

## Refugee Review Tribunal

### AUSTRALIA

#### RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

**Research Response Number:** BGD31346  
**Country:** Bangladesh  
**Date:** 8 February 2007

Keywords: Bangladesh – Trade unionists – Awami League

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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#### Questions

1. What is the current position of union activists in Bangladesh?
2. What is the current position of Awami League supporters/members?
3. Are there reports of incidents of harm relating to union members and/or Awami League supporters/members?

#### RESPONSE

##### 1. What is the current position of union activists in Bangladesh?

All union activities are now banned in Bangladesh and union activists face detention under the Bangladesh Special Powers Act 1974. On 26 January 2007, the President of Bangladesh, Iajuddin Ahmed, invoked emergency powers, which banned all street protests, rallies and strikes and imposed restrictions on all media activities. Union activities including meetings, processions, rallies, strikes and lockouts have been suspended until further notice. Under the new rules, armed forces and intelligence agencies are authorised to use force and apply special powers to detain any person ('Bangladesh: State of Emergency powers extended and tightened – strikes & demonstrations banned, media gagged' 2007, Libcom website, 27 January <http://libcom.org/news/bangladesh-state-of-emergency-powers-extended-and-tightened-strikes-demonstrations-banned-media-gagged-27012007> – Accessed 7 February 2007 – Attachment 1; 'Emergency Powers Rules proclaimed: Street procession banned, restrictions on media' 2007, *The New Nation* website, 26 January [http://nation.ittefaq.com/artman/publish/article\\_33614.shtml](http://nation.ittefaq.com/artman/publish/article_33614.shtml) – Accessed 7 February 2007 – Attachment 2).

Repression violence and murder are common responses to union activities in Bangladesh. On 9 January 2007, fifty garment workers were injured when over two hundred outside workers

were allegedly hired by the factory owners to break a strike. The attackers, led by a police informant and a local thug, beat up the workers and detained five union members in the office of an executive on the third floor of the seven-storey building at Padma Poly Cotton Knit Fabrics Limited ('50 hurt as outsiders beat up RMG workers in city' 2007, *The Daily Star* website, 10 January <http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/01/10/d70110060180.htm> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 3).

One of the largest garment workers' unions is the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) of Bangladesh. Workers in hundreds of factories have joined the NGWF. While they have no legal recognition, workers in all these factories strike and protest together. The NGWF maintains its own campaigns and calls for international solidarity with the help of the NGOs and workers advocates. Eva Cheng writing for the pro labour *Green Left Weekly* argued that Bangladeshi garment workers' incomes were further reduced since January 2005 when the three-decade old international Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) expired and exposed textile and garment exporting countries like Bangladesh to greater overseas competition. Besides the impact from an expired MFA, garment workers continue to struggle against appalling working and wage conditions, which have frequently flared up in worker protests, violence and death. The employers have previously agreed to address the plight of the workers but no action has been taken so far ('Garment workers revolt in Bangladesh' 2006, Libcom website, 14 July <http://libcom.org/news/article.php/bangladesh-garment-revolt-140706> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 4; Chang, E. 2006, 'BANGLADESH: Workers revolt against pay squeeze', *Green Left Weekly* Online, 26 July <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2006/676/7664> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 5).

## **2. What is the current position of Awami League supporters/members?**

On 4 February 2007, the Bangladesh armed forces detained fourteen leaders of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL) for their alleged links with crime and corruption. According to Nurul Kabir, "among the members of the Awami League and its front organisations detained are Mohammad Nasim, a former Home Minister, Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, a former State Minister for Planning, Salman F Rahman, Privatisation Affairs advisor to the AL President Sheikh Hasina, and Pankaj Devnath, general secretary of the Sechhasebak League, Volunteers' front of the Awami League. Mostafa Kamal, a businessman who was nominated by the Awami League for the 2001 general elections was also detained. It is alleged that the armed forces have the names of forty one political leaders and party members, who face possible corruption charges". According to the Bangladesh News website, "two advisors to the caretaker government confirmed that the current administration in Bangladesh will take legal actions against the corrupt political leaders without considering their positions in the parties" (Kabir, N. 2007, '14 politicians arrested in Bangladesh', *Dawn* website, 5 February <http://www.dawn.com/2007/02/05/top15.htm> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 6; 'Forces search for 41 political bigwigs' 2007, Bangladesh News website, 5 February <http://www.bangladeshnews.com.bd/2007/02/05/forces-search-for-41-political-bigwigs/> – Accessed 7 February 2007 – Attachment 7).

On 7 January, the AL led alliance reiterated that it will protest against calls for elections by the President, Iajuddin Ahmed. On January 10, the AL vowed to resist the 22 January polls at all cost with the announcement of fresh nation-wide agitation programs, including laying siege to the presidential palace from 14 January and a countrywide blockade on 14 to 18

January. Since October 2006, the AL and the BNP members have been organising demonstrations and attacking each other in public after a caretaker government was announced by the President following accusations of electoral fraud and corruption by the AL against the BNP. The caretaker administration was accused by the AL of being influenced by the BNP as violent attacks and protest continued (Routray, B.P. 2007, 'Bangladesh: Uncertainty Before the National Elections', Power and Interest News Report website, 23 January [http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view\\_report&report\\_id=606&language\\_id=1](http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=606&language_id=1) – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 8; Elections not likely before six months' 2007, *Asia News* website, 19 January <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=8273&geo=2&size=A> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 9; Robinson, S. 2007, 'Bangladesh's State of Emergency', *Time* website, 25 January <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1582121,00.html> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 10).

### **3. Are there reports of incidents of harm relating to union members and/or Awami League supporters/members?**

There are attacks on union members and members belonging to the AL.

#### **Attacks on union members**

Between May and June of 2006, garment workers throughout Bangladesh went on a national strike. Some four thousand factories were shut down and sixteen were burnt down. A revolt by the garment workers started on 20 May 2006 in Gazipur where one garment worker was killed and more than two hundred injured when police opened fire on the protesting workers. The workers were demanding pay increases, release of two co-workers from police detention, and a withdrawal of investigations against eighty workers. According to the *Daily Star* website:

With tension mounting rapidly, the garment workers at about 1pm went on a rampage, damaging vehicles and ransacking the factory building, besides continuing with pelting brickbats at police, witnesses said.

It was when police opened fire, hitting one of the workers standing near the factory entrance. Witnesses said police dragged away the body, put it in a sack, and hid it in a second-floor warehouse of the factory.

At 5pm Gazipur police super Atiquel Islam handed over the bullet-hit body to the workers. Witnesses said a bullet went through his right chest.

A number of workers alleged police opened fire on them at about 2pm from inside the factory without any provocation, when the situation was getting calm.

The police super said during the incident Additional Police Super M Mafizuddin and Sreepur Police Station Officer-in-Charge were present at the spot. "I don't know who ordered to open fire," he told the press.

After the incident, Director Mohiuddin and officials of the factory disappeared from the area locking the factory gate.

The workers became involved in a dispute with the factory management on May 11, when they raised a 10-point set of demands including proper salary and end to repression on them.

On that day, some knitting section workers allegedly assaulted some officials. Mohiuddin filed a case with Sreepur Police Station naming three workers as the main accused of the assault and 80 others as accomplices.

Later police arrested knitting operators Aminul and Mujibur Rahman ('1 killed in cop firing on garment workers' 2006, *The Daily Star* website, 21 May <http://www.thedailystar.net/2006/05/21/d6052101044.htm> – Accessed 6 January 2007 – Attachment 11).

On 24 March 2006, Bangladesh police arrested Bangladesh Cha Sramik Union (BCSU) President Rajendra Prashad Boonerjee and Bangladesh Mukto Sramik Federation BMSF Acting President, at his house in Srimongal. On the same day, BCSU General Secretary Narendra Boonerjee and Mr. Bupesh Sind were also arrested, following a complaint at a local police station. When the workers of the BCSU gathered in front of the union offices in Srimongal to protest against the arrests, the police used force to end the rally. The International Confederation of Free trade Unions (ICFTU) protested the arrests of union members in a letter to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Bhegum Khaleda Zia. The ICFTU further noted that in 2005, seventeen trade unionists were killed and one hundred and forty seven beaten and tortured by the Bangladesh police ('Bangladesh: the return of anti-union repression' 2006, ICFTU Online, 7 April <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223662&Language=EN> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 12; 'BANGLADESH: Three trade union leaders arrested, brutal repression of workers protest' 2006, ICFTU Online, 4 April <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223635&Language=EN> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 13; 'ASIA AND PACIFIC: anti-union repression zone' 2006, ICFTU Online, 7 June <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223811&Language=EN> – Accessed 6 February 2007 – Attachment 14).

### **Attacks on Awami League (AL) members**

- On 31 January 2007, Awlad Hossain of the AL was arrested by police while he was returning home from the AL leader Sheikh Hasina's Sudhasadan residence ('AL President Hasina's APS Dr Awlad held' 2007, *United News of Bangladesh Limited*, 31 January – Attachment 15).
- On 17 January 2007, six leaders of the AL were arrested. In a separate raid by the army on the same day, the AL leader Lokman Hossain was arrested at midnight ('862 arrested across country: 46 by army, 1,816 by RAB-police joint forces' 2007, *United News of Bangladesh Limited*, 17 January – Attachment 16).
- On 9 January 2007, five leaders of the Awami League (AL)-led grand alliance were injured as police assaulted them while using force to disperse alliance activists and leaders from around the Bangabhaban during a siege that triggered violent clashes between the police and the demonstrators ('Cops attack blockaders with brute force' 2007, *The Daily Star* website, 10 January <http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/01/10/d7011001011.htm> – Accessed 7 February 2007 – Attachment 17; Also see Awami League website at <http://www.albd.org/>).

### **List of Sources Consulted**

#### Internet Sources:

##### **Government Information & Reports**

##### **United Nations (UN)**

##### **Non-Government Organisations**

International Confederation of Free Trade Unions website [www.icftu.com](http://www.icftu.com)

##### **International News & Politics**

Libcom website [www.libcom.org](http://www.libcom.org)

*Green Left Weekly* [www.greenleft.org.au](http://www.greenleft.org.au)

Power and Interest News website [www.pinr.com](http://www.pinr.com)

*Time* website [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)

##### **Region Specific Links**

*Dawn* website [www.dawn.com](http://www.dawn.com)

*Asia News* website [www.asianews.it](http://www.asianews.it)

##### **Topic Specific Links**

*The New Nation* website [www.nation.itfaq.com](http://www.nation.itfaq.com)

*The Daily Star* website [www.thedailystar.com](http://www.thedailystar.com)

Awami League website at <http://www.albd.org/>

Bangladesn News website [www.bangladeshnews.com.bd](http://www.bangladeshnews.com.bd)

##### **Search Engines**

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

##### **Online Subscription Services**

##### **Library Networks**

##### **University Sites**

#### Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

#### **List of Attachments**

1. 'Bangladesh: State of Emergency powers extended and tightened – strikes & demonstrations banned, media gagged' 2007, Libcom website, 27 January <http://libcom.org/news/bangladesh-state-of-emergency-powers-extended-and-tightened-strikes-demonstrations-banned-media-gagged-27012007> – Accessed 7 February 2007.
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4. 'Garment workers revolt in Bangladesh' 2006, Libcom website, 14 July <http://libcom.org/news/article.php/bangladesh-garment-revolt-140706> – Accessed 6 February 2007.
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6. Kabir, N. 2007, '14 politicians arrested in Bangladesh', *Dawn* website, 5 February <http://www.dawn.com/2007/02/05/top15.htm> – Accessed 6 February 2007.
7. 'Forces search for 41 political bigwigs' 2007, Bangladesh News website, 5 February <http://www.bangladeshnews.com.bd/2007/02/05/forces-search-for-41-political-bigwigs/> – Accessed 7 February 2007.
8. Routray, B.P. 2007, 'Bangladesh: Uncertainty Before the National Elections', Power and Interest News Report website, 23 January [http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view\\_report&report\\_id=606&language\\_id=1](http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=606&language_id=1) – Accessed 6 February 2007.
9. 'Elections not likely before six months' 2007, *Asia News* website, 19 January <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=8273&geo=2&size=A> – Accessed 6 February 2007.
10. Robinson, S. 2007, 'Bangladesh's State of Emergency', *Time* website, 25 January <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1582121,00.html> – Accessed 6 February 2007.
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12. 'Bangladesh: the return of anti-union repression' 2006, ICFTU Online, 7 April <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223662&Language=EN> – Accessed 6 February 2007.
13. 'BANGLADESH: Three trade union leaders arrested, brutal repression of workers protest' 2006, ICFTU Online, 4 April <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991223635&Language=EN> – Accessed 6 February 2007.
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15. 'AL President Hasina's APS Dr Awlad held' 2007, *United News of Bangladesh Limited*, 31 January. (FACTIVA)
16. '862 arrested across country: 46 by army, 1,816 by RAB-police joint forces' 2007, *United News of Bangladesh Limited*, 17 January. (FACTIVA)

17. 'Cops attack blockaders with brute force' 2007, *The Daily Star* website, 10 January <http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/01/10/d7011001011.htm> – Accessed 7 February 2007.