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# Issue Paper BANGLADESH HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION January 1997

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## **MAP**

See original.

Source: EIU 1995, p. 23.

## **GLOSSARY**

AL

Awami League

BCL

Bangladesh Chhatra League (Awami League student wing)

BCP

Biplobi Communist Party

BGMEA

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association

BNP

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (Jatiyatabadi Dal)

CCHRB

Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh

CHT

Chittagong Hill Tracts

ICS

Islami Chhatra Shibir (Jamaat-e-Islami student wing)

JCD

Jatiyabadi Chhatra Dal (BNP student wing)

JCS

Jatiya Chhatra Samaj (Jatiya Party student wing)

JI

Jamaat-e-Islami

JP

Jatiya Party

PCJSS

Parbatya Chhatyagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (Shanti Bahini political wing)

PCP

Pahari Chhatra Parishad (Hill Students' Council)

PGP

Pahari Gano Parishad (Hill People's Council)

SPA

Special Powers Act

UBINIG

Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharani Gobeshona (Policy Research for Development Alternatives)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the human rights situation in Bangladesh in 1996, although general information on the situation in 1995 is also included. It should be read in conjunction with the December 1996 DIRB Question and Answer Series paper *Bangladesh: Political Developments and Political Violence*, which outlines political developments and related violence over the same period. For detailed information on events that occurred in 1994 and 1995, please see the March 1996 DIRB Question and Answer Series paper *Bangladesh: Chronology of Events January 1994-December 1995*. Earlier events are covered in the May 1994 DIRB Question and Answer Series paper *Bangladesh: Political Parties and Political Violence*, which also provides background information on the various political parties in Bangladesh.

While official figures indicate that 40 to 48 per cent of Bangladesh's 120 million people live below the poverty line (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1294; UPI 2 Jan. 1996), the real figure approaches 75 per cent, according to NGOs (*ibid.*). Bangladesh has a population density of 830 people per km<sup>2</sup> (Askvik 1995, 93), the world's highest (*Swiss Review of World Affairs* Aug. 1996, 23), and approximately 60 per cent of families are landless (UPI 2 Jan. 1996) in a predominantly agricultural society (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1294).

During the period under review, acute poverty combined with political instability created a context for widespread violence, human rights violations and a general breakdown in law and order in Bangladesh (*Dhaka Courier* 19 July 1996a, 9; *ibid.* 12 July 1996a, 5; HRW/A June 1996, 22; Tepper Mar. 1996, 6; *The Daily Star* 2 Jan. 1996). Violent crime, including murders, gun-fights, assaults, robberies, acid attacks and attacks on women, resulted in 2,190 deaths in 1995 (*ibid.*; *Dhaka Courier* 19 July 1996a, 8). Further, among the 803 violent deaths reported in the first quarter of 1996 (*ibid.*), 120 were the result of political violence (HRW/A June 1996, 8). Widespread poverty and unemployment make young people particularly vulnerable to exploitation by political parties, which use them to do their "dirty" work, or by criminal groups, in some cases linked to political parties, involved in the arms trade and other illegal activities (*The Bangladesh Observer* 23 Apr. 1996, 12; *The Morning Sun* 26 Apr. 1996).

Shortly after her election on 12 June 1996<sup>[1]</sup>, as part of her plan to rid the country of "terrorism,"<sup>[2]</sup> Prime Minister Hasina ordered the police to compile a non-partisan list of "terrorists" (*The Bangladesh Observer* 25 June 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 19 July 1996b, 8). On 19 July 1996 the *Dhaka Courier* reported that a list of 30,000 people had been compiled, among whom were 10,000 illegal arms possessors and "known criminals and fugitives, including party cadres" (*ibid.*). It added that more than 2,000 of these "criminals" were in Dhaka alone (*ibid.*). August 1996 government estimates indicate there were about 80,000 illegal weapons and 171 factories making crude arms (UPI 8 Aug. 1996; AFP 17 Aug. 1996). After a 7-13 August 1996 amnesty resulted in only 658 weapons being surrendered (*ibid.*; UPI 8 Aug. 1996), the police intensified their crack-down on illegal weapons possession<sup>[3]</sup> (AFP 17 Aug. 1996). The government claims that 1,110 "terrorists" were arrested and 2,092 weapons recovered in the

four months ending late October 1996 (Xinhua 1 Nov. 1996; Reuters 1 Nov. 1996).

## NOTES

[1] For information on the 15 February 1996 and 12 June 1996 general elections, please consult the December 1996 DIRB Question and Answer Series paper *Bangladesh: Political Developments and Political Violence*. [\[back\]](#)

[2] According to AFP, the Bangladeshi government refers to "all armed clashes, muggings and extortionism as 'terrorism'" (AFP 17 Aug. 1996). [\[back\]](#)

[3] Nationwide arms recovery drives around the 15 February 1996 and 12 June 1996 general elections reportedly netted fewer than 10,000 illegal arms (UPI 8 Aug. 1996). [\[back\]](#)

## 2. GENERAL HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

Human rights observers and journalists report that members of all the main political parties—the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Awami League (AL), Jatiya Party (JP) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)—their student wings and the government security forces committed human rights violations in the context of a fierce competition for political power in 1995 and 1996 (HRW/A June 1996, 2; *Country Reports 1995* 1996, 1295; AFP 22 Aug. 1996; DPA 25 Aug. 1996; Tepper Mar. 1996, 5, 7). According to Elliot Tepper, a political science professor at Carleton University in Ottawa who has written on the human rights situation in Bangladesh:

As politics becomes more intense and more violent, wider sectors of society get drawn in and abuse of authority increases. Human rights abuse directly related to political competition will increase (*ibid.*, 7).

For example, Human Rights Watch reported that during the lead-up to the 15 February 1996 general election, "leaders of opposition parties demonstrated an utter disregard for public safety," while the security forces "routinely used excessive and indiscriminate force" against armed opposition cadres and unarmed protestors, as well as in carrying out raids (HRW/A June 1996, 22-23).

In addition to using guns, knives, home-made bombs and other weapons against members of rival groups during street protests, some political party activists have intimidated, harassed and attacked media personnel, students and members of the security forces, and damaged private and public property (see section 3) (*ibid.*, 3-4; *Country Reports 1995* 1996, 1295).

Human rights violations committed by state security forces in 1995 and the first quarter of 1996 included extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and ill-treatment [\[4\]](#) (*ibid.*; AI 1996, 90; *ibid.* May 1996, 1; HRW/A June 1996, 3; *The Daily Star* 2 Jan. 1996). *Country Reports 1995* reports that "police brutality" perpetuated by "government inaction" was frequent in 1995 (*Country Reports 1995* 1996, 1294). Impunity of police personnel, whom Tepper says "are poorly paid and held in low esteem" (Tepper Mar. 1996, 4; *ibid.* 12 Jan. 1997), was a "serious obstacle to ending torture and abuse, and the killings that result from them," according to *Country Reports 1995* (*Country Reports 1995* 1996, 1295).

Human Rights Watch states that the security forces' reaction to opposition-led street violence both before and after the February 1996 election was "disproportionate to the threat and partisan," adding that the security forces sometimes used tear-gas and rubber bullets to disperse crowds, shot randomly at protestors, and arbitrarily arrested suspected opposition

supporters (HRW/A June 1996, 3). International human rights organizations, as well as some Bangladeshi intellectuals and professionals, expressed concern that security forces raids to recover illegal arms throughout the country in the run-up to the February 1996 poll sometimes served as a pretext for committing human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest, torture and harassment of civilians (see section 3) (ibid.; *The Bangladesh Observer* 7 Feb. 1996, 12; AI 14 Feb. 1996). For example, on 4 February 1996 the army attacked Char Syedpur village in Narayanganj district, south of Dhaka, in retaliation for an attack the previous day by villagers on army plainclothesmen who were searching for arms (*Hotline Newsletter* Feb.-Mar. 1996a, 3; HRW/A June 1996, 3, 9). According to Human Rights Watch, "army troops stormed over a hundred houses, destroying property and indiscriminately beating villagers. Three villagers were arbitrarily detained, and one of them was severely tortured in custody" (ibid., 3).

Amnesty International and the US Department of State report that torture and ill-treatment in detention occur frequently in Bangladesh, and prisons are generally overcrowded and have poor facilities, although conditions within each prison vary (AI 1996, 89; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1295). While Amnesty International states that at least seven people died from torture in detention in 1995 (AI 1996, 89), the Coordinating Council for Human Rights in Bangladesh (CCHRB), an umbrella group representing over 76 human rights NGOs, indicates that at least 26 people died in police custody in 1995, although it does not specify the circumstances surrounding their deaths (*India Abroad* 26 Jan. 1996, 13; *The Daily Star* 2 Jan. 1996). On 16 December 1996, 2,000 to 2,700 prisoners in a Jessore jail rebelled against prison authorities, demanding better food and living conditions, withdrawal of the security forces from their positions outside the prison, and a general amnesty (DPA 20 Dec. 1996; AFP 18 Dec. 1996). A home ministry official reportedly claimed that "terrorists" arrested during the recent weapons crack-down were behind the revolt (ibid.). Within days the revolt had spread to prisons in Tangail and Barisal (DPA 20 Dec. 1996).

## **2.1 The Special Powers Act (SPA)**

The 1974 Special Powers Act (SPA) permits detention without charge for up to 30 days of anyone deemed likely to commit a "prejudicial act," that is, an act that threatens national security or public order (Askvik 1995, 101; AI 27 Feb. 1996; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1295). Prisoners must be released after 30 days if they have not been charged (ibid.; Askvik 1995, 101), but if charged can be detained another six months while the investigation continues (ibid.). According to Askvik, "at the end of that period, a review panel examines the case to decide whether there is sufficient reason for further detention. In practice, however, the Government also has the option to simply issue a new detention order when the old one expires" (ibid., 101-02).

Prisoners are sometimes detained without charge beyond the initial 30-day limit (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1295; AI 1996, 89). Moreover, according to Amnesty International, the SPA does not distinguish between violent and non-violent actions and has no clear provision to allow visits by family members and lawyers, which are left to the discretion of the detaining authorities (AI 27 Feb. 1996). *Country Reports 1995* states that detainees usually cannot be seen by a lawyer until they have been charged<sup>[5]</sup> (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1296).

### **NOTES**

[4] According to *Country Reports 1995*, there were no disappearances in Bangladesh in 1995 (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1295). [\[back\]](#)

[5] For further information on the SPA and other security legislation in Bangladesh, please refer to the May 1994 DIRB

Question and Answer Series paper *Bangladesh: Political Parties and Political Violence*, pp. 20-22. [\[back\]](#)

### 3. GROUPS AT RISK

The following sections group information on the human rights situation in Bangladesh according to categories of people at risk. It should be noted, however, that violence is pervasive and there are no clearly defined lines of conflict in Bangladesh (Tepper Mar. 1996, 6; *The Bangladesh Observer* 18 Dec. 1995, 1, 12). For example, sources indicate that some events or incidents involving rival political groups often spark fighting in several different areas (ibid.; Tepper Mar. 1996, 6). According to Tepper:

The most pervasive and least documented abuses are unrelated directly to politics.... They relate to people caught up in personal or economic vendettas, subject to extralegal treatment by powerful personalities and unchecked local authorities. Great poverty creates opportunity for abuse of the vulnerable. Land disputes, rapes, semi-feudal relations and simple exploitation are the primary threat to individual security, from a human rights perspective (ibid., 7).

The ubiquitous nature of the violence in Bangladesh is illustrated by two incidents that occurred within a two-day period in June 1996: on 25 June, 60 people were injured in a violent clash between Mitapur and Dewtail villagers over control of a piece of land (*The Bangladesh Observer* 27 June 1996a, 11); and on 27 June between 51 and 70 people were injured when villagers clashed with Ansar militiamen at Kalapore near Srimangal in the northeastern district of Moulavibazar, in an incident that began when Ansars beat three children playing on the road (ibid. 28 June 1996, 1; AFP 28 June 1996).

#### 3.1 Members of Political Parties

Many members and supporters of various political parties were killed or injured in armed clashes with rival groups or security forces and several were individually targeted for attack by rival groups and factions, or were arrested by the security forces for their political activities in 1996 (*The Bangladesh Observer* 13 Aug. 1996, 1; ibid. 19 Aug. 1996, 1). The following paragraphs provide examples of a few such incidents. For further information on political violence during this period, please refer to the December 1996 DIRB Question and Answer Series paper *Bangladesh: Political Developments and Political Violence*. Information on violence involving the main political parties' student wings is provided in subsection 3.2.

According to *The Bangladesh Observer*, "armed miscreants" killed Shahabuddin Ahmed, an AL leader and Dhaka City Corporation ward commissioner, near his Dhaka home on 31 May 1996 (*The Bangladesh Observer* 1 June 1996, 1), and on 26 June 1996, AL activists attacked the home of a BNP leader in Dhaka, wounding about four people (ibid. 27 June 1996b, 1).

Violence involving illegal political parties escalated in Jhenidah, Magura and Chuadanga districts in the aftermath of the 12 June 1996 general election (*The Bangladesh Observer* 20 July 1996, 11; DPA 15 Oct. 1996). For example, a 25 June 1996 gunfight between members of the Biplobi Communist Party (BCP) and the Ganobhahini at Purulia, in Jhenidah district, resulted in at least 6 people being killed and 15 injured (ibid.; ibid. 26 June 1996, 1). In other incidents on the same day, BCP members targeted and killed three people in three other Jhenidah district villages (ibid. 16 July 1996, 11). On 7 July 1996 in Bijaipur, another village in Jhenidah district, a Ganobhahini leader was killed by "armed assailants" (ibid. 12 July 1996a, 11). Six people were

killed in a 14-15 October 1996 clash in Jessore between activists of the Purbo Bangla Communist Party and Bangladesh Revolutionary Communist Party, both banned in 1972 (DPA 15 Oct. 1996). One source states that Jessore is "infested with communist insurgents" (ibid.).

A 23 August 1996 armed encounter involving AL, BCL and JP activists at Kankhali, Pirojpur district, in the southern region of Khulna, left seven people wounded, three seriously (ibid. 24 Aug. 1996, 1). The incident was reportedly sparked by a disagreement over a by-election scheduled for 5 September 1996 (ibid.; *Dhaka Courier* 9 Aug. 1996a, 11). A 1 September 1996 clash between AL and JP supporters in Kankhali left about 20 people injured, including 10 AL members who suffered serious injuries (*The Bangladesh Observer* 3 Sept. 1996, 12). On 11 October 1996 unidentified attackers shot and killed two local BNP leaders at Joradah Bazar in Jhenidah district (ibid. 12 Oct. 1996, 1), and on 5 December 1996 unidentified "miscreants" stabbed and seriously injured an AL worker leaving the Chittagong city Engineers Institution (ibid. 6 Dec. 1996, 12).

In 1995 and early 1996 critics of the government were arrested under the SPA (see subsection 2.1) (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1295-96; AI 1996, 89; *India Abroad* 26 Jan. 1996, 13; *The Daily Star* 2 Jan. 1996), including five opposition party leaders arrested during the late February 1996 opposition-led "non-cooperation" campaign<sup>[6]</sup>: AL members Begum Motia Chowdhury, Muhammad Nasim and Tofael Ahmed, and Moudud Ahmed and Abdul Kader Mollah of the JP and JI respectively (AI 27 Feb. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 28 Feb. 1996, 1; ibid. 26 Feb. 1996, 1; *Dhaka Courier* 1 Mar. 1996, 10-11). Nasim, Tofael Ahmed and Mollah were released on 5 March 1996 (AI 6 Mar. 1996; Radio Bangladesh Network 5 Mar. 1996), and by 4 June 1996 the other two leaders had been released (AI 4 June 1996).

### **3.2 Students**

Sources indicate that students in Bangladesh are typically active in politics (AI May 1996, 3; Tepper Mar. 1996, 8). While the majority of student activists are involved in "unarmed political activity" (AI May 1996, 3), some members of the BNP, AL and JI student wings—the Jatiyabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) respectively—carry arms and attack supporters of rival parties (AI May 1996, 3; *The Bangladesh Observer* 25 Jan. 1996a, 1; ibid. 25 Jan. 1996b, 1; ibid. 27 May 1996, 1, 12). According to Human Rights Watch, student wing "criminal activities are tolerated and even encouraged by party leaders" (HRW/A June 1996, 4). Tepper states:

the effort to control, co-opt and tame student activists is an ongoing aspect of Bangladesh politics. Political parties and underground movements want recruits on campus. Control of student councils is often a matter of importance to political parties. Contest for power on campus is conducted with deadly earnest. Students are the intellectual core, shock troops and cadres of party and movement activities.

The tradition of student involvement has led to a tradition of efforts to manage student politics. Hence student activists are targets of security forces, and political parties maintain enforcement cadres ['goondas'], along with non-student operatives on campuses (Tepper Mar. 1996, 8).

In a 13 October 1996 meeting with representatives of the Left Democratic Front (LDF), Bangladesh President Shahabuddin Ahmed suggested imposing a moratorium on student politics to curb campus violence (*India Abroad* 1 Nov. 1996, 8). The proposal, which was supported by a

number of university students and professors, was reportedly rejected by BCL and JCD leaders (*ibid.*; Tepper 12 Jan. 1997).

According to the *Dhaka Courier*, in mid-1996 around 300 "terrorists," most of them non-students posing as students, were involved in "hijacking, kidnapping and toll collecting" at Dhaka University<sup>[7]</sup> (*Dhaka Courier* 19 July 1996c, 9). These "terrorists" have reportedly abused and harassed teachers, as well as students and visiting relatives (*ibid.*). The CCHRB reported that 30 students were killed and about 1,150 injured in campus violence in 1995 (*ibid.*; *The Daily Star* 2 Jan. 1996). Incidents of violence involving students at Bangladeshi universities and colleges in 1996 are provided below.

A 31 January 1996 clash at Dhaka University between anti-government student activists, pro-government students and the police over a planned book fair opening by Prime Minister Zia resulted in an estimated 200 to 300 people being injured (*Xinhua* 1 Feb. 1996; AFP 4 Feb. 1996). Later that day security forces attacked a Dhaka University residence for religious minority students (see subsection 3.4) (*AI* May 1996, 1; *Hotline Newsletter* Feb.-Mar. 1996b, 2; HRW/A June 1996, 11).

Sources reported an upsurge of violence between BCL and JCD activists at Dhaka University in late August 1996, leading to a nine-day closure of the campus (AFP 22 Aug. 1996; Reuters 21 Aug. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 19 Aug. 1996, 1; *ibid.* 22 Aug. 1996, 1; *ibid.* 31 Aug. 1996, 1). According to AFP, Dhaka University has long been a JCD stronghold, but since the 12 June 1996 AL election victory the BCL has been attempting to regain control over the university's student unions and residences (AFP 22 Aug. 1996). The university reopened on 31 August 1996, despite student concerns that violence between the two groups might erupt again (*The Bangladesh Observer* 31 Aug. 1996, 1). On 6 October 1996 a student and his wife were attacked in Zahurul Haq Hall, a Dhaka University residence, and a JCD leader's room in another residence was torched (*ibid.* 10 Oct. 1996, 12). JCD leaders blamed the BCL for both incidents (*ibid.*), which occurred despite a 5 September 1996 "peace agreement" between Dhaka University BCL and JCD activists (*Xinhua* 6 Sept. 1996). On 11 September 1996 Dhaka University acting vice-chancellor Shahiduddin Ahmed ordered BCL and JCD leaders to furnish lists of "outsiders and terrorists" involved in violent incidents at the university (*The Bangladesh Observer* 12 Sept. 1996a, 1, 12). The university authorities reportedly planned to take action against those named (*ibid.*).

In late August 1996 the Xinhua News Agency reported clashes between BCL and JCD activists at the Eden Girls University College in Dhaka (*Xinhua* 31 Aug. 1996).

Chittagong Medical College was temporarily closed because of political violence in December 1995 (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1295), and closed again following a 30 June 1996 clash between BCL and JCD activists that left 15 students wounded (*The Bangladesh Observer* 1 July 1996a, 1). The two groups have reportedly been locked in a "prolonged" struggle for control of student politics at the college (*ibid.*).

On 1 July 1996 ICS student activists launched a series of attacks at Jahangirnagar University, targeting a residence, individual JCD activists, a student procession, and the police (*ibid.* 2 July 1996, 1). At least 25 students were injured and about 48 ICS members arrested in what was reportedly the third such attack by ICS activists at the university since 9 November 1995 (*ibid.*). *The Bangladesh Observer* reports that the situation at the university had become



increasingly chaotic by mid-November 1996 (ibid. 19 Nov. 1996, 1).

On 11 July 1996 Dhaka Medical College authorities closed the college, ordered the dormitories vacated and banned student politics indefinitely after 15 to 25 people were injured in a clash between JCD and BCL activists (ibid. 12 July 1996b, 1; ibid. 11 July 1996a, 1; AFP 11 July 1996; Xinhua 11 July 1996). Reopened on 5 August 1996, the college was closed indefinitely on 14 August after further violent incidents (ibid. 15 Aug. 1996).

BCL and ICS activists at Sitakunda College in Chittagong district fought with guns and firecrackers on 24 July 1996, in a disagreement that reportedly began over seating arrangements at an examination (*The Bangladesh Observer* 25 July 1996a, 1, 12). On 29 July 1996 two ICS student activists at the college were abducted and killed by rival student activists (ibid. 31 July 1996, 1). On 14 August 1996 ICS members threw bombs at a Chittagong University BCL meeting (ibid. 15 Aug. 1996, 12).

*The Bangladesh Observer* reported the following incidents of political violence involving students between September and December 1996: on 1 September 1996 JCD and BCL activists clashed at Shahzadpur Government College in Sirajganj, leaving 10 students injured (ibid. 2 Sept. 1996a, 12); on the same day BCL and ICS activists clashed at Puthya Degree College near Rajshahi, resulting in 25 students injured (ibid. 2 Sept. 1996b, 12); on 2 September 1996 BCL and ICS activists clashed at Sylhet Madan Mohan University College, injuring ten students, two seriously (ibid. 5 Sept. 1996, 12); on 8 September 1996 police arrested two JCD leaders at Burichang Ershad College after an armed encounter between JCD and BCL activists left eight students injured (ibid. 9 Sept. 1996, 12); on 10 September 1996, BCL activists at Narsingdi Government College reportedly attacked and injured five ICS supporters demonstrating against the killing of an ICS member in Jessore two days earlier (ibid. 11 Sept. 1996a, 1, 12); on 1 October 1996 a BCL leader was stabbed to death by a group of unidentified attackers at Bahubal thana in Habiganj district; witnesses reportedly stated that the killing was the result of a dispute between rival Bahubal thana BCL factions (ibid. 4 Oct. 1996, 11); on 9 November 1996 at Bangladesh Agricultural University in Mymensingh, JCD activists reportedly killed two BCL activists and injured two others (ibid. 10 Nov. 1996, 1; ibid. 27 Nov. 1996, 12); on 25 November 1996 a BCL leader at Dhaka Polytechnic Institute was gunned down by unidentified attackers (ibid. 26 Nov. 1996, 1); and on 4 December 1996, unidentified attackers killed a pro-AL student activist at Kadalpur village, Rauzan thana in Chittagong district (ibid. 6 Dec. 1996, 12).

In July 1996 there were clashes between police and students at universities and colleges throughout the country, including in Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Cox's Bazar, Mymensingh, Dhaka, Barisal and Faridpur (*The Bangladesh Observer* 3 July 1996, 1; ibid. 9 July 1996, 1; ibid. 11 July 1996b, 1; ibid. 17 July 1996, 11). In almost all cases the confrontations began when students were caught cheating on exams—a widespread practice in Bangladesh—and expelled from examination halls (ibid. 3 July 1996, 1; ibid. 9 July 1996, 1; ibid. 11 July 1996b, 1; ibid. 17 July 1996, 11; AP 11 July 1996).

At Dherai College Centre in early July, two magistrates were stabbed in an incident that began when a student was caught copying an examination paper, and in Rajshahi and Cox's Bazar invigilators were beaten after expelling students from exams (*The Bangladesh Observer* 3 July 1996, 1). On 10 July, after several students at Kamudini Women's College in Mirzapur had been either expelled from examinations or ordered to undress by college authorities searching

for answer sheets, hundreds of students attacked examination centres and clashed with police (ibid. 17 July 1996b, 11; AP 11 July 1996). Two teachers and as many as 160 students were injured in the incident (ibid.; *The Bangladesh Observer* 17 July 1996b, 11). On 10 July 1996 about 35 people, including students, railroad employees and two policemen, were injured when students, unhappy with questions on an economics exam, attacked two passenger trains at Narsinghdi, northeast of Dhaka (ibid. 11 July 1996b, 1; AP 11 July 1996).

### **3.3 Media Personnel**

Reports indicate that violence against media personnel was perpetrated by all sides of the political conflict in Bangladesh in 1995 and 1996 (*La lettre de Reporters sans frontières* Mar. 1996; CPJ 8 Mar. 1996; HRW/A June 1996, 18; *The Bangladesh Observer* 24 June 1996a, 1). Journalists and photographers covering political events and street confrontations were especially targeted, either for reporting on abuses committed by different groups or because of their alleged political sympathies (HRW/A June 1996, 18-22; UPI 4 Feb. 1996; Tepper Mar. 1996, 12). According to Reporters sans frontières, "dozens of journalists were harassed, attacked, arrested or killed" in 1995 (RSF 16 Jan. 1996).

On 9 January 1996, police beat four journalists covering a clash between rickshaw drivers and supporters of an opposition-led general strike in Dinajpur, in northern Bangladesh (ibid.). On 4 February 1996 at Dhaka University, JCD members attacked two photographers with the dailies *Janakantha* and *Khabar* (UPI 4 Feb. 1996). The journalists were attacked when they attempted to photograph JCD activists destroying microphones prior to a BCL meeting to protest the 31 January 1996 police attack against minority students at the university (see subsection 3.4) (ibid.).

On 7 February 1996 in Feni, eight reporters were hurt during a clash between BCL and JCD activists at a BNP campaign meeting (HRW/A June 1996, 19; *La lettre de Reporters sans frontières* Mar. 1996, 14). Among those injured in the clash was Habibur Rahman Habib, a photographer with the pro-AL daily *Ajker Kagoj*, who was beaten by BNP activists (ibid.; HRW/A June 1996, 19). The next day he was beaten and arrested by police while photographing a street fight between police and AL militants (ibid.; *La lettre de Reporters sans frontières* Mar. 1996, 14).

On 19 February 1996, while attempting to quell election-related violence in Nilphamaria, police reportedly shot and killed journalist Mohammad Quaruzzaman of the weekly *Neel Sagar* (RSF 21 Feb. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 20 Feb. 1996, 1).

*The Bangladesh Observer* has reported the following additional incidents of violence against journalists in 1996: on 28 April 1996, Zakaria Kazol, a journalist with the pro-JI daily *Inqilab*<sup>[8]</sup>, was attacked by five armed men in Narayanganj (ibid. 3 May 1996, 12); on 21 June 1996, at least 20 journalists covering a BNP meeting at the party's central election office in Kakrail were verbally abused and chased by BNP activists (ibid. 22 June 1996, 1); on 23 June 1996, at least six photographers were injured when police "lathi-charged" a group of about 20 press photographers covering the swearing-in of Jatiya Party MPs to parliament (ibid. 24 June 1996a, 1, 12); on 10 September 1996, at least 12 photojournalists with various national dailies were attacked and injured while photographing BNP demonstrators damaging shops and vehicles in Dhaka (ibid. 11 Sept. 1996b, 1); and on 28 November 1996, a photojournalist with a Satkhira daily was beaten and seriously injured by unidentified attackers on his way home from the office (ibid. 30 Nov. 1996, 12).

Sources consulted by the DIRB do not indicate whether the Bangladeshi government has taken measures to protect journalists and other media personnel. However, in June 1996 Human Rights Watch reported that there had been no official inquiry into police attacks against journalists during the weeks surrounding the 15 February general election and no action had been taken against members of the police responsible for these attacks (HRW/A June 1996, 18).

### **3.4 Religious and Ethnic Minorities**

While the majority of Bangladeshis are Bengali-speaking Muslims, approximately 10 per cent are Hindus, Christians, Buddhists or members of 20 to 27 ethnic minority groups with various religious beliefs (*Country Reports 1995* 1996, 1298, 1301; Monan 1995, 52; *Tribune de Genève* 9-10 Mar. 1996; Khaleque Oct. 1995, 7, 12, 16). *Country Reports 1995* indicates that although there were "no significant instances of intercommunal violence" in 1995, religious and ethnic minorities were discriminated against by the state and society, and occasionally attacked by "Islamic extremists" (*Country Reports 1995* 1996, 1294, 1301).

On 31 January 1996 government security forces raided Jagannath Hall, a Dhaka University residence for religious minorities and BCL stronghold, after students allegedly pelted police with stones from the roof of the residence (AI May 1996, 1; *Hotline Newsletter* Feb.-Mar. 1996b, 2; HRW/A June 1996, 11). After breaking into the residence the security forces fired tear-gas, beat students, took valuables and arbitrarily arrested 95 people, including many non-student visitors (ibid.; AI May 1996, 1). An estimated 150 to 200 students were wounded in the incident (ibid.; HRW/A June 1996, 11). Opposition sources and Bangladeshi human rights organizations have stated that the minority students were targeted because of their support for the AL<sup>[9]</sup> (ibid.; AI May 1996, 1). All 95 detainees had been released on bail by 2 April 1996 (ibid., 12; HRW/A June 1996, 12).

According to *India Abroad*, Hindus in the districts of Bogra, Sylhet, Dhaka, Sathkira, Khulna, Barisal, Patuakhali, Noakhali and Chittagong were threatened by BNP leaders and activists, who, fearing they would support the Awami League, warned them not to vote in the 12 June 1996 general election (*India Abroad* 21 June 1996, 18). The source adds that BNP members torched homes and destroyed property of Hindus in these areas (ibid.).

#### **3.4.1 Indigenous Groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts**

Since 1973 the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), comprising the districts of Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban in southeastern Bangladesh (BIHPAA May 1995, 1), have been the site of a low-intensity war between government security forces and the Shanti Bahini, a guerrilla movement dominated by the indigenous and largely Buddhist Chakmas<sup>[10]</sup> (Reuters 1 Feb. 1996; ibid. 19 Nov. 1996; Askvik 1995, 95; *Country Reports 1995* 1996, 1296; EIU 2nd Quarter 1996, 11). The movement has been fighting for autonomy and the expulsion of Bengali-speaking settlers from the area (ibid.; AFP 22 Jan. 1996; Reuters 1 Feb. 1996; Askvik 1995, 95).

On 20 or 21 January 1996 the government and the Shanti Bahini's political wing, the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS), agreed to extend the 1992 cease-fire until 15 February 1996 (AFP 22 Jan. 1996; Reuters 1 Feb. 1996; DPA 27 Jan. 1996). The Shanti Bahini simultaneously stepped up its activities, launching a series of attacks in the CHT, primarily in the districts of Khagrachhari and Rangamati (AFP 22 Jan. 1996; EIU 2nd Quarter 1996, 11). According to a police source, the PCJSS and three affiliated groups—the Hill Students Council (Pahari Chhatra Parishad, PCP), Hill People's Council (Pahari Gano Parishad, PGP) and Hill Women's Federation—also "intensified their activities" (Reuters 1 Feb. 1996). Sources

indicate that the rebel movement may have been using the cease-fire as an opportunity to recruit new members and rearm (*ibid.*; *Dhaka Courier* 16 Aug. 1996, 14; *ibid.* 4 Oct. 1996, 16; EIU 2nd Quarter 1996, 11). One government source claims that during the cease-fire the Shanti Bahini added 1,500 new recruits to its already 5,000-strong guerrilla force (*Dhaka Courier* 4 Oct. 1996, 16). The cease-fire has been extended several times (*ibid.*; Reuters 4 Nov. 1996; AFP 3 Nov. 1996), the last extension until 31 March 1997 (Reuters 21 Dec. 1996; *ibid.* 24 Dec. 1996; Radio Bangladesh 21 Dec. 1996). It has also been violated, allegedly by both sides, at least 400 times since 1992 (AFP 22 Jan. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 16 Aug. 1996, 14).

On 12 June 1996 Kalpana Chakma, the organizing secretary of the Hill Women's Federation, and her two brothers were kidnapped from their home in Bagaichhori, in Rangamati district (WLUML 24 June 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 21 June 1996, 11; OMCT-SOS Torture 26 July 1996). The two brothers subsequently escaped, but Kalpana Chakma's whereabouts remained unknown as of 19 July 1996 (*ibid.*).

Sources differ on who is responsible for the abduction (*The Bangladesh Observer* 21 June 1996, 11; Reuters 27 July 1996; WLUML 8 July 1996). An army lieutenant, identified by Kalpana Chakma's brother as one of the kidnapers, had reportedly questioned her about her political activities in mid-April 1996, when he and 15 to 20 soldiers had visited Bagaichhori (*ibid.*). According to a communication from the Hill People's Council, the kidnapping was "pre-planned" and intended to discourage hill people from voting for the PGP candidate in the general election (*ibid.* 24 June 1996; OMCT-SOS Torture 19 July 1996). The army denied any involvement in the incident, claiming the accusation was itself "pre-planned" and part of a "conspiracy" by Chakma organizations to discredit the army (*The Bangladesh Observer* 24 July 1996; Reuters 27 July 1996). Security forces sources reportedly claimed she had either joined or been kidnapped by the Shanti Bahini (*ibid.*).

A 27 June 1996 protest against Kalpana Chakma's kidnapping and the slow pace of the investigation led to a clash between Chakmas and Bengali settlers near an army post at Bagaichhori (WLUML 8 July 1996; OMCT-SOS Torture 19 July 1996). A Bengali settler shot and allegedly killed a 16-year-old Chakma boy, and three young men disappeared during the clash (*ibid.*; WLUML 8 July 1996). July 1996 sources reported increased tension in the area in connection with this clash and Kalpana Chakma's disappearance (*ibid.*; Reuters 27 July 1996).

On 25 July 1996, Shanti Bahini rebels reportedly kidnapped nine Bengali-speaking settlers in the Panchhari area, Khagrachhari district (Reuters 27 July 1996). On 28 July 1996 they also abducted a local government official from his residence in Baillachhari village, Khagrachhari district, and set fire to the houses of eight non-tribals in a neighbouring village (*The Bangladesh Observer* 1 Aug. 1996, 12). According to police, the attacks were a reprisal for non-payment of tolls demanded by the movement (*ibid.*). Sources report that Chakma rebels regularly collect tolls from tribal people and Bengali settlers (Reuters 1 Feb. 1996; *ibid.* 19 Nov. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 4 Oct. 1996, 16), and one police source claims they sometimes torture tribals who do not provide them with funds or shelter (Reuters 1 Feb. 1996).

On 24 June 1996 *The Bangladesh Observer* reported that eight former Shanti Bahini members had surrendered to the security forces and told the media that the Shanti Bahini and PCJSS were internally divided and corrupt, financing their activities by extorting funds from the hill people (*The Bangladesh Observer* 24 June 1996b, 12). One month later, according to the same source, another Shanti Bahini member who had surrendered to government authorities

was shot and wounded by a "tribal terrorist armed cadre" in Goduli Anantbag, in Rangamati district (ibid., 11).

On 11 September 1996, Shanti Bahini rebels reportedly killed 28 to 30 Bengali woodcutters in Rangamati district, the "biggest massacre in many years," according to a defence ministry spokesman (Reuters 12 Sept. 1996; ibid. 30 Nov. 1996; ibid. 21 Dec. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 12 Sept. 1996b, 1). On 29 November 1996 the Shanti Bahini allegedly abducted six Bengalis, including two government officials, at Thanchi in Bandarban district (Reuters 30 Nov. 1996; ibid. 21 Dec. 1996). Army commandos later rescued the victims from a rebel hideout (ibid.).

Although none of the 48,000-50,000 Chakma refugees living in India's Tripura state returned to Bangladesh under government supervision in 1995 (USCR 1996, 93; AI 1996, 89; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1297), one report indicates that 1,721 repatriated "on their own" (AFP 22 Jan. 1996). While the 16-point repatriation package includes provisions for, among other things, a return of land, six months' supply of essential food, a cash allowance and an agricultural grant (ibid.; Dewan Jan. 1996, 9; *Dhaka Courier* 12 July 1996b, 13), indigenous sources claim the Bangladeshi government has failed to deliver on these promises (Dewan Jan. 1996, 9; AIPP 1996, 11). Chakma refugees in India have demanded UNHCR and International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) monitoring of the repatriation and resettlement process, although unsuccessfully (Dewan Jan. 1996, 9-10; AI 1996, 89). The Shanti Bahini and other groups in the CHT, as well as the India-based All-India Chakma National Movement (AICNM), have dissuaded refugees from returning, claiming the situation in the CHT is not conducive to their return (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1297; PTI 19 Jan. 1996). However, a 14 August 1996 PTI report indicated that repatriation would resume "shortly" (PTI 14 Aug. 1996).

On 12 July 1996 the *Dhaka Courier* reported that, while the former BNP government's all-party parliamentary committee on the Chittagong Hill Tracts was now "defunct," the AL government had "recognised the CHT problem as a political one" (*Dhaka Courier* 12 July 1996b, 13). On 12 September 1996 Interior Minister Rafiqul Islam stated that the government was "ready for peace" and wished to hold talks with the rebels (Reuters 12 Sept. 1996). In October 1996 the government established an eight-member national committee to work out a peace formula for the CHT (*Dhaka Courier* 15 Nov. 1996, 17; Radio Bangladesh 21 Dec. 1996; Reuters 27 Oct. 1996), and opened negotiations with guerrilla leaders on 21 December 1996 (ibid. 21 Dec. 1996; ibid. 24 Dec. 1996; Radio Bangladesh 21 Dec. 1996). Although Bangladeshi indigenous sources, government officials and military personnel have indicated that the short-term prospects for peaceful resolution of the conflict are dim (AIPP 1996, 11; *Dhaka Courier* 4 Oct. 1996, 16; Reuters 27 Oct. 1996), both the committee head and PCJSS leader indicate that some progress had been made during the talks, which on 24 December 1996 were adjourned until 25 January 1997<sup>[11]</sup> (ibid. 24 Dec. 1996; DPA 26 Dec. 1996). However, on 25 December a suspected "extremist faction" of the Shanti Bahini killed Subinoy Chakma, secretary-general of the the pro-peace National Coordination Council, which includes both tribal and non-tribal members, near his home at Champaknagar in Rangamati district (ibid.; Xinhua 26 Dec. 1996; Reuters 26 Dec. 1996).

### **3.4.2 Biharis**

There are at least 238,000 Biharis, Urdu-speaking Muslims, living in 66 refugee camps located throughout Bangladesh (Askvik 1995, 123; Reuters 4 Aug. 1996a; ibid. 14 Aug. 1996; DPA 11 Mar. 1996). The Biharis opted for Pakistani citizenship when Bangladesh separated from

Pakistan in 1971, but their status is still unresolved (ibid.; Askvik 1995, 123). They have not yet been granted Pakistani citizenship, and although they can apply for Bangladeshi citizenship (ibid.), many continue to await repatriation to Pakistan<sup>[12]</sup> (Reuters 14 Aug. 1996). Several hundred Biharis participated in street protests in Dhaka on 4 and 14 August 1996, accusing the Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments of ignoring their plight (ibid. 4 Aug. 1996b; ibid. 14 Aug. 1996). Some protestors at the 14 August demonstration attempted self-immolation, but the flames were quickly extinguished (ibid.). One protestor stated that Biharis would rather commit suicide than stay in Bangladesh (ibid.). The Bangladeshi government has reportedly demanded that the Pakistani government allow the Biharis back into Pakistan (DPA 1 Mar. 1996). However, according to a Bangladeshi government official, Pakistan has responded poorly (ibid.).

### 3.5 Others

Armed groups, some reportedly supported by politicians (AFP 28 Dec. 1995; *The Bangladesh Observer* 23 Apr. 1996, 12), kidnapped a number of wealthy Chittagong city residents in 1995 and 1996 (ibid.; *Dhaka Courier* 22 Nov. 1996, 17; AFP 28 Dec. 1995). In the last week of December 1995 at least six people were abducted for ransom by armed groups, which find refuge in the nearby hilly jungle areas of Raozan, Fatikchhari and Rangunia (ibid.; *The Bangladesh Observer* 23 Apr. 1996, 12), raising the total for the city to around 100 for 1995 (AFP 28 Dec. 1995). At least 27 wealthy Chittagong city residents were kidnapped for ransom between January and November 1996 (*Dhaka Courier* 22 Nov. 1996, 17); one was hacked to death near his home in Jhanabad village in Sitakunda thana on 28 June 1996 (*The Bangladesh Observer* 30 June 1996, 11). On 5 August 1996, millionaire Taher Ali Fakhri was abducted in Chittagong city and released three days later after police organized a massive search (*Dhaka Courier* 22 Nov. 1996, 17). Similarly, Mahsin College student Emdadul Alam Chowdhury, the son of a wealthy Chittagong industrialist, was kidnapped on 7 October 1996 and released six days later in response to mounting police pressure (*The Bangladesh Observer* 14 Oct. 1996, 12). The Chittagong district police claim the Shanti Bahini supplies weapons to arms brokers in Chittagong city, who resell them to the criminal "gangs" responsible for these abductions and other crimes in the Chittagong area (ibid. 23 Apr. 1996, 12). With many armed criminals reportedly connected to Bangladesh's major political parties and possessing sophisticated weapons, the police are apparently unwilling or ill-equipped to cope with the increasing crime rate in the area (ibid.; UPI 8 Aug. 1996; *Dhaka Courier* 22 Nov. 1996, 17). According to one observer, however, the "police make a serious effort to find the abductors only when an angry public protest forces them to" (ibid.).

Artists and intellectuals were reportedly threatened by BNP leaders after the BNP government was forced to surrender power to a caretaker government in late March 1996<sup>[13]</sup> (*The Daily Star* 7 Apr. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 18 Apr. 1996, 1; ibid. 14 Apr. 1996, 12), and according to a statement issued by cultural organizations, well-known Bangladeshi artist Syed Hasan Imam was subsequently attacked by "BNP hooligans" (ibid.).

### NOTES

[6] For information on the non-cooperation campaign, please refer to the December 1996 DIRB Question and Answer Series paper *Bangladesh: Political Developments and Political Violence*. [\[back\]](#)

[7] The source reports that these "terrorists" also exact tolls from various enterprises and rent arms to other groups (*Dhaka Courier* 19 July 1996c, 9). [\[back\]](#)

[8] With a circulation of 210,000 to 250,000 (*Ulrich's* 1996, 2940; HRW/A June 1996, 21), *Inqilab* is among the country's

most-read newspapers (ibid.). [\[back\]](#)

[9] Human Rights Watch indicates that the religious minorities tend to support the Awami League (HRW/A June 1996, 11). [\[back\]](#)

[10] The Chakmas are the largest of the 10-12 indigenous groups in the CHT known as the Jumma people (*Indigenous Affairs* Oct.-Dec. 1995, 38; BIHPAA May 1995, 21; AIPP 1996, 7). [\[back\]](#)

[11] In late 1996 Reuters reported that "as many as 19 peace attempts have failed since 1985" (Reuters 21 Dec. 1996). [\[back\]](#)

[12] Askvik states that Biharis in Bangladesh "may seek employment and conduct other activities, but as noncitizens they do not vote, hold seats in Parliament, or hold passports" (Askvik 1995, 123). [\[back\]](#)

[13] For information on the caretaker government, please see the December 1996 DIRB Question and Answer Series paper *Bangladesh: Political Developments and Political Violence*. [\[back\]](#)

#### **4. SITUATION OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN** [\[14\]](#)

Bangladesh has several laws that protect women and children, but often these laws are poorly implemented or inadequately enforced (Akhter Munir Aug. 1995, 44; AFP 1 Sept. 1996). For example, despite passage of the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1980, an estimated 75 per cent of marriages involve payment of a dowry (*The Bangladesh Observer* 4 Jan. 1996, 11). The exchange of cash is an important component of many dowries, but it is not included in the act's definition of dowry, thus limiting the law's effectiveness, according to one source (Salahuddin and Shamim Aug. 1995, 91).

Divorce, abandonment, torture, ill-treatment and murder is the price some married women pay for their families' failure to meet dowry demands (ibid., 91-92; Monan 1995, 24; *The Bangladesh Observer* 4 Jan. 1996, 11; ibid. 21 Jan. 1996, 11; *India Abroad* 26 Jan. 1996, 13). While the Women and Children Repression (Special Provisions) Bill, enacted on 11 July 1995 (Akhter Munir Aug. 1995, 41), permits use of the death penalty to punish those who murder women for their dowry (AFP 5 Feb. 1995), the CCHRB reported that over 45 women were murdered for dowry in 1995 (*India Abroad* 26 Jan. 1996, 13; *The Daily Star* 2 Jan. 1996). On 9 October 1996 *The Bangladesh Observer* reported that a man at Ekarpara village in Khetlal thana had killed his wife for dowry (*The Bangladesh Observer* 9 Oct. 1996, 11). October 1996 sources reported that at Ratankandi village in Sirajganj district, a man doused his newly-wed wife with kerosene and burned her to death, although it is not clear that dowry was involved (AFP 17 Oct. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 20 Oct. 1996, 11). Other women have been driven to suicide (ibid. 4 Jan. 1996, 11; ibid. 21 Jan. 1996, 11; ibid. 15 July 1996, 11). *The Bangladesh Observer* reports that of the 106 people who committed suicide in the southern district of Khulna in the first half of 1996, approximately 95 per cent were women between 14 and 20 years of age (ibid.). The number of unmarried women between 18 and 35 years is reportedly increasing in Bangladesh because many parents cannot afford dowries (ibid. 4 Jan. 1996, 11).

A 1995 survey revealed that in the rural areas of Patuakhali and Barguna districts in southern Bangladesh, marriages in many poor and lower middle-class families were not registered because of the high costs involved (ibid. 21 Dec. 1995a, 11; *Country Reports 1995* 1996, 1300). Legal safeguards [\[15\]](#) for women generally apply only to registered marriages (ibid.; *The Bangladesh Observer* 21 Dec. 1995a, 11), therefore in part explaining why divorce and abuse of women are "common phenomena" in these areas (ibid.). Although, wife-beating is

reportedly widespread in Bangladesh (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300; *The Bangladesh Observer* 19 Apr. 1996, 2; Salahuddin and Shamin Aug. 1995, 91), Salahuddin and Shamin state that it is not recognized by the family, community and police as a crime (ibid.). For this reason, the police neither record nor file complaints of wife abuse as criminal cases (ibid.).

Since 1993, self-appointed village mediation or arbitration councils (*salish*) have illegally tried and punished women accused of committing "immoral acts" such as adultery (AI 1996, 90; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300; Askvik 1995, 101; WLUML 1996, 8, 75). These councils are led by local Islamic leaders and teachers who carry out trials in conformity with their interpretation of Islamic law (*shari'a*), and issue religious edicts (*fatwas*) that include punishments such as whipping and stoning to death (ibid., 8; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300; Askvik 1995, 101). According to Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), a *fatwa* is an "opinion given by a jurist, learned in Islamic law, in response to a question involving a point of law, not evidence," but in Bangladesh it is "being used to bolster the authority of the village elite," and is "being pronounced by people who have no authority or scholarship" (WLUML 1996, 75). The source adds that the Bangladeshi government reacts "only mildly" to the illegal activities of the village *salish*, many of which are connected to Islamist organizations and political parties (ibid., 8). The government declared *fatwas* illegal in 1994 after the Bangladeshi NGO Ain-O-Salish Kendra successfully sought the prosecution and conviction of nine men who had issued a *fatwa* against a 17-year-old girl in 1993 (*The Ottawa Citizen* 30 Oct. 1996; AFP 19 Oct. 1996). The organization, which has evidence of at least 100 *fatwas* being issued against women since 1993 (see Appendix I) (*The Ottawa Citizen* 30 Oct. 1996), had helped save about 12 women from punishment and had 6 cases before the courts by October 1996 (ibid.). According to the CCHRB, over 20 women were victims of illegal *fatwas* in 1995 (*India Abroad* 26 Jan. 1996, 13; *The Daily Star* 2 Jan. 1996). In the first reported case of a *fatwa* in 1996, on 21 September 1996 two women were reportedly caned 101 times and fined 6,000 taka (US\$143) each at Baharampur village in Kushtia district for leaving the village without their husbands' consent (AFP 19 Oct. 1996).

Many Bangladeshi women are compelled by poverty to work outside the home (Askvik 1995, 96, 115, 119; *The Bangladesh Observer* 31 Oct. 1996a, 11). According to Askvik, women make up 30 per cent of the labour force in the formal sector, including 85 per cent of workers in the export-oriented garment industry (Askvik 1995, 115). Less than five per cent of government positions are filled by women (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300). Women also work in the informal sector (Askvik 1995, 115). According to a survey conducted by a committee representing Dhaka slum-dwellers, almost 65 per cent of Dhaka households hire servants, the overwhelming majority of whom are women and children (IPS 3 June 1996). A 3 June 1996 report states that "rape and torture of teenage maids is fairly common," and that "no political party or organization has come forward to assist them to fight for their rights" (ibid.).

According to *Country Reports 1995*, the Bangladeshi government has not protected women's basic rights (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300). Women, 80 per cent of whom are illiterate (*The Ottawa Citizen* 30 Oct. 1996) and have little education, often do not know what their rights are (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300; Akhter Munir Aug. 1995, 42). *Country Reports 1995* adds that "strong social stigmas and lack of economic means to obtain legal assistance, frequently keep women from seeking redress in the courts" (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300).

Reports indicate the existence of a widespread network of trafficking in Bangladeshi



women and children to India, Pakistan, the Middle East and southeast Asia (see Appendix II) (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300; *The Bangladesh Observer* 3 Jan. 1996, 11; *ibid.* 25 Oct. 1996, 3-4; UBINIG 1995, 8, 16). According to a document produced by the Dhaka-based NGO UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternatives), more than 50 women and children are smuggled out of Bangladesh each day, many after being abducted or lured with "false promises of jobs, marriage etc." (*ibid.*, 8; *The Bangladesh Observer* 25 Oct. 1996, 3-4). Citing a study by the Bangladesh Women's Lawyers Association, *Janakantha* reported on 1 September 1996 that about 200,000 Bangladeshi women had been sold into prostitution outside the country in the last decade (AFP 1 Sept. 1996). On 20 November 1996, police arrested a suspected leader of an organized group of human traffickers from a house at Badichandi village in Jamalpur district (*The Bangladesh Observer* 21 Nov. 1996, 12). He was reportedly preparing to take two children aged 3 and 4 to India through the Dhamua-Kamalpur border area (*ibid.*).

Many Bangladeshi children do not attend school because they must work to ensure their families' survival (*The Bangladesh Observer* 21 Dec. 1995b, 11; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1303; Askvik 1995, 120). One study indicates that of the 60 to 70 per cent of Bangladeshi children enrolled in primary school, half do not attend, 70 to 80 per cent eventually drop out, and only 20 per cent learn how to read and write (Ahmed Aug. 1995, 16). United Nations figures indicate that one-third of Bangladeshi children below 18 years of age are employed in the formal or informal sectors (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1303), including the transportation of market produce, construction, the shrimp industry, agriculture and as rickshaw drivers, domestic servants and prostitutes<sup>[16]</sup> (*ibid.*, 1300, 1303; Monan 1995, 58; Askvik 1995, 121; *The Bangladesh Observer* 31 Oct. 1996b, 11).

Children have also been employed in the garment industry (*Dhaka Courier* 18 Oct. 1996, 13; Monan 1995, 58; Askvik 1995, 96, 120; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1303). However, fearing an international boycott on garments produced by child labour, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) recently ordered garment factories to discharge child workers under 14 years of age (*ibid.*; Monan 1995, 58; *Dhaka Courier* 18 Oct. 1996, 13). A 4 July 1995 memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Government of Bangladesh, BGMEA, UNICEF and the ILO offers some protection to dismissed child workers (*Dhaka Courier* 18 Oct. 1996, 13; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1303-04). Among other things the MOU stipulates that dismissed child workers in the garment industry would be enrolled in new schools and receive a monthly stipend to compensate for lost employment income (*ibid.*). Reports state that the BGMEA reached an agreement with UNICEF, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Bangladeshi NGO Gono Shabajja Sangstha (GSS) under which girls below the age of 14 would be allowed to work six hours a day, on condition they attend school for the remaining two hours (*Dhaka Courier* 18 Oct. 1996, 13; *The Bangladesh Observer* 1 Nov. 1996, 1; Monan 1995, 58). GSS agreed to provide the schooling and the girls would receive their full daily wage (*ibid.*). The first school for child garment workers reportedly opened in Khilgaon on 30 January 1996 and is operated by BRAC (*Hotline Newsletter* Feb.-Mar. 1996c, 4). While the *Dhaka Courier* reported on 18 October 1996 that 130 schools attended by 2,015 child workers had been opened (*Dhaka Courier* 18 Oct. 1996, 13), on 1 November 1996 *The Bangladesh Observer* reported there were 5,500 child workers attending 247 schools (*The Bangladesh Observer* 1 Nov. 1996, 1).

Many dismissed child workers, apparently unaware of the MOU, have been employed in other factories, prompting the BGMEA to introduce fines and other punitive measures against noncompliant firms (*Dhaka Courier* 18 Oct. 1996, 13; *La Presse* 2 Nov. 1996, A-19; *The*

*Bangladesh Observer* 1 Nov. 1996, 1). The BGMEA subsequently announced that as of 1 November 1996 children would no longer be employed in the garment industry (*ibid.*; *La Presse* 2 Nov. 1996, A-19).

## NOTES

[14] For background information on women, please see Extended Responses to Information Requests BGD21346.E to BGD21351.E. [\[back\]](#)

[15] According to *Country Reports 1995*, the law provides safeguards against "arbitrary divorce and the taking of additional wives by husbands without the first wife's consent" (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300). [\[back\]](#)

[16] One human rights group estimates that there are about 29,000 child prostitutes in Bangladesh (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1300). [\[back\]](#)

## 5. FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Specific information on the availability of legal redress for victims of human rights violations in Bangladesh is scant. Emphasizing the unpredictability of the judicial system, Tepper states that lower courts in the countryside are generally "more amenable to influence" than higher courts in the cities (Tepper 12 Jan. 1997). While media sources provide examples of legal action taken against some perpetrators of human rights abuses (*The Bangladesh Observer* 23 June 1996, 11, *ibid.* 1 July 1996b, 1, 12; *ibid.* 8 July 1996, 1, 12; *ibid.* 24 Aug. 1996, 1; Reuters 12 May 1996), other sources emphasize the difficulties the poor and uneducated, who form the majority of the population in Bangladesh, have registering cases with the police and gaining access to the legal system (Akhter Munir Aug. 1995, 42; *Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1296; Tepper Mar. 1996, 7-8; *ibid.* 12 Jan. 1997). However, the AL-led government has taken steps to reform the legal system with the passage on 2 September 1996 of the Law Commission Bill 1996 (*The Bangladesh Observer* 3 Sept. 1996, 1, 12). This bill aims at changing existing laws and developing new ones to bring the legal system in line with current social and economic conditions<sup>[17]</sup> (*ibid.*).

Aid donors meeting in Dhaka in early March 1996 expressed concern over Bangladesh's law and order situation and its impact on the country's economic development (Radio Bangladesh Network 8 Mar. 1996; *The Bangladesh Observer* 8 Mar. 1996, 1; *The Christian Science Monitor* 11 Mar. 1996). Noting the interdependence of development, democracy and political stability, sources have commented on the importance of taking the clash of political views "off the streets" and of establishing democratic and accountable institutions (*India Today* 31 Jan. 1996, 87; *Janakantha* 4 Apr. 1996).

In its election platform the AL promised to restore peace, development, the rule of law and respect for human rights through a "national consensus" government (*The Morning Sun* 11 May 1996, 3; Xinhua 13 July 1996), and Prime Minister Hasina reiterated this promise after being sworn in to office on 23 June 1996 (AFP 23 June 1996). However, beset by internal feuding (*Dhaka Courier* 9 Aug. 1996b, 14), the BNP has indicated its unwillingness to join the government's endeavour (IPS 30 July 1996; *The Economist* 23-29 Nov. 1996, 40), and in November 1996 began an indefinite boycott of parliament to protest, among other things, the alleged arrest of 1,200 JCD activists since the AL came to power (Xinhua 16 Nov. 1996). This ongoing political factionalism and violence, which has not been resolved by the election, tempers optimistic predictions about the country's future economic and political stability (*The Economist* 3-9 Aug. 1996, 34; *ibid.* 23-29 Nov. 1996, 40; Tepper 12 Jan. 1997).

**NOTES**

[17] For further information on this bill and other political developments between mid-December 1995 and late November 1996, please refer to the December 1996 DIRB Question and Answer Series paper entitled *Bangladesh: Political Developments and Political Violence*. [\[back\]](#)

**APPENDIX I: AREAS WHERE FATWAS ISSUED AGAINST WOMEN (1993-1995)**

Source: WLUML 1996, p. 3.

**APPENDIX II: TRAVEL ROUTES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKERS**

Source: UBINIG 1995, p. 22.

**APPENDIX III: NOTES ON SELECTED SOURCES****Bangladeshi Media Sources:**

Bangladeshi newspapers have flourished since restrictions on the media were lifted following General Ershad's ouster in 1990 (IPS 1 Apr. 1993). The number of newspapers and magazines has risen from about 100 in 1990 to over 1,000 in 1994, including 189 dailies (*ibid.*; *Europa* 1995, 497). According to an IPS report, the Bangladeshi press "is free but not fair. ...every newspaper is for or against one or other political party, and actively involved in jockeying for power" (IPS 1 Apr. 1993).

State advertising is a major source of revenue for Bangladeshi newspapers and periodicals (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1297; IPS 1 Apr. 1993). While one source states that the government has "no control" over the content of publications (*ibid.*), another indicates the government has withheld advertising and newsprint from publications it deems anti-government, causing some publications to exercise self-censorship (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1297).

With a circulation of 40,000 to 43,000 the Dhaka-based daily *The Bangladesh Observer* is reportedly the most-read English-language newspaper in the country (IPS 1 Apr. 1993; *Europa* 1995, 498). An independent publication (Reuters 12 Apr. 1991; *The Courier-Journal* 8 Dec. 1990), it was founded in 1949 (*Europa* 1995, 498). The *Dhaka Courier*, a weekly, has a circulation of 18,000 (*ibid.*, 499).

Radio and television stations are owned and controlled by the government and reportage is generally biased in its favour (*Country Reports 1995 1996*, 1298).

**UBINIG (Unnayan Bikalper Nitinirdharani Gobeshona, or Policy Research for Development Alternatives):**

Based in Dhaka, UBINIG began in 1981 as an informal "study circle" opposed to "patriarchy and imperialism" (*Women's Movements of the World* 1988, 19). In 1984 it was formally established as a research organization to propose "alternative development policies" concerning women in Bangladesh (*ibid.*). Its 120 researchers, most of whom are women, have examined such issues as women's reproductive rights, income generation and employment, community health care, violence against women and the situation of women workers in the export-oriented industries (*ibid.*, 20).

**Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML):**

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) was founded by nine women representing different Muslim countries and communities during a July 1984 international women's meeting on reproductive rights in Amsterdam. Its membership includes women both within and outside the Muslim world, and its objectives include sharing information on the impact of Muslim laws in different countries, and providing international support to women affected by these laws (WLUML 1996).

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