

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Briefing
on
Human Rights in Bangladesh: An Update

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Since the [Briefing on Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh](#) that the TLHRC hosted on August 31, 2021, the human rights situation of the country has remained extremely alarming as before.¹

The designation of sanctions against the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and six of its top commanders by the Department of Treasury of the United States and the subsequent visa ban on the two former commanders of RAB has created significant impacts. Hundreds of victims of gross human rights abuses and their families as well as the human rights defenders welcomed the designation.² As an immediate impact of the sanctions, extrajudicial killings halted for around three months.³

Under the Sheikh Hasina regime – between January 2009 and June 2023 – there have been 2,683 people extrajudicially killed by the law-enforcement agencies. When we look at the statistics we see that the agencies committed 107 extrajudicial executions in 2021.⁴ In 2022, after the

¹ Department of State of the United States of America, 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh <<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bangladesh/>>

² Voice of America, 16 December 2021, Rights Activists Welcome US Sanctions on Bangladesh's Elite Paramilitary Force <<https://www.voanews.com/a/rights-activists-welcome-us-sanctions-on-paramilitary-unit-despite-bangladesh-s-rejection-/6357236.html>>

³ Dhaka Tribune, 9 March 2022, Bangladesh reports zero crossfire deaths in 90 days <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/265258/bangladesh-reports-zero-crossfire-deaths-in-90>>
Also see: The Daily Star, 11 January 2022, No 'crossfire' deaths since US sanctions <<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/no-crossfire-deaths-us-sanctions-2936486>>
Please also see: Dhaka Tribune, 9 February 2022, No crossfire in 2 months since US sanctions on RAB <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/263534/no-crossfire-in-2-months-since-us-sanctions-on-rab>>

⁴ Capital Punishment Justice Project, Human rights violations in Bangladesh: 2009-2022 data <<https://www.cpjp.org.au/resources/bangladesh>>

designation of sanction against the RAB, the total number of extrajudicial killings were 31.⁵ From January to June 2023, 8 people have been extrajudicially killed including 3 crossfires, 4 tortured to deaths and 1 man shot to death by the police.⁶ It indicates that the number of extrajudicial executions in the pretext of ‘crossfire’, ‘encounter’, and ‘gun-battle’ have been reduced.

The above statistics suggests that sanctions have been instrumental to save many lives as far as extrajudicial executions are concerned. The victims who have been shot to death in the post-sanction period are mostly the opposition activists while the police opened gunshots at peaceful political rallies.

The trend of committing enforced disappearances remains almost steady since the sanction was designated. According to the documented cases, 659 people have been disappeared between January 2009 and June 2023.⁷ In 2021, there were 23 people disappeared by the law-enforcement agencies while in 2022, 21 people have been the victims of enforced disappearances. From January to June 2023 the documentation suggests 16 people have been disappeared.⁸

The incumbent government of Bangladesh has established the following patterns: 1. Empowering the law-enforcement agencies, who are recruited on political considerations, with massive arbitrary power⁹; 2. Deliberate and disproportionate use of forces disregarding the Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law-Enforcement Officials¹⁰; 3. Highly repressive and heavy-handed use of the law-enforcement agencies against opposition’s peaceful political events¹¹ and ruling party friendly attitudes of the statutory institutions of the state¹²; 4. Using the complaint mechanisms for registering trumped-up, often fictitious, criminal cases against the opposition political activists¹³; 5. Systematic denial of access to justice for the gross human rights violations

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Human Rights Documentation Report by Odhikar <https://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/HRR_April-June_2023_English.pdf>

⁷ Capital Punishment Justice Project, Human rights violations in Bangladesh: 2009-2022 data <<https://www.cpjp.org.au/resources/bangladesh>>

⁸ Human Rights Documentation Report by Odhikar, 10 July 2023, <https://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/HRR_April-June_2023_English.pdf>

⁹ The Daily Star, 29 August 2022, The Politicisation of police <<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/the-politicisation-police-3105981>>

¹⁰ United Nations Human Rights Instruments, Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law-Enforcement Officials <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/basic-principles-use-force-and-firearms-law-enforcement>>

¹¹ Joint Action Letter by Special Procedures Mandates of the United Nations, 27 December 2022, <<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27748>>

¹² Prothom Alo English, 29 July 2023, AL men bring out procession with sticks at Signboard area under police guard <<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/vpgwf3vxdw>>

Please also see: New Age, 29 July 2023, Arrests, attacks, internet shutdown mark BNP rally <<https://www.newagebd.net/article/208094/arrests-attacks-internet-shutdown-mark-bnp-rally>>

¹³ Voice of America, 13 March 2019, Bangladesh Police Accused of Harassment With Fake Cases <<https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladesh-police-accused-of-harassment-with-fake-cases/4827043.html>>

through police-judiciary nexus targeting the dissidents and the opposition leaders¹⁴; 6. Intensified hounding of the families of enforced disappearance victims to coerce signatures on pre-drafted statements by the intelligence units and law-enforcement agencies¹⁵; 7. Physical and digital surveillance on the independent human rights defenders, academic scholars, journalists, and dissidents who consistently face intimidation, torture, and ill-treatment by the state actors and the pro-government non-state actors¹⁶; 8. Prolonged arbitrary incarceration of dissidents in trumped-up cases registered under draconian laws by the law-enforcement agencies and the pro-ruling party entities¹⁷; 9. Reprisal against independent human rights defenders¹⁸; 10. Rewarding the key perpetrators of gross human rights violations,¹⁹ including those who were sanctioned by the Department of Treasury of the United States.²⁰

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights²¹ and Independent Experts of the United Nations have repeatedly expressed their serious concerns over the human rights situation of Bangladesh.²² Recommendations were made to amend the draconian laws.²³

Please also see: The Daily Star, 3 January 2022, Fictitious cases again being filed against BNP men <<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/fictitious-cases-again-being-filed-against-bnp-men-2930931>>

Please also see: Prothom Alo English, 22 July 2023, 'Fictitious' cases being filed again <<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/politics/5rtongovf8>>

¹⁴ Asian Legal Resource Centre, Written Submission to the 46th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, 2021, BANGLADESH: Torture being used to block access to justice <<https://alrc.asia/bangladesh-torture-being-used-to-block-access-to-justice/>>

Please also see: Voice of America, 17 July 2023, Bangladeshi Police Accused of Conspiring Against Opposition Candidates <<https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladeshi-police-accused-of-conspiring-against-opposition-candidates/7184308.html>>

¹⁵ Voice of America, 29 January 2022, Bangladesh Police Accused of Hounding Families of Victims of Enforced Disappearances <<https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladesh-police-accused-of-hounding-families-of-victims-of-enforced-disappearances/6418170.html>>

¹⁶ CIVICUS, 22 December 2022, BANGLADESHI GOVERNMENT BRUTALLY CRACKS DOWN ON OPPOSITION RALLIES AS WELL AS JOURNALISTS AND DISSIDENTS <<https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/bangladeshi-government-brutally-cracks-down-opposition-rallies-well-journalists-and-dissidents/>>

Please also see: Asian Human Rights Commission, 29 July 2022, BANGLADESH: Dissidents and Human Rights Defenders Survive Defenselessly <<http://www.humanrights.asia/news/ahrc-news/AHRC-STM-011-2022/>>

¹⁷ Voice of America, 12 April 2023, Bangladesh Criticized for Use of Digital Security Act to Punish Media Error <<https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladesh-criticized-for-use-of-digital-security-act-to-punish-media-error/7047268.html>>

¹⁸ Joint Action Letter by Special Procedures Mandates of the United Nations, 22 December 2022 <<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27745>>

¹⁹ Voice of America, 8 October 2022, Bangladesh Accused of Rewarding Alleged Rights Abusers <<https://www.voanews.com/a/bangladesh-accused-of-rewarding-alleged-rights-abusers/6781614.html>>

²⁰ Prothom Alo English, 28 June 2022, IGP Benazir receives integrity award <<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/igp-benazir-receives-integrity-award>>

²¹ Press Briefing from the OHCHR, 4 August 2023, <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/08/bangladesh-protests>>

²² Joint Urgent Letter by Special Procedures Mandates of the United Nations, 3 May 2023, <<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27983>>

²³ UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Expression and Opinion, 6 February 2023, <<https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=27845>>

The Sheikh Hasina government not only disregards those calls for respecting human rights, the regime smears hate campaigns against the international community, including the United States.²⁴ Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina slammed the US Government for announcing a new visa policy for Bangladesh in compliance with the latter's commitment to promote democracy in the country.²⁵ The government keeps up the pattern of abusing the laws and the institutions of the state for retaining power through ballot-stuffing like what it did in the previous night of the December 30, 2018 national election.²⁶ Valid concerns of international community over targeted violence on contestants of elections²⁷ is retaliated with repeated attacking rhetoric against the diplomats.²⁸

While the national parliamentary elections are ensuing and the strive for the people's right to vote is growing higher, the government of Bangladesh is making things hard for holding a credible, free-fair, and inclusive elections that can guaranty a fair play for all parties. The government has speeded up the pace of prosecution against the targeted opposition leaders aiming to bar the potential candidates from contesting the elections.²⁹ Tens of thousands of people are taking to the streets to demand their right to vote under a neutral interim (caretaker) government despite mass arrests, judicial harassments, physical attacks by the police and the ruling party people.³⁰ The government has adopted the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill, 2023 to make the Election Commission (EC) a toothless tiger by scrapping the authority of the already dysfunctional body.³¹ The newly adopted RPO amendment authorizes the EC to postpone or cancel the results or voting of one or more than one polling stations in any number of constituencies on polling day and takes away the power of cancelling result of the entire election to a constituency. In the era of

²⁴ Benar News, 10 April 2023, Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina slams US in parliament <<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/hasina-slams-washington-04102023152136-1.html>>

²⁵ Xinhua News, 4 June 2023, Bangladesh PM slams U.S. visa curbs, sanctions <<https://english.news.cn/20230604/35f0fb7ab6ad4d7dba013bo91b4644d1/c.html>>

²⁶ New Age, 30 December 2018, Ballot box stuffed with votes found in Ctg: BBC <<https://www.newagebd.net/article/60307/ballot-box-stuffed-with-votes-found-in-ctg-bbc>>

Please also see: The Daily Star, 16 January 2019, Polls anomalies in 47 of 50 seats <<https://www.thedailystar.net/bangladesh-national-election-2018/bangladesh-election-2018-irregularities-47-out-50-seats-tib-1687840>>

²⁷ Prothom Alo English, 20 July 2023, Attack on Hero Alam: Foreign minister expresses anger over statement of 12 embassies <<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/muoqofrutl>>

²⁸ The Financial Express, 26 July 2023, Bangladesh calls 13 Western envoys for "violating diplomatic norms" <<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/bangladesh-calls-13-western-envoys-for-violating-diplomatic-norms>>

²⁹ New Age, 15 August 2023, Cases against opposition leaders move fast <<https://www.newagebd.net/article/209427/cases-against-opposition-leaders-move-fast>>

³⁰ The Daily Star, 19 July 2023, 'BCL activists attack BNP motorcade in Dinajpur' <<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news/bcl-activists-attack-bnp-motorcade-dinajpur-3373396>>

³¹ BD News 24 Dot Com, 5 July 2023, Parliament ratifies RPO amendments amid strong reservation from opposition <<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/lt65wtccyo>>

Please also see: Dhaka Tribune, 4 July 2023, EC's power decreases as JS passes amended RPO <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/314841/ec-s-power-decreases-as-js-passes-amended-rpo>>

systemically rigged elections under Sheikh Hasina, such amendments to the RPO have irreparable damaging impacts to the process of democratization in Bangladesh. These changes are deliberately made as there is no judicial remedy available under a completely subjugated judiciary while the judges do not face sanctions for their complicity in gross violation of human rights and denial of access to justice.

We would urge the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the US Congress to utilize its full mandate to minimize the human costs that the Bangladeshis have been paying under an authoritarian kleptocrat in office without any institutionalized system of accountability for the gross violations. Ensuring the people's right to franchise is an immediate and unavoidable prerequisite for democracy. Accountability and democratization must not be part of any bargain process costing the lives and liberties of the people.

Thank you!