

Bangladesh government intensifies “anti-drug” crackdown

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Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s “anti-drug” crackdown has entered its second month, with more than 150 people killed and about 21,000 arrested since May 15.

Hasina’s government has given a free hand to the police and its notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB).

The *Daily Star* reported on June 14 that “mobile courts” established by Hasina’s Awami League-led government to carry out quick show trials have already sentenced over 3,520 suspects to jail terms of between seven days and two years.

The government claims that its campaign seeks to “save the country from the drug menace.” Its real purpose is to further strengthen the country’s repressive state machinery. The crackdown is being used to target political opponents and suppress the mounting opposition by workers, youth and the oppressed masses to Hasina’s big business policies.

Last month, Habibur Rahman, a 42-year-old activist for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the main right-wing opposition party, was taken from his local mosque in Chittagong by men thought to be plain-clothes officers and later killed in custody.

One of Rahman’s relatives told the *Telegraph* on June 1: “He was neither a drug seller nor a drug addict. It was because he was involved in politics against the government and protested about land affairs.”

Addressing parliament on June 20, Hasina declared that her government would introduce anti-narcotics legislation that included the death penalty. She said the “special drives” against “drug-related criminals” were based on “zero tolerance.”

According to *New Age*, the anti-drug campaign is so terrifying that government opponents did not “dare to hold protests against the extrajudicial killings outside the capital.”

Protesting students who organised a human chain in Dhaka’s Shahbag neighbourhood against extrajudicial killings on June 6 were baton-charged by police and a leading activist, Imran H. Sarkar, detained and held for seven hours.

The government’s state-endorsed violence and political assassinations have been widely condemned. Early this month, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein criticised the crackdown. He described official declarations that none of the victims was innocent as “dangerous ... and indicative of a total disregard for the rule of law.”

The UN statement demanded the campaign be “immediately halted.” It added: “Given the large number of people arrested, there is a high likelihood that many people may have been arbitrarily detained, without due regard for their rights.”

The Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (Women’s Council of Bangladesh), a human rights organisation, denounced the killings and demanded legislation to make the law enforcement agencies “accountable for human rights violations.”

Supreme Court Bar Association president Zainul Abedin demanded the government stop “extra-judicial killings” and follow “the due process of the law.” Human Rights Watch Asia director Brad Adams said: “Until this spate of killings is independently investigated and proper procedures are put in place to protect the public, the campaign should be suspended.”

These appeals will change nothing. Any inquiry organised by the Hasina government will be a cover-up to protect the state forces and their murderous operations.

Hasina has dismissed condemnations of the repression, claiming that those killed are all drug dealers. “You might think that this is a violation of

human rights,” she said, but “could you show me one innocent person who has been caught up in the middle [of this]?”

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan told CNN the campaign will continue until the problem is brought under control.

As anger mounted against the repression, the Stalinist Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) and Socialist Party of Bangladesh (SPB) announced they would join protests against the extrajudicial killings. The CPB and SPB, however, tacitly support the crackdown, advising the government to “curb the drug menace with iron hands through strict enforcement of the law.”

On June 14, US State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert issued a statement voicing “concerns.” She urged the government “to conduct thorough and transparent investigations into all credible reports of extrajudicial killings” and “to fully meet its human rights obligations.”

Washington’s concern is bogus. The killing of innocent civilians, mainly youth, by police shootings, has been commonplace in the US under the both the Trump and Obama administrations, as is the arrest and jailing of so-called illegal immigrant workers and their children.

The US regards its relations with the Hasina government as crucial to its geo-political interests in South Asia and its military and economic efforts to undermine China’s influence in the region. Washington’s real concern is that mass opposition to Hasina’s measures will draw in key sections of the working class fighting for higher wages and better working conditions and destabilise her regime.

The government mobilised thousands of police in the lead-up to the June 15 holiday marking the end of Ramadan, worried that ongoing demands by garment workers over unpaid wages and religious festival allowances could erupt across the country. In Chittagong, metropolitan police commissioner Mahbubur Rahman deployed 4,000 police and plain-clothes officials across the city “to avert any untoward situation.”

There has been no national strike action, but hundreds of garment workers from the Paradise Group, Westeria Textile and Positive Fashionwear in Dhaka demonstrated earlier this month to demand unpaid wages and allowances.

Tens of thousands of non-government teachers are also in conflict with the government because it has not included them in the Monthly Pay Order (MPO). They say the government, which previously promised to pay them under this system, ignored them in the 2018–2019 budget.

Under the MPO, the government pays salaries and benefits to teachers of non-government schools, colleges and technical institutions. There are about 80,000 teachers of 5,000 non-government schools, colleges and technical institutions. The dispute remains unresolved.



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