Over 100 killed in Bangladesh “anti-drug” crackdown

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Over 100 people have been killed and around 12,000 arrested so far in an “anti-drug” crackdown launched last month by the Bangladesh government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The operation has been compared with the murderous so-called anti-drug war being conducted by Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte.

Under the pretext of “saving the country from the drug menace,” hundreds of police officers and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) personnel have been mobilised against residents in slum areas of the capital Dhaka and other major cities. The RAB is notorious for brutality and has been widely condemned by human rights groups.

The real purpose of these police-state style operations is to strengthen the state apparatus against growing anti-government opposition by workers, youth and other oppressed layers, in preparation for mass social struggles against the Bangladesh capitalist elite.

Virtually all those killed in the crackdown were supposedly shot during “gunfights,” “crossfire” or “shootouts” with law enforcers. Not a single police or state security officer has been killed in the military-style operations.

On May 26, heavily-armed RAB personnel raided the poverty-stricken Stranded Pakistanis Relief Camp, popularly known as the Geneva Camp, in Dhaka’s Mohammadpu area. Over 150 people were arrested. More than 40,000 Urdu-speaking people are housed in miserable conditions in the settlement, with an average of 90 people forced to share a single toilet.

Later that night, 52 people were arrested during raids on Dhaka’s Kamlapur and Korail slums. Police claimed to have recovered marijuana, methamphetamine tablets and locally-made liquor.

Prime Minister Hasina has been centrally involved in the “anti-drug” campaign from the outset, giving a free hand to the RAB and other police units. In line with her instructions, RAB Director-General Benazir Ahmed announced on May 14 that the operations would include “mobile courts.” These virtual kangaroo courts violate basic legal procedures and democratic rights.

According to a *bdnws24.com* report on May 27, mobile courts sentenced 77 people in one day, issuing jail terms ranging from three months to two years. Geneva Camp residents told the *Daily Star* that most of the detainees were “innocent.” The real drug dealers had fled after being tipped off in advance.

Media reports revealed that some victims were killed after victims’ families failed to pay bribes to the police. A *Daily Star* editorial on May 25 reported: “In Feni and Gazipur, families of men killed in ‘shootouts’ have alleged that the local police sought bribes in exchange for their release. In Feni, relatives have alleged that the failure to pay the bribe led to their deaths, while in Gazipur’s Tongi, the police allegedly killed a detained man even after having been paid the bribe.”

A motor mechanic detained and later released during one raid told the media that ordinary people were “suffering” for a few drug dealers. “We can’t do anything against the drug traders because people in the administration and politicians are also involved in drug trade,” he said.

Under conditions of growing social inequality, wage demands by garment workers and student protests over jobs, sections of the ruling elite have begun voicing concerns about the anti-drug operations.

A *New Age* editorial on May 26 described the so-called gunfight deaths as “typical of extrajudicial killing.” It criticised “law enforcers” who were able to “play the judge, the jury and the executioner.” Two days earlier, the Committee for the Protection of

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Fundamental Rights condemned the anti-drug operations and mobile courts, and pointed out that the number of deaths had increased alarmingly.

The main bourgeois opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Khaleda Zia, and the Jatiya Party (JP) of former military dictator H.M. Ershad, denounced Hasina's repressive operations as "extrajudicial killings." These parties are manoeuvring in preparation for national elections later this year. Their statements are cynical frauds. Both parties were involved in extrajudicial killings whilst in power.

Just as hypocritical is the Democratic Left Alliance, a platform of eight Stalinist and Maoist parties, including the Socialist Party of Bangladesh (Marxist), Revolutionary Workers' Party, United Communist League and Democratic Revolutionary Party. It issued a pathetic appeal to the Hasina government to defend "the rule of law, democratic norms and the constitution."

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