

Bangladesh government accused of “kneecapping” opponents

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Human Rights Watch (HRW) late last month released a report alleging that Bangladeshi security forces have deliberately targeted and maimed government opponents. The 45-page report is entitled *No Right to Live: ‘Kneecapping’ and Maiming of Detainees by Bangladesh Security Forces*.

“Kneecapping” causes serious damage—to kneecaps, soft tissue, blood vessels, muscles and nerves. In some cases, the victims’ limbs must be amputated. The HRW report says the injured were denied proper medical treatment and were jailed.

The US-based human rights organisation’s accusations are another exposure of the increasingly repressive methods used by Awami League-led government of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina Wajed.

The Awami League dominates the current parliament after the right-wing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and other opposition parties boycotted the 2014 national election. Confronting ongoing agitation by the BNP and other opposition parties, and deepening discontent by Bangladeshi workers, the Hasina government is increasingly using police-state methods to maintain its rule.

The HRW report contains testimony from 25 people, mostly members and supporters of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, a reactionary Islamic fundamentalist party.

Fearing retribution, most of the victims were unwilling to be identified and used pseudonyms. They told HRW that police had shot them in the leg, without any provocation, permanently disabling several individuals. Many said they were beaten by security forces before being kneecapped.

Mahbub Kabir, who worked in the marketing department of *Naya*, pro-Jamaat daily newspaper, was captured and shot in front of witnesses on his way to work. The security officer told Kabir: “I have shot in

your leg. If you speak out, then next time I will shoot in your eyes.”

The police repression was not confined to Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital. Another victim, a 32-year-old farmer, said he was shot after a raid in Chittagong, in southeastern Bangladesh. “After beating me for a few minutes, the police tied me to a tree. Then he shot me above the knee in my left leg,” the farmer said. While the police officer involved denied the accusation, he called the farmer a criminal and said he had “no right to live.”

The attacks were highly organised and systematic. One victim told HRW: “One of the policemen was talking on his cell phone and asking a person on the other end whether they should injure or kill me. After he finished talking, the other police officers pushed me face down on the ground and shot me in my left leg. Then they put me back in the van and took me to hospital.”

Another victim, Anis, 45, who was shot in February 2013, said: “A policeman put me into handcuffs and brought me out and made me stand. He then went behind me and shot me in my left leg. I must have fallen unconscious, because the next thing is that I found myself lying on a bed at National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation. Four days later, my left leg was amputated.”

Nor was the repression limited to the opposition activists. Ordinary citizens accidentally in the “wrong place” have also become victims.

Fazal, 18, an International Islamic University law student lived in Kutubbagh, Dhaka where the opposition held an anti-government protest. He went to get his breakfast but was caught up in the protest and grabbed by police after he witnessed officers beating three men. According to television footage, Fazal was

healthy when taken into custody. He was detained along with others at Sher-e-Bangla Police Station.

Fazal told HRW: “The SI [police superintendent] said: ‘He has not been shot. Bring him out.’ They grabbed me by my collar and pulled me to the back of the police station... They said: ‘Keep quiet. Stand with your eyes shut. We are going to shoot. If you talk too much we will shoot you in the chest’.”

Fazal, who was later kneecapped and had his leg amputated, reported that one of the men said: “Give us five lakh taka [\$US6,300]. We will let you go.” Fazal added: “I heard five lakhs and kept quiet. I knew my family couldn’t give five lakhs. They started hitting me with rifles. The SI who was supposed to shoot me said, ‘Blindfold him.’ They tied my eyes. I knew they were shooting me. I heard the sound. Then I woke up I found myself in the verandah, bleeding. I realised I had been shot.”

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan immediately rejected the report, telling the AFP news agency that “all the allegations against the security forces are baseless.” He claimed that the “security forces only shot at ‘criminals’ when they ‘try to escape’ or were in confrontation with police.”

Last week, Prime Minister Hasina dismissed the HRW report, telling the *Hindu*, India’s English-language daily, that the “human rights agencies are more vocal for the rights of the criminals than they are for the rights of the victims.”

Hasina attempted to justify the state violence by referring to police repression in the US. “What is happening in America? When they have an attack on their schools or anywhere, what do law enforcement agencies there do? Don’t they kill the attackers and rescue people? Should our law enforcement agencies not kill terrorists who attack them?”

The police repression in Bangladesh has nothing to do with countering alleged terrorism but is aimed at suppressing anti-government opponents. After the BNP-led opposition boycotted the January 2014 general election and called protests demanding new elections, the government unleashed its security forces, killing more than 100 people in that month alone.

Under the cover of combating terrorism and under pressure from the US, the Awami-led regime in June this year detained more than 11,000 people. Mass arrests continued after ISIS claimed responsibility for

taking hostages at Holey Artisan Bakery, a popular restaurant in Dhaka.

While Washington has pointed to the rise of ISIS and other Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh, these concerns are driven by its geo-strategic manoeuvres in the Indian sub-continent and, in particular, bringing the Awami League-led regime into line with US war preparations against China.

Though the BNP and other opposition activists are the government’s current targets, its main aim is the suppression of Bangladeshi working class, peasants and the poor and their increasing opposition to worsening social exploitation and inequality.



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