could catch any of them."

The unsubstantiated conspiracy theories swirling around Dhaka suggest that sections of the military and the government are desperate to find a convenient scapegoat to deflect blame for the revolt from themselves. That is not to completely rule out the possibility that the pent-up frustration of the BDR soldiers was not manipulated for ulterior purposes.

All of the various conspiracy theories ignore the basic fact that what is fuelling the sharpening social and political tensions is the country's underlying economic crisis. The methods now being used by the government and military against the BDR rebels will be used against workers and farmers in the next period as they seek to defend their jobs and living standards.



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