



# **Three-month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh**

**Reporting Period: April – June 2020**

**Prepared by Odhikar**

Date of Release: 6 July 2020

# Foreword

Since its establishment in 1994, Odhikar as a human rights organisation has always been active to raise mass awareness of the human rights violations committed by the state and to campaign for internationally recognised civil and political rights, protest abuses of rights and prevent the state from violating human rights. Odhikar unconditionally stands beside the victims of human rights violations and works to ensure the safety of victims and establish justice.

In order to promote and protect human rights, Odhikar has been facing extreme state oppression and harassment of the present government since 2013. Despite this adverse situation, Odhikar continues to work; and has prepared the second quarter (April-June) report of 2020 on the human rights situation of Bangladesh, based on reports gathered by grassroots human rights defenders associated with Odhikar and data collected from the media.

## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Executive Summary.....   | 4  |
| Statistics: Human Rights violations (January-June) 2020 .....                | 7  |
| Hindrance to Freedom of Expression and Media and Repression .....            | 9  |
| Repressive Digital Security Act, 2018.....                                   | 10 |
| Freedom of the Media .....   | 13 |
| State Repression and Impunity amid the COVID-19 Pandemic.....                | 16 |
| Extrajudicial killings .....   | 16 |
| Enforced disappearances .....  | 17 |
| Torture and ill-treatment of law enforcement agencies .....                  | 20 |
| Human rights violations in prisons.....                                      | 25 |
| Political Violence and Criminalisation .....                                 | 26 |
| Public Lynching.....   | 28 |
| Death Penalty.....   | 28 |
| Constitutional and State Institutions .....                                  | 29 |
| National Human Rights Commission .....                                       | 29 |
| Widespread corruption and Anti-Corruption Commission .....                   | 30 |
| Labour Rights .....  | 32 |
| Situation of readymade garment industry and other formal sector .....        | 32 |
| Closure of the state-owned jute mills .....                                  | 37 |
| Workers in the informal sectors.....   | 38 |
| Migrant Bangladeshi nationals shot dead in Libya and Human Trafficking ..... | 40 |
| Violence against Women.....  | 41 |
| Rape.....  | 41 |
| Sexual harassment .....  | 41 |
| Dowry related violence .....   | 42 |
| Acid violence .....  | 43 |
| Neighbouring States: India and Myanmar .....                                 | 44 |
| India's influence over Bangladesh.....                                       | 44 |
| Genocide against Rohingya Population .....                                   | 45 |
| Hindrance to Human Rights Activities .....                                   | 47 |
| Recommendations .....  | 48 |

## Executive Summary

1. The COVID-19 pandemic became widespread in Bangladesh between April and June of 2020. The human rights situation in the country during this period was extremely worrying. This report reviews violations of civil and political rights, including state repression, deprivation of the right to life and other important human rights violations. During this period, the government brought social media under scrutiny to curb citizens' right to freedom of speech, thought, conscience and expression.
2. There have been cases of people from different walks of life, including dissenters, writers, bloggers, leaders and activists of opposition parties, teachers, cartoonist, journalists, lawyers and even children, being arrested and sent to jail under the Digital Security Act 2018, for criticizing the failure of the government to effectively and seriously address the outbreak of the Coronavirus; and for writing or 'liking' / 'sharing' posts on social media against high-ranking members of the ruling party or their family members. There have been allegations that the government has put pressure on the media in various ways to disrupt the promotion of objective and impartial COVID-19 related news and in most cases, journalists are being forced to impose self-censorship, as has been the norm for several years now. During this time, journalists were attacked while performing their professional duties and false and fabricated cases were filed against them.
3. The lack of effective information and decisions regarding COVID-19 is harming rights to health, safety and employment. On top of that, even in the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens have been subjected to various human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture by members of law enforcement agencies. At the same time, Rohingya refugees have been subjected to extrajudicial killings.
4. Despite warnings from the World Health Organization (WHO), the government of Bangladesh has failed to take appropriate measures to prevent the spread COVID-19. As a result, this deadly coronavirus has become widespread in Bangladesh and the miserable state of the health system has become apparent. According to official estimates, as of 30 June, 145,483 people in Bangladesh have been infected with the coronavirus of which 1,847 have died.<sup>1</sup> However, unofficial estimates are much higher. Coronavirus samples were officially tested free of cost at the beginning. However, on 28 June, it was stated in a circular issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare that the government had set a fee of Tk. 200 for testing samples to check for coronavirus. If the sample is collected from home, the fee will be Tk. 500.<sup>2</sup> Many people will not be able to get tested because of the fee, which will eventually increase the risk and spread of infection.

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<sup>1</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 1 July 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=233470&cat=2/>

<sup>2</sup> BDnews24.com, 29 June 2020; <https://bangla.bdnews24.com/bangladesh/article1775081.bdnews>

5. Corruption has become widespread during this pandemic. High-ranking doctors have been transferred and appointed as Officers on Special Duty (OSD)<sup>3</sup> for protesting against corruption in health sector.<sup>4</sup> In addition, there have been incidents of people who have laundered money abroad and fled the country allegedly with the help of the government.
6. Incidents of public lynching continued despite the pandemic. Due to an ineffective justice mechanism, which has become even more dysfunctional due to the pandemic, ordinary people are taking the law into their own hands and participating in mob beatings.
7. From April to June 2020, overcrowding in prisons across the country continued. Several prisoners have been infected with COVID-19 due to overcrowding and lack of proper sanitation. As of 10 May, at least 23 prison guards in different jails across the country have been infected with COVID-19. In addition, 64 prison guards and 249 inmates were isolated because they had symptoms and came in contact with COVID-19 patients.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the rest of the prisoners are at high risk of infection. To reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection, the government has released 2,884 convicted prisoners, who had been punished with light sentences.<sup>6</sup> However, this number is negligible compared to the total number of prisoners. Again, due to the acute shortage of medical facilities and doctors in the prisons, most of the prisoners are being deprived from medical treatment of any kind.
8. In the midst of this pandemic, ordinary citizens were killed and injured in attacks by leaders and activists of the ruling political party across the country; there have also been casualties of internal clashes and infighting due to internal strife. Various types of lethal weapons, including firearms, were used in these clashes. During this period, leaders and activists of the ruling party were accused of embezzling relief allocated to the poor people affected by the Coronavirus.<sup>7</sup> There have also been a number of clashes between the two groups of the ruling party over such relief.
9. In the last three months, many women and girls have been victims of various forms of violence. Incidents of rape, sexual harassment, acid throwing and oppression and killing of women for dowry continued. There are allegations of various forms of such oppression and violence against the leaders and activists of the ruling party.
10. In the last three months, the workers of formal and informal sectors have been subjected to various human rights violations. Workers in the garment industry, sugar industry, jute mills and tea gardens demanded arrears of wages in public protests. Readymade garment industry workers have been terminated and the

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/12/24/osd-spend-day> for an explanation on the status of 'Officer on Special Duty'.

<sup>4</sup> The daily Bangladesh Pratidin, 29 April 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/last-page/2020/04/30/525616>

<sup>5</sup> The Daily Star, 11 May 2020; <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-live-update-23-prison-guards-2-inmates-test-covid-19-positive-1901596>

<sup>6</sup> Bangladesh Protidin, 10 May 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/city/2020/05/10/528792>

<sup>7</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 24 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1652831>

BGMEA said that a large number of workers will be laid off. Police and criminals backed by factory owners, attacked workers' rallies as they protested for their rightful demands. Workers in the informal sector have lost their jobs during the outbreak of the Coronavirus and are without income, food or assistance along with their families. Although the government says it is distributing massive amounts of relief across the country, many workers have been deprived from such relief.

11. In the last three months, members of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) have killed, tortured and abducted Bangladeshi nationals. During this period, a BSF member entered Bangladesh and shot dead an SSC<sup>8</sup> examinee engaged in agricultural work.
12. Rohingya refugees are at serious risk of COVID-19 infection. According to the World Health Organisation, as of 28 June, 50 Rohingyas have been infected and five of them have died. Meanwhile, a month before the deadline for compliance with the International Criminal Court (ICC) order, the President's Office of Myanmar issued a directive on 8 April 2020, to comply with the UN Convention on Genocide and to preserve evidence of all violence committed against Rohingyas in Rakhine State. However, during the ICC and ICJ investigations and following orders from the President of Myanmar, attacks on Rohingyas in Rakhine continued and they are fleeing the country and entering Bangladesh. Of the more than 500 Rohingya refugees who had been floating in the sea in two trawlers for more than three weeks, 280 were rescued and sent to Bhasanchar of Hatiya in Noakhali on 7 May 2020. On 26 May, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released some new satellite images of Myanmar's Rakhine state. It found that a fire had broken out in Let Kar Village in Rakhine State on 16 May and that about 200 houses had been set on fire.
13. The persecution on *Odhikar* that began in 2013 continues. In 2014, *Odhikar* applied to the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) under the Prime Minister's Office for the renewal of its registration, but it has not been renewed until June 2020. Furthermore, the NGOAB has also stopped fund clearance all of *Odhikar's* projects for more than six years and has completely stopped approving any new projects. As part of government's crackdown on *Odhikar*, the Standard Chartered Bank is also harassing *Odhikar* in various ways by freezing its accounts. Human rights defenders associated with *Odhikar* are under surveillance for being vocal about human rights violations. The case filed under the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (Amendment 2009) against the Secretary and Director of *Odhikar* is still pending. *Odhikar* has also been forced to resort to self-censorship in publishing reports due to various obstacles and constant hindrance on freedom expression by the government.

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<sup>8</sup> Secondary School Certificate Examination

## Statistics: Human Rights violations (January-June) 2020

| Statistics: January-June 2020*        |                             |           |           |           |           |           |           |            |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Type of Human Rights Violation        |                             | January   | February  | March     | April     | May       | June      | Total      |
| Extrajudicial killings                | Crossfire                   | 21        | 24        | 28        | 12        | 27        | 28        | 140        |
|                                       | Torture to death            | 1         | 2         | 3         | 2         | 2         | 1         | 11         |
|                                       | Shot to death               | 1         | 0         | 5         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 6          |
|                                       | Beaten to death             | 0         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1          |
|                                       | <b>Total</b>                | <b>23</b> | <b>26</b> | <b>37</b> | <b>14</b> | <b>29</b> | <b>29</b> | <b>158</b> |
| Enforced Disappearances               |                             | 4         | 3         | 2         | 1         | 0         | 3         | 13         |
| Death in Jail                         |                             | 4         | 6         | 7         | 2         | 5         | 9         | 33         |
| Death Penalty                         | Sentenced to death          | 33        | 28        | 18        | 0         | 0         | 0         | 79         |
|                                       | Execution of death sentence | 0         | 0         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 0         | 1          |
| Human rights violations by Indian BSF | Bangladeshis Killed         | 13        | 3         | 0         | 2         | 1         | 6         | 25         |
|                                       | Bangladeshis Injured        | 4         | 2         | 0         | 7         | 0         | 4         | 17         |
|                                       | Bangladeshis Abducted       | 1         | 0         | 2         | 0         | 0         | 0         | 3          |
|                                       | <b>Total</b>                | <b>18</b> | <b>5</b>  | <b>2</b>  | <b>9</b>  | <b>1</b>  | <b>10</b> | <b>45</b>  |
| Attack on journalists                 | Injured                     | 1         | 6         | 6         | 21        | 5         | 1         | 40         |
|                                       | Assaulted                   | 3         | 5         | 1         | 2         | 5         | 2         | 18         |
|                                       | Attacked                    | 0         | 2         | 0         | 5         | 0         | 5         | 12         |
|                                       | Threatened                  | 0         | 0         | 4         | 3         | 1         | 0         | 8          |
|                                       | <b>Total</b>                | <b>4</b>  | <b>13</b> | <b>11</b> | <b>31</b> | <b>11</b> | <b>8</b>  | <b>78</b>  |
| Political violence                    | Killed                      | 0         | 5         | 6         | 6         | 7         | 7         | 31         |
|                                       | Injured                     | 209       | 132       | 146       | 173       | 247       | 129       | 1036       |
| Dowry related violence against women  |                             | 16        | 8         | 12        | 8         | 10        | 19        | 73         |
| Rape                                  | Girl under the age of 18    | 66        | 74        | 59        | 52        | 43        | 69        | 363        |

|  |                                     |         |    |     |    |    |    |     |     |
|--|-------------------------------------|---------|----|-----|----|----|----|-----|-----|
|  | Women                               |         | 26 | 35  | 28 | 29 | 40 | 41  | 199 |
|  | Age could not be determined         |         | 0  | 1   | 0  | 0  | 5  | 2   | 8   |
|  | Total                               |         | 92 | 110 | 87 | 81 | 88 | 112 | 570 |
| Sexual harassment /Stalking of females |                                     |         | 11 | 15  | 13 | 8  | 12 | 12  | 71  |
| Acid violence                          |                                     |         | 0  | 3   | 1  | 0  | 3  | 5   | 12  |
| Public lynching                        |                                     |         | 6  | 2   | 4  | 3  | 2  | 6   | 23  |
| Situation of workers                   | RMG workers                         | Killed  | 0  | 0   | 0  | 2  | 0  | 0   | 2   |
|  |                                     | Injured | 4  | 10  | 0  | 42 | 63 | 0   | 119 |
|  | Workers in other (Informal sectors) | Killed  | 5  | 6   | 7  | 4  | 4  | 9   | 35  |
|  |                                     | Injured | 11 | 1   | 17 | 1  | 40 | 7   | 77  |
| Arrest under Digital Security Act 2018 |                                     |         | 5  | 4   | 5  | 37 | 27 | 18  | 96  |

\* Statistics of some issues have been updated



## Hindrance to Freedom of Expression and Media and Repression

1. In the three months of April-June 2020, the government has carried out persecution, violating freedoms of speech, thought, conscience and expression, with the aim to prevent the free flow of information during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although various incidents have not been published in the print media due to pressure on the mass media, they have been published in social media. Due to this, the government also brought the social media under extensive surveillance. Several websites have been shut down in Bangladesh for criticizing the government.<sup>9</sup> The government has compiled a long list of people from different walks of life, including university teachers, bureaucrats, local and foreign journalists, intellectuals, political leaders and businessmen, who have been accused of creating rumours and conspiracies over the government's failures and shortcomings in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The upper echelons of the government said that action would be taken against those on the list.<sup>10</sup> During this period, the government issued a notification prohibiting government employees, including doctors and nurses, from expressing their views. On 2 May 2020, Professor ABM Abdul Hannan, Registrar of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) issued a notification that teachers, doctors and other officials of the BSMMU should not speak to the media and participate in television talk shows without the permission of the authorities; and that they should also be careful while giving status/shares on social media, so as not to tarnish the image of the government and university authorities.<sup>11</sup> On 7 May, the government issued a circular directing government employees to refrain from uploading, commenting, liking or sharing any post, photo, audio or video that 'tarnishes' the image of the government or the state through social media. The notice states that legal action would be taken if the order is violated.<sup>12</sup> On 15 April, the government instructed all government nurses and health workers to refrain from talking to the media and to not talk about availability or other issues related to personal protective equipment (PPE), without the prior permission of the authority.<sup>13</sup> By imposing such restrictions on speech and expression, the government is creating even more confusion regarding the pandemic and even creating a false sense of 'things are better' – evident by the crowded transports and markets.

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<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, 7 May 2020; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/07/bangladesh-mass-arrests-over-cartoons-posts>

<sup>10</sup> The Daily Ittefaq, 5 May 2020; <https://www.ittefaq.com.bd/national/150718>

<sup>11</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 3 May 2020; <https://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=224978&cat=1>

<sup>12</sup> The Daily Ittefaq, 7 May 2020; <https://www.ittefaq.com.bd/national/150151>

<sup>13</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 17 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1651469>

## Repressive Digital Security Act, 2018

2. Citizens of various professions, including volunteers assisting the victims of COVID-19, cartoonist, writers, university teachers, opposition political leaders, lawyers and children have been sued and arrested under the Digital Security Act, 2018 for expressing critical views, giving analysis, cartoons, criticizing the government and high-ranking members of the ruling party, for failing to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, gross malpractices in the healthcare system and massive irregularities in the distribution of relief. Many of those arrested were picked up by plain clothed men from their homes, but law enforcement officials initially denied arresting them. Later, they were taken to the police stations and cases were filed against them under the Digital Security Act, 2018. They were then sent to jail through the court. Furthermore, lawsuits have been filed against journalists under the repressive Digital Security Act, 2018 for publishing news on embezzlement and irregularities on distribution of relief. Law enforcement officials and ruling party leaders and activists reportedly filed these cases.<sup>14</sup> The Editor's Council issued a statement on 30 June, condemning the filing of the cases under the Digital Security Act, 2018 against newspaper editors, journalists, writers and university teachers, for their criticism of the mismanagement in dealing with COVID-19. The Council has expressed concern over the deteriorating environment for free and independent journalism and the growing number of police attacks on the media.<sup>15</sup>
3. Freedom of opinion and expression is a constitutional right of the citizens of Bangladesh. These arrests are tantamount to harassment and have led to detention of people and their incarceration in crowded prisons with hardly any medical care.
4. **During the three months of April-June 2020, 82 persons were arrested under the Digital Security Act-2018, for criticizing individuals or leaders of the government and the ruling party.**
5. A teenager named Borhanul Islam Milon (15) posted on Facebook that the genuinely helpless people in Darshnapara Union under Poba Upazila in Rajshahi District did not get relief. On 18 April 2020, Borhanul Islam Milon was called by Kamrul Raj, Chairman of Darshnapara Union Parishad (UP) and president of the union unit Awami League, to his office – where he was beaten and seriously injured. Later the UP Chairman handed Milon over to the police at Karnahar Police Station. Police also arrested Milon's elder brother Babu Munna when he went to the police station to protest Milon's arrest. In the evening of 18 April, UP member Hasan Ali who also beat Milon, filed a case against three people, including the two brothers, under the Digital Security Act,

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<sup>14</sup> The Daily New Age, 7 May 2020; <https://www.newagebd.net/article/105803/businessman-cartoonist-sent-to-jail-following-series-of-arrests>

<sup>15</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 1 July 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=233472&cat=2/>

2018 at Karnahar Police Station. Locals alleged that the Awami League leader has given relief food items to his supporters and people of his choice more than once. However, he did not give any government relief to the actual needy. When the news of Milon and Babu Munna's arrest spread, the locals became angry and surrounded the police station demanding the punishment of Kamrul Raj.<sup>16</sup>

6. Mannan (40) was beaten to death by police on 29 April 2020 on the allegation of stealing, in Ghorashal of Narshindi. This had been reported in the online version of the local daily Grameen Darpan and in an online news portal called Narsingdi Protidin. Zahirul Islam, Officer-in-Charge of Ghorashal Police Outpost, accused Ramzan Ali Pramanik, news editor of the daily Grameen Darpan, staff reporter Shanto Banik, and publisher and editor of the online news portal Narsingdi Protidin, Shaon Khandaker Shahin and filed a case against them under the Digital Security Act, 2018 at Palash Police Station, for publishing his statement about the arrest incorrectly and without consulting him while preparing the report. On 1 May 2020, police arrested the three journalists.<sup>17</sup>



*Ramzan Ali Pramanik, news editor of local daily Grameen Darpan, Shanto Banik, staff reporter and Shaon Khandaker Shahin, publisher and editor of online portal Narsingdi Pratidin. Photo: Manabzamin, 1 May 2020*

7. Ali Azam, president of Brahmanbaria Sadar Upazila unit Juba League, filed a case against Brahmanbaria district BNP leader and lawyer Ali Azam Chowdhury under the Digital Security Act, 2018 for commenting on Facebook about former president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Police arrested him on 6 April.<sup>18</sup>
8. On 4 May 2020, a group of plainclothes men, claiming to be members of RAB-3, picked up writer Mostaq Ahmed, cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore and on 5 May Didar Bhuiyan, one of the organisers of an organisation called Rashtrachinta, and Minhaj Mannan, a shareholder director of Dhaka Stock

<sup>16</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 20 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/city/496802>; Jugantor, 20 April 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/news/299806>; and report sent by local human rights defender associated with Odhikar in Rajshahi.

<sup>17</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 1 May 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1654141>

<sup>18</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 7 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1649302>

Exchange, from different parts of Dhaka. When Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) Zafar of RAB-3 was contacted after Didar was arrested, he said that no one by that name had been brought to RAB-3 office and RAB-3 did not have any information about such an operation. When contacted, the law and media wing of RAB refused to comment on the arrest of Mostaq Ahmed.<sup>19</sup> The RAB handed over the detainees to Ramna Police Station and on 5 May, RAB filed a case under the Digital Security Act, 2018 against 11 people for allegedly posting against RAB and the government on Facebook, providing false information about the Coronavirus and publishing cartoons of various leaders. Expatriate journalist Tasnim Khalil has also been accused in the case.<sup>20</sup>

9. On 4 June 2020, Awami League activist Rana Ahmed Shanto filed a case under the Digital Security Act, 2018 against a young girl named Mahmuda Akhter Polly of Satoria Upazila under Manikganj District, for posting on her Facebook a post critical of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. On 5 June, Mahmuda Akhter Polly was arrested by the police.<sup>21</sup>
10. Tushar Kibria, President of the Begum Rokeya University unit Awami League-backed Chhatra League, filed a case with the Tajhat Police Station, under the Digital Security Act 2018 against Sirajum Munira, a Bangla Department teacher at Begum Rokeya University, for commenting on Facebook about the late Awami League Presidium Member and former Health Minister Mohammad Nasim. Police arrested Sirajum Munira at mid night on 13 June.<sup>22</sup>



*Sirajum Munira, Photo: Manabzamin, 17 June 2020*

11. Kazi Zahidur Rahman, a teacher in the Computer Science and Engineering Department of Rajshahi University, posted some articles on Facebook about corruption in the health sector during the period of the Health Minister Mohammad Nasim. On 17 June 2020, Advocate Tapash Kumar Saha, a resident

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<sup>19</sup> Bangladesh Protidin, 6 May 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/city-news/2020/05/06/527553>

<sup>20</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 7 May 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=225446&cat=1>

<sup>21</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 5 June 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/dhaka/506095/>

<sup>22</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 17 June 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=231162&cat=9>

of Sagarpara in the Rajshahi city, filed a case against Zahidur Rahman under the Digital Security Act, 2018 at Motihar Police Station, when pro-Awami League teachers and Chhatra League<sup>23</sup> leaders and activists demanded his punishment. Zahidur Rahman was arrested by the police that night.<sup>24</sup>



*Rajshahi University teacher Kazi Zahidur Rahman. Photo: Prothom Alo, 18 June 2020*

12. Mohammad Emon, a ninth-grade student of Habirbari Paragaon High School in Bhaluka Upazila under Mymensingh District, wrote a post on his Facebook on 19 June 2020, criticizing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. On 20 June, Hanif Mohammad Nipun, General Secretary of Habirbari Union unit Juba League<sup>25</sup>, filed a case against him with Bhaluka Police Station under the Digital Security Act, 2018. The police arrested Emon from his house at around 10:00 pm on the same day.<sup>26</sup>

## Freedom of the Media

13. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there are allegations that the government has been putting more pressure on the media and obstructing objective and impartial news. Many media outlets and journalists have reportedly been forced to maintain self-censorship under pressure from the government. As of 22 June, 419 journalists had been infected with Coronavirus while on professional duty, of whom seven died.<sup>27</sup> The government controls most of the media, especially the electronic media, and almost all electronic media and most print media are owned by individuals loyal to the government. Meanwhile, pro-opposition

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<sup>23</sup> Student wing of Awami League

<sup>24</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 18 June 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1663466>

<sup>25</sup> Youth wing of Awami League

<sup>26</sup> The Daily Star, 22 June 2020; <https://www.thedailystar.net/bangla/শীর্ষ-খবর/ডিজিটাল-নিরাপত্তা-আইনের-মামলায়-কিশোর-সংশোধনগারে-নবম-শ্রেণির-ছাত্র-158129>

<sup>27</sup> Information collected from New Age.



electronic and print media - Diganta TV, Islamic TV and Amar Desh - have been shut down by the government since 2013.

14. During this difficult time, several electronic and print media authorities terminated journalists and deprived them from their salaries and allowances. In protest of this, journalists staged a rally in front of Dhaka's SAARC fountain on 25 May, the day of Eid.<sup>28</sup> In the last three months, ruling party leaders, activists, and law enforcement officials filed cases against journalists under the Digital Security Act, 2018 in retaliation of publishing news. Many of them have also been arrested, the details of which are given in the 'Repressive Digital Security Act 2018' section of this report. In this repressive situation, journalists and reporters who dare to publish objective news were attacked or arrested under fabricated cases. It is alleged that the journalists were attacked by the ruling party leaders and activists because they were gathering information on the embezzlement of relief or had reported on relief embezzlement.
15. Members of the law enforcement agencies also attacked journalists while they were carrying out their professional duties. One of the victims, journalist Sajal Bhuiyan, suffered severe eye damage.<sup>29</sup> During this period, journalist ABM Mizanur Rahman, who was covering the killing of a man in a clash between two groups of the ruling party, has been accused in the murder case. Expressing concern over the filing of cases and arrests of journalists, Shompadak Parishad (Editors' Council) in a statement on 7 May said that such incidents were a threat to the freedom of the media and expression.<sup>30</sup> In a joint statement issued on 26 May, a group of UN human rights experts in Geneva called for an end to the persecution of journalists in Bangladesh, saying such persecution could have devastating consequences for media activists, journalists and their families – and also for society as a whole.<sup>31</sup>



*Journalists staged a symbolic rally on Eid day, demanding their arrears of salary and bonus. Photo: Bangla Tribune, 25 May 2020*

<sup>28</sup> Bangla Tribune, 25 May 2020; <https://www.banglatribune.com/others/news/625269>

<sup>29</sup> The Daily Prothom Alo, 24 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1652831>

<sup>30</sup> The daily Jugantor, 8 May 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/news/305128>

<sup>31</sup> 'Bangladesh must end persecution of journalist, say UN experts'; Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25905&LangID=E>

16. During the period from April to June 2020, 27 journalists were injured while performing their professional duty, nine were assaulted, 10 were attacked, four were threatened, two arrested, and 10 journalists were sued.
17. On 1 April 2020, a group criminals led by Aushkandi Union Parishad Chairman and Awami League leader Muhibur Rahman Harun, attacked Shah Sultan Ahmed, a correspondent of the daily Pratidiner Sangbad, for publishing irregularities in the distribution of government relief among low-income people, in Aushkandi Union under Nobiganj Upazila in Habiganj District. Mujibur Rahman, Nabiganj correspondent of the daily Amar Sangbad, and Bulbul Ahmed, Nabiganj correspondent of SA TV, were injured while trying to save Sultan. Sultan was admitted to Sylhet Osmani Medical College Hospital in critical condition. Locals said, each person should have been given 10 kg of rice as government relief; however, the UP Chairman and ruling party leader Muhibur Rahman Harun gave only 5 kg of rice.<sup>32</sup>



*Shah Sultan Ahmed, correspondent of the daily Pratidiner Sangbad. Photo: Ittefaq, 2 April 2020*

18. On 16 April 2020, Tuhin Hawlader, a reporter of Bangladesh Protidin, was on his way to perform his professional duties. At that time, Sub Inspector Mahbubur Rahman, and a police constable of Wari Police Station blocked his way at Tikatuli area in Dhaka, dragged him off his motorcycle and severely beat him up for leaving the house during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tuhin was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital with serious injuries.<sup>33</sup>
19. On 23 April 2020, SA TV's Narsingdi District correspondent Sajal Bhuiyan and Asian TV's senior reporter Baten Biplob, went to gather information on allegations of irregularities during the sale of rice in the open market (OMS), against Amirganj Union Parishad Chairman and Awami League leader Nasir Uddin Khan in Raipur under Narsingdi District. When Nasir Uddin Khan was contacted on his cell phone to comment on the allegations, he told the reporters to go to the Union unit Awami League office. When they went there, Sajal

<sup>32</sup> The daily Jugantor, 2 April 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/second-edition/295058>

<sup>33</sup> The daily Naya Dignata, 17 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/more-news/496163>

Bhuiyan was attacked on Nasir Uddin's orders for some reports previously published against Nasir Uddin Khan. Sajal Bhuiyan was first admitted to Narsingdi Sadar Hospital with serious injuries.<sup>34</sup> Later, when his condition deteriorated, he was referred to Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital in Dhaka. Doctors said that his left eye had been severely damaged.<sup>35</sup>



*Injured journalist Sajal Bhuiyan. Photo: Bangla Tribune, 28 April 2020*

20. On 24 May 2020, Juba League activist Tapash Kumar Das was killed in a clash between supporters of Bauphal Municipality Mayor and Awami League leader Mohammad Ziaul Haque and his rival group in Bauphal under Patuakhali District, over the construction of a pylon. During the clash, Prothom Alo's Bauphal correspondent ABM Mizanur Rahman and other journalists were covering the news. The report sent by Mizanur Rahman was published in the online version of the daily Prothom Alo. On 25 May, Pankaj Kumar Das, brother of Tapas Kumar Das, filed a murder case against 35 people at Bauphal Police Station. Journalist Mizanur Rahman was also implicated as an accused in this case.<sup>36</sup>

## **State Repression and Impunity amid the COVID-19 Pandemic**

### ***Extrajudicial killings***

21. Extrajudicial killings continued throughout the country in the last three months despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The worst example of violations of right to life and personal liberty is extrajudicial killing, which is a clear violation of Article 32 of the Constitution and Article 8 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. There are well founded allegations that law enforcement

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<sup>34</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 24 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1652831>

<sup>35</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 23 May 2020

<sup>36</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 29 May 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/opinion/article/1659310>; Report sent by local human rights defender associated with Odhikar from Patuakhali. The daily Prothom Alo, 29 May 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/opinion/article/1659365>



agencies try to cover up such killings by calling them deaths in ‘gunfights’ or ‘crossfire’. Odhikar believes that extrajudicial killings are taking place due to the impunity given to law enforcement and security forces by the State in the absence of a democratic government and due to a dysfunctional justice delivery system.

22. From April to June 2020, a total of 72 persons were reportedly killed extrajudicially. Of them, 41 persons were killed by police, one by Detective Branch (DB) of Police, 25 by RAB, and five by BGB. Among the 72 persons extrajudicially killed, 67 were killed in ‘crossfire/ encounters/gunfights’. Furthermore, among the deceased, five persons were allegedly tortured to death by police. Of the 72 victims of extrajudicial killings, 15 Rohingya refugees were killed extrajudicially in the name of ‘gunfight’ during this period.
23. On 12 May 2020, Auto-rickshaw driver Sajjad Hossain (40), the main accused in the rape and murder of a young woman named Champa Begum, in Chakaria of Cox’s Bazar District, was killed in an alleged ‘gunfight’ with police. It is to be noted that the locals apprehended Sajjad from his area of Shekhershil on 11 May, and handed him over to the police.<sup>37</sup>
24. On 17 May 2020, a man named Mahbub Hasan Babu was stabbed to death in Banchharampur under Brahmanbaria District, in retaliation to a previous altercation. The police arrested four people involved in the incident. One of them, Mohammad Sujon, the main accused in this murder case, was killed in a ‘gunfight’ with police late at night.<sup>38</sup>
25. On 9 June 2020, a man named Shafiqul Islam (40) was killed in a so-called ‘gunfight’ with police in Bhola Sadar Upazila. According to the police, Shafiqul Islam was a pirate. Shafiqul Islam and his opponents had clashed over ‘territory’ in the northern side of the Meghna River. Upon receiving the news, when the police reached the spot, the pirates fired at the police. Shafiqul was killed when police fired back in self-defense. However, Shafiqul’s wife Jasmine Begum, alleged that her husband was arrested from the Ilsha Junction area by Sub Inspector Sujon Majhi of Ilsha Investigation Center, on 8 June at around 8.30 pm and later shot to death.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Enforced disappearances***

26. Acts of enforced disappearance continued even during this COVID-19 pandemic. The victims of enforced disappearance were mainly identified as opposition leaders and activists; and dissidents. There are allegations that they were disappeared for political reasons. In many cases, members of the law

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<sup>37</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 13 May 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/more-news/501681>

<sup>38</sup> The daily Manabzamin online version, 18 May 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=227079>

<sup>39</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 9 June 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1661631>

enforcement agencies denied their detention. The disappeared persons were later shown as arrested in a criminal case and handed over to the court. This tendency of law enforcement agencies, to deny the arrest after detention, has become a dangerous issue. Law enforcement officials have denied arrest after abduction in the past as well. Therefore, when members of the law enforcement agencies deny the detention of a disappeared person, it creates extreme anxiety and fear among the victim family members. Although high-ranking officials of the government have repeatedly denied the issue of disappearances, there have been allegations of state security forces being involved in every case of enforced disappearance, and in some cases, evidence has been found.<sup>40</sup> Earlier, BNP central leader Salahuddin Ahmed, who was disappeared, was rescued inside India; and journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajal, who was reported as disappeared, was later detained at the Bangladesh-India border.

27. Every year in the last week of May, organisations consisting of family members of the disappeared, commemorate International Week of the Disappeared in different countries of the world. In Bangladesh too, every year during this week, the families of disappeared persons and human rights defenders associated with Odhikar, jointly organise various programmes, demanding the return of their loved ones. However, this year, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the families of the disappeared could not hold any public events, but they demanded the return of their loved ones through video messages on social media. The children of the victims of enforced disappearances participated in an art exhibition by painting pictures of their disappeared fathers.<sup>41</sup> Odhikar also issued a [joint statement](#) with the Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) to mark this week in solidarity with victim-families.
28. **A total of four persons were allegedly disappeared after being picked up allegedly by members of law enforcement agencies, between April and June 2020. All of them were later shown as arrested under different laws and produced before the court after a few days of disappearance.**

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<sup>40</sup> On 2 March 2017, disappeared victim Mokhesur Rahman Jony's wife Jasmine Nahar Reshma filed a writ petition (No. 2833/2017) before the High Court Division of the Supreme Court. Based on this petition, on 16 May 2017 a High Court Division Bench consisting of Justice Kazi Reza-ul Huq and Justice Mohammad Ullah asked the Chief Judicial Magistrate of Satkhira to submit an inquiry report to the High Court Division by 3 July 2017 regarding the disappearance of homeopathy physician Mokhesur Rahman Jony. A Senior Judicial Magistrate of Satkhira, Habibullah Mahmud, submitted an inquiry report to the High Court Division on 4 July 2017 that found the Superintendent of Police Mohammad Altaf Hossain and former Satkhira Sadar Police Station officer-in-charge Emdadul Huq Sheikh, former Sub-Inspector Himel Hossain, were involved in the arrest of Sheikh Mokhesur Rahman Jony and his subsequent disappearance. It was mentioned in the probe report that the OC Emdadul Huq Sheikh, SI Himel Hossain, were directly involved. (<http://www.newagebd.net/article/19321/>) In another case, Narayanganj District and Sessions Judge Syed Enayet Hossain on 16 January 2017 gave a verdict on the killing of seven persons subsequent their disappearance. 26 accused, including 16 RAB officers and commanding officer RAB-11, Lt. Col. (Retrd) Tareq Sayeed were sentenced to death. (<https://www.jugantor.com/news-archive/first-page/2017/01/17/93821/>)

<sup>41</sup> Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Odhikar.HumanRights/>

29. On 18 April 2020 at noon, Abdul Majed, Joint Secretary of Kushtia District unit Juba Dal and General Secretary of Kushtia Sadar Thana, went to Khazanagar area for some work and he was picked up by eight men claiming to be members of the Detective Branch (DB) of Police, and put in a white microbus. However, the police of the Sadar Police Station and the DB Police denied the arrest of Majed. DB Police officer-in-charge Aminul Islam, said they did not arrest any person named Abdul Majed. According to local sources, on 17 April, more than 100 low-income people blocked the road in Kushtia's Battoil Union, demanding relief. The government officials believe that Juba Dal leader Majed was the support behind the protest.<sup>42</sup> On 20 April, the family members of Majed came to know about his arrest only after Kushtia Sadar Police produced Abdul Majed in a case in Kushtia court.<sup>43</sup>
30. The Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) has claimed that Shafiqul Islam Kajal, a disappeared photojournalist and editor of Pakkhakal magazine, was detained while entering Bangladesh from India at around 12:45 am on 2 May 2020. After that, Kajal was produced in Jashore court on 3 May, showing him as arrested in a case under the Passport Act, 1920 and under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898.<sup>44</sup> Prior to this, on 9 March 2020, Saifuzzaman Shikhar, Member of Parliament belong to the Awami League from Magura-1 constituency, filed a case with Shere Bangla Nagar Police Station at Dhaka under the Digital Security Act, 2018 against the Chief Editor of the daily Manabzamin, Matiur Rahman Chowdhury and its chief reporter Al-Amin, over a report published on 2 March in the daily Manabzamin. He also accused 32 others, including Shafiqul Islam Kajal, who shared the news on Facebook.<sup>45</sup> It is alleged that Shafiqul Islam Kajal was disappeared on 10 March 2020 after leaving home for work.<sup>46</sup>
31. On 6 June 2020, a businessman named Mehedi Morshed Palash (33) was allegedly picked up by men claiming to be members of the law enforcing agency, from near the Kanchpur Bridge in Narayanganj, on his way back home with his new bride. Mehedi Morshed Palash's elder sister Meena Parveen told Odhikar that her younger brother Palash got married to Tanjia Akhter of Mohajerpara in Cox's Bazar on 5 June. After the marriage ceremony, at around 6:00 pm on 5 June, they left for their home in Sirajganj in a rented microbus with the bride Tanjia Akhter, and others. After reaching the Dhaka-bound lane on the eastern slope of Kanchpur Bridge in Narayanganj at around 3:00 am on 6 June,

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<sup>42</sup> The daily Jugantor, 19 April 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/news/299546>

<sup>43</sup> Report sent by local human rights defender associated with Odhikar from Kushtia.

<sup>44</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 3 May 2020;

<sup>45</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 11 March 2020; and Amnesty International, 21 March 2020;

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/cctv-footage-shows-last-whereabouts-of-bangladeshi-journalist-shafiqul-islam-kajol/?fbclid=IwAR2gHPg9HKwiCv7uv6YJiSs7EwGfwQSNfOMLX-DgLfYR24S4clQ1kbPs6g>

<sup>46</sup> Amnesty International, 18 March 2020; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/bangladesh-must-reveal-whereabouts-of-disappeared-journalist-and-end-repression/>

four men in plainclothes stopped their microbus, claiming to be members of the law enforcement agency. All of them had firearms in their hands. They took Palash out and put him in a SUV (Dhaka Metro D 13-7095) which was parked further away. After the incident, the family contacted Kanchpur Highway Police Outpost, Sonargaon Police Station, Bandar Police Station, Siddhirganj Police Station, RAB-10 and 11 and the Office of the Superintendent of Police in Narayanganj. However, Palash was not found. On 18 June, a General Diary, numbered 604, was lodged with Narayanganj Sadar Police Station in regard to this incident. On 24 June, Mehedi Morshed Palash was showed as arrested in a sabotage case, and handed over to Dakshinkhan Police Station in Dhaka by RAB-1.<sup>47</sup>

32. In the evening of 13 June 2020, Mohammad Ibrahim Khalil, General Secretary of Deyara Union unit Chhatra Dal of Jashore Sadar Upazila and his friend Ripon Hossain were allegedly picked up by plain clothed law enforcers in a microbus from Lauzani Bazar. When people in the market tried to stop them, the men said they were members of the law enforcement agencies and threatened to shoot. After receiving the news, the family members of Ibrahim Khalil contacted the law enforcement agencies at different levels, however, they all denied the arrest. When Ibrahim Khalil's relatives went to Jhikargachha and Monirampur Police Stations to file a General Diary (GD), the police harassed them without taking the GD. When the police finally agreed to take the GD, Ibrahim Khalil's mother Nurjahan Begum lodged a GD numbered 604 with Jhikargachha Police Station on 16 June.<sup>48</sup> On 18 June, Ibrahim Khalil and his friend Ripon Hossain were shown as arrested at Monirampur Police Station in two separate cases under the Arms Act, 1878 and for robbery.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Torture and ill-treatment of law enforcement agencies***

33. Many members of the law enforcement agencies have been infected with the coronavirus while performing their professional duties. Several of them have also died. Even in this pandemic, allegations of torture, illegal detention, harassment, extortion by threats of death in crossfire; and degrading treatment were found against members of the law enforcement agencies. These officers have become reckless due to the impunity they enjoy, as a section of law enforcement agencies are apparently being used to suppress political opponents, government critics and dissidents. Although there are frequent cases of torture and degrading treatment of citizens in the country, very few of them have been made public. The incidents are concealed by intimidating the victims and/or forcing them to compromise. There are allegations that Awami League leaders and activists are allegedly involved with members of law enforcement

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<sup>47</sup> Report sent by local human rights defender associated with Odhikar from Sirajganj

<sup>48</sup> The daily Jugantor, 18 June 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/317273/>; Information gathered by Odhikar.

<sup>49</sup> The daily Jugantor, 20 June 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/city/317677/>



agencies.<sup>50</sup> The families of the victims of torture or ill-treatment are facing harassment and threats by members of law enforcement agencies after filing cases against the perpetrators. Even if the crime is proven, in most cases the perpetrators in the law enforcement agencies are being transferred or ‘closed’ instead of being tried as criminals in a competent court of law. Due to the efforts and pressure of human rights defenders, the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act was passed in 2013. But due to various obstacles, the torture victims or the victim-families are not able to file cases under this law; and if cases are filed, they almost always forced to withdraw them due to fear of reprisals.

34. International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, declared by the United Nations, is observed every year on 26 June in different countries of the world. Odhikar in collaboration with the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) issued a [joint statement](#) to pay tribute to torture victims and stand in solidarity with the victims and their families. Furthermore, human rights defenders associated with Odhikar, along with the local people, victims and their families, organised rallies and human chains in different districts of the country in solidarity with those who have been subjected to various forms of torture, cruel and inhumane treatment.



<sup>50</sup> Bangladesh Pratidin, 8 June 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/last-page/2020/06/08/536847>



*Human rights defenders associated with Odhikar organised rallies and human chains in different districts to mark the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. Photo: Odhikar*

35. A CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver named Mannan (40) died on 29 April 2020 after returning from police custody at Ghorashal under Palash Upazila in Narsingdi District. According to the relatives of the deceased, Mannan was arrested and beaten by the police of Ghorashal Police Outpost on the allegation of stealing, as he came out on the road with his auto-rickshaw during the lockdown due to COVID-19. Later he died due to torture. Angered by the incident, relatives of the deceased and local auto-rickshaw drivers blocked the road in protest.<sup>51</sup>
36. Nikhil Talukder, a farmer from Ramshil Village in Kotalipara under Gopalganj District, died on 4 June 2020 while undergoing treatment at the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR)<sup>52</sup> in Dhaka, due to police torture. Nikhil Talukder's wife Eti Talukder said that on 2 June, Nikhil was playing cards with his friends, sitting near the bridge in Ramshil Bazar. At that time, Assistant Sub Inspector (ASI) Shamim Hasan of Kotalipara Police Station appeared and started taking video footage with his cell phone. Seeing this, the others ran away but ASI Shamim arrested Nikhil and started beating him. At one stage, Nikhil was seriously injured when ASI Shamim damaged Nikhil's back with his knee, fracturing bones. Nikhil was first admitted to Barisal Medical College Hospital. When his condition deteriorated, he was shifted to NITOR in Dhaka and died on 4 June.<sup>53</sup> On 7 June, Nikhil's younger brother Montu Talukder filed a murder case against ASI Shamim Hasan and police informer Mohammad Rezaul at Kotalipara Police Station. On 8 June, Kotalipara police produced Shamim Hasan and Rezaul in the Judicial Magistrate's Court in Gopalganj and the Judge Kanchan Kumar Kundu ordered them to be sent to jail.<sup>54</sup> People of the locality carried out public programmes to protest the torture and death of Nikhil. However, a meeting was held at the Kotalipara Upazila Chairman's office on 7 June to decide how to conceal the

<sup>51</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 1 May 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1654141>

<sup>52</sup> The National Institute of Traumatology & Orthopaedic Rehabilitation is an orthopaedic hospital and undergraduate & post-graduate institute in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka, Bangladesh. It was established in 1972 by the Government of Bangladesh as the Shaheed Suhrawardy Hospital

<sup>53</sup> Bangla Tribune, 7 June 2020; <https://www.banglatribune.com/country/news/626983>

<sup>54</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 8 June 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1661511/>

incident. Local Awami League leaders, including Awami League-backed Upazila Chairman Bimal Biswas, Awami League-backed local mayor and the officer-in-charge of the police station tried to dissuade Nikhil's wife Eti Talukder, by telling her that she would be provided with five hundred thousand taka and a job. Two hundred thousand taka has been paid to her to date.<sup>55</sup>



*Deceased Nikhil Talukder. Photo: Bangla Tribune, 7 June 2020*

37. Members of the Detective Branch (DB) of Police have been accused of illegally detaining a young man named Zulfiqar Amit (30) from his home in Pallabi, Dhaka on 10 June 2020. Amit returned from India with a higher degree in Mass Communication and Journalism. He is known to have written on social media, blogs and online. Amit's mother Julia Fahad said that on 10 June at noon, the police from Pallabi Police Station came to their house to check the information of the tenant registration form and talked to Amit. Later in the evening, the security guard of the house informed that the police had come to the house and wanted to talk to Amit again. When Amit went downstairs, he was taken away in a car. When the security guard informed her about this, she ran downstairs and saw Amit being taken away in a black jeep. When she called on Amit's cell phone, a stranger answered and said that they were taking Amit to the DB Office at Mintu Road, Dhaka. Since then, Amit's cell phone had been found switched off. When his family members contacted some officials of Pallabi Police Station and the DB Office about this, they all denied the arrest of Amit.<sup>56</sup> Later on 11 June, Amit's mother went to the DB Office and Amit was returned to her. Amit's mother refuses to talk of the incident.<sup>57</sup>
38. It has been alleged that both kidneys of a college student named Imran Hossain were damaged due to police torture in Jashore Sadar Upazila. Imran Hossain, who is undergoing treatment at the hospital, said that in the evening of 3 June, he was returning home from Sabua Bazar area of Chaugachha Upazila under

<sup>55</sup> Bangladesh Protidin, 8 June 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/last-page/2020/06/08/536847>

<sup>56</sup> The daily Desh Rupantor, 11 June 2020; <https://www.deshrupantor.com/capital/2020/06/11/223868>

<sup>57</sup> Information gathered by Odhikar



Jashore District on public transport. When the vehicle reached the front of Jashore University of Science and Technology, the policemen of Sajiali Outpost stopped it and started searching the bag of a boy sitting next to Imran. Fearing the police, Imran got out and ran. Police chased him for about two kilometers and arrested him. He was then severely beaten by police and as a result, he fell unconscious. When he regained consciousness, he saw that he had been taken to a pharmacy in Ambattala market. The police then arrested him after ‘finding’ Ganja in his pocket. Imran’s father Neshar Ali said that on 3 June at 6:30 pm, the police called him from Imran’s cell phone and asked him to go to a pharmacy in Ambattala market. When he got there, the police demanded Tk. 30,000 to release Imran. Later, the police released Imran for Tk 6,000. Police threatened to torture Imran after taking him into remand, if he told anyone about the incident. Imran fell seriously ill that night and was admitted to Jashore General Hospital in the morning of 4 June. He was later admitted to a private hospital (Queen’s Hospital) when his condition deteriorated. Jashore General Hospital doctor Ubaidul Qadir said that the condition of Imran Hossain’s kidneys was very bad. He has already had to commence dialysis. A three-member inquiry committee, headed by Additional Superintendent of Police Golam Rabbani Sheikh, has been formed to look into this incident.<sup>58</sup> Following a Writ Petition, filed on 23 June 2020, a virtual bench of Justice JBM Hasan of the High Court Division of the Supreme Court asked the Civil Surgeon of Jashore and the Superintendent of Police (SP) to inform about the physical condition of Imran and to submit a report by 28 June on the investigation into the incident.<sup>59</sup> On 28 June, the High Court directed the Jashore Civil Surgeon to submit a report to it on 5 July after conducting a dope test on Imran. The High Court also directed the SP in Jashore to submit a copy of his investigation report on the custodial torture on next hearing on 5 July.<sup>60</sup>



*College student Imarn Hossain under treatment at Queen’s Hospital in Chittagong. Photo: Prothom Alo, 9 June 2020*

<sup>58</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 9 June 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1661672/>

<sup>59</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 23 June 2020; <https://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=232497> ; The Daily Star, 24 June 2020; <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/police-brutality-hc-seeks-health-inquiry-reports-jashores-imran-1919457>

<sup>60</sup> New Age, 29 June 2020; <https://www.newagebd.net/article/109760/hc-seeks-civil-surgeon-report-on-drug-test-of-torture-victim>



39. In the morning of 10 June 2020, Constables Selim and Sohag, led by Sub Inspector Biswajit of Sharankhola Police Station in Bagerhat District, went to arrest a garment worker named Swapan Mia in a case filed over a family dispute. Police dragged sleeping Swapan out of bed, beat him, and dragged him to the street. After that, police took him to the police station and tortured him till he became unconscious. He was later admitted to Khulna Medical College Hospital with serious injuries. Swapan's brother Halim said Swapan had given a description of the torture on him to the Additional Superintendent of Police, Reazul Islam. After that, they agreed to settle the matter on the proposal of the Officer-in-Charge of Sharankhola Police Station. In this incident, three policemen have been 'closed' in the Bagerhat Police Line. Additional Superintendent of Police Reazul Islam said that there was a 'misunderstanding' between the police and Swapan during the investigation and the action was taken after Swapan said that he had no complaints against the police.<sup>61</sup>

### ***Human rights violations in prisons***

40. The total capacity of 13 central jails and 55 district jails across the country is 41,314. However, as of 30 June, there were 71,682 prisoners in the country's prisons.<sup>62</sup> Several prisoners have been infected with COVID-19 due to overcrowding and lack of proper sanitation in prisons. As of 10 May, at least 23 inmates in different jails across the country have been infected with the coronavirus. In addition, 64 prison guards and officials, and 249 inmates have been quarantined for showing Coronavirus-like symptoms and coming in contact with COVID-19 patients.<sup>63</sup> As a result, the rest of the inmates are at high risk of this infection. On 10 May 2020, an under trial prisoner died in Sylhet Central Jail<sup>64</sup> and another under trial prisoner named Mohammad Anukul Islam died in Mymensingh Central Jail on 22 June due to COVID-19 infection.<sup>65</sup> In response to demands from various quarters, the government released 2,884 convicted prisoners who were serving small sentences, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection.<sup>66</sup> This number is negligible compared to the total number of prisoners.

41. At present, there is a lack of medical treatment and a huge shortage of physicians in the prisons. As a result, most prisoners are being deprived from the right to health. Meanwhile, in the midst of the pandemic, 400 prison patients suffering from complex diseases, were taken to different hospitals in Dhaka for treatment and follow-up, but the concerned hospitals did not accept them.

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<sup>61</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 15 June 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/bangla-diganta/508439/>

<sup>62</sup> Bangladesh Jail, available at: <https://prison.com.bd/>

<sup>63</sup> The Daily Star, 11 May 2020; <https://www.thedailystar.net/coronavirus-live-update-23-prison-guards-2-inmates-test-covid-19-positive-1901596>

<sup>64</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 12 May 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=226135&cat=9>

<sup>65</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 23 June 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=232560&cat=43/>

<sup>66</sup> Bangladesh Protidin, 10 May 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/city/2020/05/10/528792>

Although there is a 172-bed hospital inside Dhaka Central Jail, there are not enough medical facilities. The hospital is run by a physician, a nurse and a pharmacist. There is no specialist doctor. Furthermore, two of the jail hospital's three oxygen cylinders were damaged. An X-ray machine was brought in but it has not been installed yet and there is no technician to operate it.<sup>67</sup>

**42. From April to June 2010, 16 inmates died in jail, allegedly due to 'illnesses'.**

## Political Violence and Criminalisation

43. Even in the midst of this pandemic, the criminal activities of the leaders and activists of the ruling political party continued. During this reporting period, citizens were killed and injured in attacks by Awami League leaders and activists. There were other cases of fatalities, as the ruling party men have been involved in clashes with each other over establishing supremacy in areas; and due to internal conflicts. They were seen using various lethal weapons including firearms. The cutting off of a leg of a person from a rival group also occurred, in a violent altercation between the two groups of the ruling party. A Faridpur district unit Awami League leader was arrested with a large quantity of firearms and other illegal items for allegedly attacking an opponent's house due to internal conflicts.<sup>68</sup> There are also allegations of corruption and embezzlement in COVID-19 relief distribution, against leaders of the ruling party. Moreover, there were also clashes between the two groups of the ruling party over the distribution of relief. In addition, a person who had been convicted with the capital sentence for murder, was fully pardoned by the President before being executed and later released from prison- after which he again became involved in violence and murder.

**44. From April to June 2020, at least 20 people were killed and 549 injured in political violence. Furthermore, 42 incidents of internal violence in the Awami League were recorded during this period. 11 persons were killed and 441 were injured in internal conflicts within the Awami League.**

45. On 12 April 2020, clashes erupted between supporters of Zillur Rahman, Chairman of Krishnanagar Union Parishad and President of the Union unit Awami League, and Kausar Molla, a senior member of the Union unit Awami League, over establishing supremacy in the area. During the clash, supporters of Kausar Molla cut off a leg of one of Zillur Rahman's supporters, Mubarak Mia (45), and took out a joyous procession. Police later arrested Zillur Rahman and Kausar Molla.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The daily Jugantor, 7 May 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/last-page/304930/>

<sup>68</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 22 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/last-page/497245/>

<sup>69</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 13 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/chattagram/495447/>



*Arrested Zillur Rahman and Kausar Molla. Photo: Naya Diganta, 13 April 2020*

46. On 19 April 2020, a group of miscreants led by Mehrab Hossain Bhutto, General Secretary of Chashirhat Union unit Awami League, set fire to three shops of Haji Super Market in Kabilpur Uttarpara under Sonaimuri Upazila in Noakhali District due to previous enmity. When one of the shop owners, Rahat Hossain, arrived after receiving information that his shop was on fire, miscreants attacked him and beat him to death. Police later arrested Mehrab Hossain Bhutto and one Mohin Uddin.<sup>70</sup>
47. On 21 April 2020, a man named Shahid Matubbar was killed in a clash between supporters of Awami League Presidium Member Kazi Zafarullah and supporters of Nixon Chowdhury, the younger brother of chief whip of the Awami League and MP of Faridpur-4 constituency, in Laxmipur Village of Manikdaha Union under Faridpur District.<sup>71</sup> Shahjahan Matubbar filed a case with Bhanga Police Station against 54 people, including Awami League leader Aslam Fakir.<sup>72</sup> It is to be mentioned that on 25 September 2003, Faridpur District and Sessions Judge's Court sentenced former president of Bhanga Upazila unit Juba League, Aslam Fakir, including two other accused, Tara Mridha and Imarat Ali, to death, for killing AKM Shahed Ali Mia, Chairman of Manikdah Union Parishad under Bhanga Upazila in Faridpur. The sentence was upheld in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. On 19 May 2013, Aslam Fakir pleaded guilty to the murder and begged the President for his life. His plea was rejected on 13 October 2014 and his execution was scheduled for 13 November the same year. However, his execution was postponed due to "unhealthy" and "abnormal" behavior, a day before the execution. On the same day, Aslam Fakir appealed to the President again for clemency. The President granted his request for clemency and he was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment. On 26 March 2015, Independence Day, the then Awami League MP appealed for his release

<sup>70</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 22 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/last-page/497245/>

<sup>71</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 21 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1652247/>

<sup>72</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 25 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/last-page/497880/>

on the occasion of general amnesty for the prisoners. On 25 August 2017, Aslam Fakir was acquitted and released from the High Security Jail in Gazipur. After his release from prison, Aslam Fakir returned to the area and became active in violent politics again.<sup>73</sup>

48. On 16 May 2020, incidents of attack, vandalism, arson and beating took place at the house of Faridpur District unit Awami League President Advocate Subal Chandra Saha. On 7 June, police arrested nine people, including Faridpur city unit Awami League General Secretary Sajjad Hossain Barkat and his younger brother Imtiaz Hasan Rubel, on allegations of their involvement in this incident. Police later searched their offices, homes and rest houses and recovered seven firearms, including pistols, shotguns, 90 rounds of bullets, and 29 hundred thousand taka, Indian Rupees and US dollars. During this search, the Food Department also seized 1200 sacks of rice and various drugs.<sup>74</sup>

## Public Lynching

49. In the last three months, people continued to be killed in public lynching. A dysfunctional justice delivery system, impunity of law enforcement agencies and corruption have eroded people's confidence in state and constitutional institutions. As a result, there has been a growing tendency among the people to take the law into their own hands.
50. **At least 11 persons were killed in public lynching between April and June 2020.**
51. On 15 May 2020, a day laborer named Prashant Roy (40) was beaten to death by a mob in Parashuna area of Sholla Union under Nawabganj Upazila in Dhaka District. The deceased Prashant Roy was a resident of Saghata Upazila in Gaibandha District. According to the locals, Prashant was working as a day laborer in the area.<sup>75</sup>

## Death Penalty

52. The death penalty is still in force in Bangladesh. The courts remained closed, from 29 March to 30 May due to the outbreak of the COVID-19. Although the government offices reopened on 31 May, courts are still closed and court proceedings have taken place online. **In the three months from April to June 2020, no one was sentenced with the death penalty, but one person was executed.**

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<sup>73</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 25 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/last-page/497880/>

<sup>74</sup> BanglaNews24.com, 8 June 2020; <https://www.banglanews24.com/politics/news/bd/792857.details>

<sup>75</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 16 May 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=226851>

53. According to a report by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP), Captain (Retd.) Abdul Majed, who was on death row, in connection with the murder of former President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family members, was arrested on 6 April 2020 from Gabtoli area of Dhaka. On 8 April, Dhaka District and Sessions Judge M Helal Chowdhury ordered the issuance of a death warrant for Abdul Majed. On the same day, he appealed to the President for mercy. On 11 April, Majed's execution was carried out by hanging at the Dhaka Central Jail, after the President rejected his request for clemency.<sup>76</sup>

## Constitutional and State Institutions

54. The Awami League government has pushed the country towards a terrible crisis by controlling and politicizing the constitutional and state institutions. Citizens are being deprived from good governance and the degree of human rights violations has increased as the state institutions have become subservient bodies to the government.

### *National Human Rights Commission*

55. Citizens of different walks of life in the country are being sued and arrested under the Digital Security Act 2018, for expressing different views on Facebook, and criticizing the government for failing to take appropriate action to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite widespread government repression on citizens' freedom of expression, the current National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of Bangladesh has not been seen to play any role. Furthermore, the NHRC remained silent on the issues of human rights violations, despite widespread acts of human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture. It is to be mentioned that on 22 September 2019, the government appointed five new NHRC members, including former Senior Government Secretary Nasima Begum as the Chairperson of the NHRC and former Secretary Dr. Kamal Uddin Ahmed as a full-time member. The Commission has been accused of various controversial activities and of being subservient to the government, as in the past. On 24 June 2020, a bench comprising of Justice Sheikh Hassan Arif and Justice Rajik Al Jalil of the High Court Division of the Supreme Court, passed a judgment on a Writ Petition filed in 2013 regarding violence against a housemaid named Khadija in Mirpur, Dhaka.<sup>77</sup> The High Court commented that, "The National Human Rights Commission has shown extreme incompetence in fulfilling its responsibilities to prevent human rights violations, and the Commission is

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<sup>76</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 12 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1650240/>

<sup>77</sup> In 2013, Khadija, a housemaid, became victim of domestic violence in Mirpur, Dhaka. The incident was reported in a national newspaper. A letter was sent to the National Human Rights Commission on behalf of the Children's Charity Foundation along with the report. On 22 December 2018, Barrister Abdul Halim, Chairman of the Children's Charity Foundation, filed a Writ Petition at the High Court, five years after no action was taken by the NHRC.



sleeping with eyes wide open”. Furthermore, the High Court also gave some directives to make the NHRC an effective body.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Widespread corruption and Anti-Corruption Commission***

56. In the name of ‘development, looting, corruption in the banking sector, illegal trade, tender bidding, extortion, money laundering and stock market manipulation, as well as the embezzlement of relief allocated for country’s poor, have reportedly been carried out by the political leaders and party workers amid the COVID-19 pandemic. There are also allegations that many local government representatives are involved in the embezzlement of relief. It is to be noted that in the local government elections, in most voting areas, local Awami League leaders became the people’s representatives by depriving the people from their right to vote.
57. On 2 April 2020, Raninagar Upazila administration recovered 138 sacks of government rice (under a Vulnerable Group Development Programme) and more than 200 empty sacks from the house of Ayat Ali, a member of the Kaligram Union Awami League’s advisory council in Raninagar under Naogaon District.<sup>79</sup> The local people protested in Jashore on 2 April<sup>80</sup> and on 29 April in Narayanganj and Dinajpur demanding relief. They alleged that relief was being looted and they were not receiving any.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, on 29 April, the upazila administration recovered 1200 sacks of rice in a raid from the warehouse of Javed Bhuiyan, General Secretary of Madanpur Union unit Juba League<sup>82</sup> in Bandar Upazila of Narayanganj.<sup>83</sup> Due to COVID-19, a special facility called OMS (Open Market Sale)<sup>84</sup> has been introduced for the marginalized people of the country such as beggars, vagrants, and the extremely poor and low-income people who are not included in any social safety net. However, the list of OMS cardholders includes the names of 91 relatives, including 13 family members of Mohammad Shah Alam, Brahmanbaria District unit Awami League secretary for industry and commerce and director of the Brahmanbaria District Chamber of Commerce and Industries. According to the locals, all the relatives of Shah Alam are financially well off.<sup>85</sup>
58. On 19 May 2020, the EXIM Bank authority filed a case with Gulshan Police Station against Rono Haque Sikder, Managing Director of Sikder Group, and his brother Dipu Haque Sikder, alleging that they had harassed and attempted to

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<sup>78</sup> THE BUSINESS STANDARD, 24 June 2020; <https://tbsnews.net/bangladesh/court/national-human-rights-commission-sleeping-eyes-open-high-court-97513#.XvMuoz33YM.facebook>

<sup>79</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 3 April 2020; <https://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=220308>

<sup>80</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 3 April 2020;

<sup>81</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 30 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/more-news/498928/>

<sup>82</sup> Youth wing of Awami League

<sup>83</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 1 May 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/last-page/499177/>

<sup>84</sup> OMS cardholders will get 20 kg of rice at the rate of Tk 10/kg per month.

<sup>85</sup> BDnews24.com, 11 May 2020; <https://bangla.bdnews24.com/samagrabangladesh/article1757438.bdnews>

shoot and kill two top officials, including the bank's Managing Director Mohammad Haider Ali Mia, over a loan of BDT 5 billion. Despite the case pending against them, Rono Haque Sikder and Dipu Haque Sikder left Dhaka for Bangkok on 25 May by their own air ambulance, with the help of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>86</sup> It is to be noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the air traffic was closed at that time. The Director of Shahjalal International Airport, Group Captain AHM Touhid Ul Ahsan said that no aircraft operates now without the approval of the Foreign Ministry.<sup>87</sup> The Sikder family has huge assets in major cities around the world, including in Las Vegas and has reportedly invested large amounts of money illegally in various countries. According to the policy of Bangladesh Bank, there is no opportunity to take money abroad for investment without the approval of the Central Bank. Sikder Group is known to be close to the ruling Awami League government. Parvin Haque Sikder, daughter of the Chairman of Sikder Group, Zainul Haque Sikder, is a Member of Parliament belonging to Awami League in the reserved seat for women. The Sikder Group's business began to flourish in 2009. Since then, the condition of the National Bank owned by them has been deteriorating and their assets begun to increase abroad after the National Bank came under their full control. They were also given multiple new power projects.<sup>88</sup>

59. Acts of widespread looting and corruption in the health sector continue despite the pandemic. Patients infected with Coronavirus have been dying from the lack of adequate intensive care units (ICU) since the outbreak of COVID-19. In this situation, face masks were sent to various hospitals across the country for doctors, from the Central Medical Stores Depot (CMSD). However, the director of Khulna Medical College Hospital, Dr. Manjur Morshed, was transferred and the director of Mugda 500-bed General Hospital, Dr. Shahid Mohammad Sadiqul Islam, was made Officer on Special Duty (OSD) as they complained and refused to accept the masks, saying they were of poor quality. An official of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), who wished to remain anonymous, said that a powerful section of the Department of Health, including the Health Ministry, was involved in the mask corruption. Thus, the doctors who were talking about these issues have been transferred and punished by being made OSD.<sup>89</sup> Meanwhile, according to the data available till 13 June, the total death toll from COVID-19 in the country was 1.34 percent. However, this rate is almost threefold among the physicians. According to the Bangladesh Medical Association, as of 27 June, 56 doctors have died due to Coronavirus. From the very beginning, there has been negligence and indifference towards

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<sup>86</sup> On 23 May, the Bangladesh Embassy in Thailand sent a letter to Thai Foreign Ministry, requesting a permission to land the air ambulance in Thailand. The landing was allowed on the same day. Then a letter was sent to the Thai Embassy in Dhaka requesting for medical visas for the two. They were given visas on 24 May and left Dhaka on 25 May.

<sup>87</sup> DW.com, 29 May 2020; <https://www.dw.com/bn/এমন-কাগুর-পর-দুই-সিকদার-ঢাকা-ছাড়লেন-কিভাবে/a-53620551>

<sup>88</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 9 June 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/economy/article/1661561/>

<sup>89</sup> Bangladesh Pratidin, 29 April 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/last-page/2020/04/30/525616>

the need for COVID 19 protection for doctors.<sup>90</sup> The doctors had said that the PPE and masks provided were of very poor quality; treating a Coronavirus infection patient using these PPE and masks would put them at high risk. In this situation, the doctors of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital have personally collected masks and PPE. It was learnt that the Minister for Health has family ties with the concerned contractors who supply the masks.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health took an initiative to purchase various protective equipment including PPE, ventilators, masks, goggles for doctors and health workers with the loan money taken from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The budget allocated for purchasing this equipment is two to four times higher than the current market price. In addition, during the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe, where there is a need to pay close attention to medical equipment, the DGHS is more inclined towards other sectors such as website development, seminars-conferences, software, and making audio-video films. Meanwhile, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) has approved two projects on emergency assistance in dealing with the Coronavirus. The Planning Commission has put an objection to the cost of the two projects, but it did not help.<sup>92</sup> In view of the huge toll on the doctors and nurses, the government has appointed 5,054 nurses to carry out the medical activities in the hospitals dedicated to COVID-19 patients. This information was given in a press release of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on 7 May. Regrettably, the recruited nurses are being sent to hospitals where there is no corona unit, in exchange for bribes, instead of being sent to the COVID-19 specialized hospitals.<sup>93</sup>

60. Despite widespread corruption in the country, the Anti Corruption Commission has not taken any effective action against the ruling party leaders and activists, government officials, businessmen and individuals affiliated with the government.

## Labour Rights

61. In the last three months from April to June, workers in both the formal and informal sectors have faced various human rights violations, including livelihood crises.

### ***Situation of readymade garment industry and other formal sector***

62. Incidents of closing down factories without notice, termination of workers in the readymade garment sector and other formal sectors and non-payment of wages

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<sup>90</sup> The daily Kaler Kantha, 14 June 2020; <https://www.kalerkantho.com/print-edition/first-page/2020/06/14/922675>

<sup>91</sup> Bangladesh Protidin, 22 June 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/first-page/2020/04/18/521798>

<sup>92</sup> The daily Kaler Kanta, 4 June 2020; <https://www.kalerkantho.com/print-edition/first-page/2020/06/04/918961>

<sup>93</sup> The daily Jugantor, 20 May 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/city/308872>



occurred amid the COVID-19 pandemic and this has resulted in labour unrest in this sector. In addition to garment factories, workers in sugar mills, textile mills, tea gardens, spinning mills, hatcheries and jute mills have staged protests in various parts of the country demanding payments of arrears and wages. Police and criminals, backed by factory owners, attacked workers. The police also filed false cases against the workers and arrested them.

63. When the government announced a general holiday from 26 March to 4 April to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus, garment factory workers left for their village homes. In the meantime, despite the deteriorating situation, the BGMEA<sup>94</sup> decided to reopen the factories, which forced workers from all over the country to reach their workplaces by any means possible, even on foot, due to closure of public transport.<sup>95</sup> The workers said that the factory authorities had sent messages to their cell phones that they would be out of employment if they did not join the workplace by the morning of 5 April.<sup>96</sup> However, the government closed the factories again after the workers returned. Although the factories were supposed to be closed as per the government's 'holiday' announcement, workers were forced to work in many factories. At that time, the issue of maintaining physical distance had been neglected. As a result, workers were put at risk. It is believed a large number of workers in the ready-made garment and other industries have been infected with the Coronavirus. As of 9 June, 313 garment workers in 153 factories had been infected with the virus.<sup>97</sup> Workers who left home without joining work have been laid off. During this period, about 10,000 workers of various garment factories in Dhaka, Ashulia, Savar, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Chittagong were terminated due to non-attendance at work.<sup>98</sup> According to Rubana Haque, President of BGMEA, the retrenchment of garment factories will start from June. However, Garment Workers Trade Union Center sources said that about 70,000 workers have already been laid off in the country. Besides, BKMEA<sup>99</sup> has said that in the next few months, about 25 per cent of the workers in the garment sector will be laid off in the current situation.<sup>100</sup> Many owners of garment factories are at the top of the money laundering game through back-to-back LCs or debentures, while factories laid off workers and did not pay them. The Global Financial Integrity (GFI) fears that if this trend continues, money laundering from the country will exceed USD 14.13 billion by 2030.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporters Association

<sup>95</sup> The daily Jugantor, 4 April 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/covid-19/295662/>

<sup>96</sup> The daily Jugantor, 4 April 2020' <https://www.jugantor.com/covid-19/295671/>

<sup>97</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 9 June 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=230406>

<sup>98</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 13 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/economy/article/1650611/>

<sup>99</sup> Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association

<sup>100</sup> The daily Jugantor, 6 June 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/second-edition/313043/>

<sup>101</sup> Bangladesh Protidin, 14 June 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/first-page/2020/06/14/538657>



*Workers returning to Dhaka on foot. Photo: Jugantor, 4 April 2020*



*Thousands of people at the Shimulia ferry terminal in Munshiganj returning to work. Photo: Prothom Alo, 5 April 2020*



*The garment factories have started production with the risk of coronavirus. The government has repeatedly called for maintaining social distance on the way back and forth; but the picture says the opposite. Garment workers traveling in BSCIC area of Fatullah in Narayanganj. Photo: Ittefaq, 2 June 2020.*

- 64. From April to June 2020, two readymade garment (RMG) factory workers died when they fell under a moving truck while crossing the road to escape the police attack during a protest. Furthermore, 84 workers were injured by the**



**police, and 21 workers were injured by factory authorities when the workers demonstration for payment of their arrears.**

65. Although the government announced a 'general holiday' in the garment factory sector from 26 March to 4 April 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities of a garment factory named Crown Wars (Pvt.) Ltd. in Bhaluka under Mymensingh District, forced the workers to join work. On 5 April, the factory authorities laid off more than 500 workers for not joining work at that time. On 6 April, the workers came to join work and saw a notice in front of the gate stating that the factory was closed. The workers demanded their salary for the month of March, but the factory authorities refused to pay it. When the workers blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway in protest, the police baton charged and threw tear gas shells and fired rubber bullets at them. 25 people were injured in this incident. Apart from the police, men of the factory authorities also attacked the workers. Harun ur Rashid, a worker at the Crown Wars (Pvt.) Ltd, and Jewel, a worker at Square Fashion, were killed when they fell under a moving truck while crossing the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway to escape the attack. While taking pictures of the attack, the men of the factory authorities snatched away the cell phone, camera and identity card of a local correspondent of the daily Jugantar newspaper, Zahirul Islam Jewel.<sup>102</sup>



*Police clashed with garment workers near Postagola Bridge in the Capital when workers were on protest demanding arrears. Photo: Bangladesh Protidin, 20 May 2020*

<sup>102</sup> The daily Jugantor, 7 April 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/last-page/296287/>



*Policemen charge on women garment workers who blockaded the Dhaka-Mawa highway demanding arrears.  
Photo: Daily Star, 21 May 2020*

66. On 1 April 2020, more than 150 workers of the Rajbari Jute Mill staged a protest in Rajbari against the closure of the mill without paying their dues.<sup>103</sup> On 5 April, workers of Sonargaon Textile Mill in Barishal staged a protest on the Barishal-Patuakhali highway demanding payment of their arrears. Although all the mills were closed due to the outbreak of the Coronavirus, the activities of Sonargaon Textile Mill were still on. The workers worked there amid risk, but the authorities did not pay them for two months.<sup>104</sup> On 19 April, workers of Kaliti Tea Garden at Kulaura in Moulvibazar marched in a rally to demand payment of their arrears. According to the workers, the Kaliti Tea Garden was leased from the government by Jobeda Tea Company Limited. The daily wage of each worker is only 102 Taka. The workers have not been paid for three months even though they are supposed to be paid every week. In this situation, the family members of the workers were spending their days in extreme hardship.<sup>105</sup> On 21 April, the workers of Faridpur Sugar Mill staged a protest demanding three months' wages and allowances<sup>106</sup> and on 26 April, the workers of the sugar mills in Shyampur of Rangpur and Rangpur Sugar Mill in Mahimaganj of Gaibandha staged a protest demanding four months' wages and allowances. The workers said that they are living a miserable life with their families due to lack of salary.<sup>107</sup>

<sup>103</sup> The daily Jugantor, 2 April 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/bangla-face/295012/>

<sup>104</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 5 April 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=220630>

<sup>105</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 19 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1651865/>

<sup>106</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 21 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1652274/>

<sup>107</sup> The daily Jugantor, 27 April 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/news/302013/>





Workers of Kaliti Tea Garden in Moulvibazar demanding their arrears. Photo; Prothom Alo, 19 April 2020



Sugarcane farmers and workers protest at the main gate of Faridpur Sugar Mill in Madhukhali, demanding arrears of wages and allowances. Photo: Ittefaq, 7 May 2020

67. On 30 May 2020, 254 workers of Medlar Apparels Ltd were attacked by the police during a human chain and hunger strike organised by the Garment Workers Front Industrial Committee, in protest of the termination of workers, in front of Ashulia Press Club at Ashulia under Dhaka District. Police arrested factory workers Ataur Rahman and Moksed from the spot. Ataur Rahman and Moksed were later granted bail by the court.<sup>108</sup>

### ***Closure of the state-owned jute mills***

68. The government has decided to close all state-owned jute mills due to the mismanagement, irregularities and corruption, that has caused huge loss in this sector for years.<sup>109</sup> Textiles and Jute Minister Golan Dastagir Gazi said that the

<sup>108</sup> Bangladesh Protidin, 31 May 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/city/2020/05/31/534497>

<sup>109</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 29 June 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=233200&cat=2/>

state-owned jute mills would be run under private management. The minister further stated that the government is thinking of ways to take the jute sector forward by re-opening these mills by paying all the money through golden handshake to 24,886 permanent workers in 25 jute mills. The Jute Minister also said that their dues would be paid by next September.<sup>110</sup> However, Textile and Jute Secretary Lokman Hossain Mia said that 8,954 jute mill workers have retired since 2013. Due to the financial crisis, it was not possible to pay their retirement benefits. Meanwhile, the workers continue to protest, demanding the arrears of wages and implementation of the 2015 Wage Commission.<sup>111</sup>



*Workers of Asha Jute Mill at Nuritala area in Chandina upazila of Comilla blocked the Dhaka-Chittagong highway demanding arrears of salary. Photo: Prothom Alo, 6 April 2020*

### ***Workers in the informal sectors***

69. Workers in the informal sector, including construction workers, who lost their jobs in the COVID-19 pandemic, have been living in poverty with their families. There are at least 3.5 million construction workers across the country, including Dhaka. Among them, about 1.2 million workers work in Dhaka city.<sup>112</sup> There are many women workers employed for road construction work and brick chipping in the area. According to the workers, they are living at almost starvation level with their families, but so far they have not received any relief from the government. Abdur Razzak, General Secretary of the Building Construction Workers Union of Bangladesh, said they had appealed to the Deputy Commissioner for Dhaka District to help the construction workers. However, there was no response.<sup>113</sup> More than seven million road transport workers lost their jobs when public transport was shutdown on 26 March after the

<sup>110</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 29 June 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/first-page/511676/>

<sup>111</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 29 June 2020; <https://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=233133&cat=1/>

<sup>112</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 30 April 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/last-page/498953/>

<sup>113</sup> Ibid



government announced a 'general holiday'. Public transport has started to operate again since 31 May. During the period of shut down, road transport workers protested in different places demanding relief.<sup>114</sup> There was 4.1 billion taka in the Bangladesh Workers' Welfare Foundation's fund. The workers' organisations demanded help to workers from the fund during the pandemic, but the government did not spend the money to help the workers. As a result, the transport workers did not receive any financial assistance during the emergency.<sup>115</sup>



*Transport workers formed a human chain on the Kurigram-Rangpur road in front of the central bus terminal in Kurigram District demanding food relief. Photo: Ittefaq, 3 May 2020*



*Workers protested by blocking roads at Sayedabad area in Dhaka city, demanding relief or opening of public transport as they did not receive any help from transport workers' unions during the hard times in the coronavirus outbreak. Photo: Prothom Alo, 3 May 2020*

<sup>114</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 1 May 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1655766/>

<sup>115</sup> The Daily Ittefaq, 15 May 2020; <https://www.ittefaq.com.bd/print-edition/first-page/151771/>

70. From April to June 2020, 17 workers from informal sectors were killed in workplace/work-related accidents and 48 were injured.

## **Migrant Bangladeshi nationals shot dead in Libya and Human Trafficking**

71. Although the government claims that the country's economic growth rate has increased, the disparity between rich and poor is widening. The current government's continual suppression of the opposition and dissidents has caused thousands of opposition leaders and activists to be accused and arrested in fictitious cases.<sup>116</sup> Numerous opposition leaders and activists became victims of enforced disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings. In such a situation, many of them are going abroad by any means possible to seek political asylum. Again, due to the acute crisis of livelihood, unemployed youth are also seeking ways to leave, often with help of unscrupulous 'agents' and traffickers.
72. The Libyan government said in a statement on 28 May that family members of a human trafficker had shot dead 30 migrants in Mizda city of Libya; 26 of the dead are Bangladeshi citizens.<sup>117</sup> Libya is the largest route for human trafficking in Europe. Many Bangladeshis go to Libya through human traffickers in the hope of a better life or for political reasons. After being held hostage and collecting 7-8 hundred thousand taka from their families, the migrants are taken to a boat or trawler to cross the Mediterranean Sea, to be sent to a European country. It is known that in Libya, incidents of torture and extortion of Bangladeshi nationals often occur. Many Bangladeshi nationals have drowned while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. According to UNHCR, more than 19,000 people lost their lives while crossing the sea between January 2014 and April 2020. Among them, many were Bangladeshi citizens.<sup>118</sup>
73. The human trafficking groups in Bangladesh have been deceiving the poor for many years and pushing them to death. All those arrested for trafficking so far were brokers at the local level. Those at the higher level in the racket are beyond reach, as they have connections with the government and the ruling party. On 6 June 2020, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of Kuwait arrested Kazi Shahid Islam Paplu, a Member of Parliament for Laxmipur-2 constituency, in Kuwait, on charges of human trafficking, visa fraud and laundering of billions of taka. Kazi Shahid Islam Paplu is the chief patron of the Kuwait unit of the Awami League and a member of the central committee of the Bangabandhu Parishad. Paplu had been involved in human trafficking and money laundering for a long time. No action was taken against him, despite reports published in

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<sup>116</sup> New Age, 6 June 2020; <https://www.newagebd.net/article/107795/opposition-faces-wave-of-arrests-in-fictitious-cases-fakhrul>

<sup>117</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 29 May 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/middle-east/504339/>

<sup>118</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 29 May 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/diplomacy/504406/>



various media.<sup>119</sup> The Bangladesh Embassy in Kuwait and the Foreign Ministry initially tried to withhold information about Paplu's arrest. When the Bangladeshi ambassador sent a message to Dhaka calling the Kuwaiti media reports 'fake news', the Foreign Minister Dr. AK Abdul Momen also called them 'fake news'.<sup>120</sup>

## Violence against Women

74. In the three months from April to June 2020, women fell victim to rape, sexual harassment, dowry violence and domestic violence. The incidents of child rape has risen sharply. There are allegations of various forms of oppression and violence against women, against the leaders and activists of the ruling party. The number of trials and convictions in such incidents is very low.

### *Rape*

75. **From April to June 2020, a total of 281 females were raped. Among them, 110 were women, 164 were minors (below the age of 18 years) and the age of seven females could not be determined. Of the women, 40 were victims of gang rape and 12 were killed after being raped. Out of the 164 minors, 29 were victims of gang rape, eight were killed after being raped and one committed suicide. Furthermore, 55 females were also victims of attempted rape.**
76. On 22 May 2020, a 12-year-old domestic maid was raped by Sakhawat Hossain, president of Baraigram Union's ward unit Awami League in Baraigram Union under Natore District. Attempts were made to conceal the matter, but when locals protested, police arrested Sakhawat on 4 June.<sup>121</sup>

### *Sexual harassment*

77. The prevalence of sexual harassment continued between April and June 2020.
78. **From April to June 2020, a reported total of 32 women and minors (below the age of 18) became victims of sexual harassment. Among them, one committed suicide, eight were assaulted, and 23 were harassed in various ways. Furthermore, four male relatives of the victims were killed and 11 male relatives were injured when they protested the stalking and harassment.**
79. Sohrab Hossain Majumder, younger brother of Belghar North Union unit Awami League's Relief Affairs Secretary and UP member Delwar Hossain Majumder, had been harassing the daughter of farmer Aman Ullah in Lalmai Upazila under Comilla District for a long time. On 16 April 2020, Sohrab went to Aman Ullah's house and called to his daughter. At that time, Aman Ullah

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<sup>119</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 8 June 2020; <https://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=230069>

<sup>120</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 11 June 2020; <https://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=230633&cat=2/>

<sup>121</sup> The daily Jugantor, 5 June 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/todays-paper/bangla-face/312621/>

shouted out, thinking that a thief had come; and locals came and grabbed Sohrab and beat him. Enraged by the incident, a group of criminals led by Delwar attacked and vandalized Aman Ullah's house while Aman Ullah's family fled in fear. On 17 April, Aman Ullah returned home with his family following assurances from the villagers. On hearing this news, Delwar, his brother Sohrab and other criminals grabbed Aman Ullah from his house, beat him and left him on the road side in Yapura Village. Aman Ullah was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital in a critical condition, where he died on 18 April. Police arrested two persons named Tofazzal Hossain and Rabiul Alam in the incident but could not arrest Delwar and Sohrab.<sup>122</sup>

80. On 31 May 2020, Ashraf Hossain, a member of Ward 2 of Daulatdia Union and Social Welfare Secretary of Goalanda Upazila unit Juba League<sup>123</sup>, and his two associates forcibly picked up a girl student of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade from in front of the Dhaka-Khulna highway in Goalanda under Rajbari District. Ashraf had been harassing that schoolgirl for a long time. The girl's father filed a case with Goalanda Police Station in this regard.<sup>124</sup>

### ***Dowry related violence***

81. Violence against women over dowry demands was widespread in the three months from April to June 2020. There have been incidents of women being beaten, burnt, strangled and hacked to death over dowry demands. Although giving and taking dowry is a criminal offense under the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 and the Prevention of Repression against Women and Children Act of 2000, the practice of giving and receiving dowry is widely prevalent in society and most of the victims are being deprived from justice due to lack of rule of law. Husbands play a key role in killings for dowry, though in-laws are also involved – especially in putting mental pressure on the wife. Many couples have young children. When the husband kills his wife over dowry, the police arrest the husband and then the couple's children lose both parents and fall into financial and psychological disaster. The mental development of young children in particular, is severely hampered.
82. **A reported total of 37 women were subjected to dowry violence from April to June 2020. Among them, 19 females were killed allegedly for dowry and 17 were physically abused due to dowry demands. One woman committed suicide due to dowry violence.**
83. On 22 April 2020, a housewife named Lucky Begum was beaten and her body set on fire by her husband Abdur Razzak, over dowry in Lalmonirhat Municipality. Lucky Begum was admitted to Rangpur Medical College Hospital

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<sup>122</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 19 April 2020

<sup>123</sup> Youth wing of Awami League

<sup>124</sup> The daily Jugantor, 2 June 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/311850/>

in critical condition. However, doctors advised that she be sent to Dhaka for better treatment. She was brought back to her husband's house in Lalmonirhat on 25 April due to financial and travel problems amid the pandemic. As a result, Lucky Begum died on 26 April. Police arrested Abdur Razzak in this incident. The couple has a five-year-old daughter.<sup>125</sup>

84. On 16 May 2020, a housewife named Sharani Kant Mahanta was beaten to death by her husband Gouranga Chandra Mahanta in Phulbari Upazila under Dinajpur District for not paying a dowry of Tk 50,000. Police arrested Gouranga Chandra Mahanta in the incident. The couple has two daughters, aged 11 and 6.<sup>126</sup>



*Gouranga Chandra Mahanta arrested for killing his wife in Dinajpur. Photo: Naya Diganta, 18 May 2020*

### **Acid violence**

85. From April to June this year, a total of eight persons became victims of acid violence. Among them, five were women, two were minor girls and one was a man.
86. In the midnight of 25 May 2020, criminals threw acid on Anwara Begum and her two daughters, Sumaiya Akhter (27) and Sumi Akhter (18) while they were sleeping in Raipura under Laxmipur District. They were admitted to Noakhali General Hospital in critical condition.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>125</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 28 April 2020

<sup>126</sup> The daily Naya Diganta, 18 May 2020; <https://www.dailynayadiganta.com/rangpur/502788/>

<sup>127</sup> Bangladesh Protidin, 25 May 2020; <https://www.bd-pratidin.com/last-page/2020/05/29/533939>

## Neighbouring States: India and Myanmar

### *India's influence over Bangladesh*

87. Apart from India's political and economic intervention in Bangladesh, members of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) infiltrated Bangladesh illegally from April to June 2020, and killed, tortured and abducted Bangladeshi nationals. During this period, an attempt was made to push Indian citizens into Bangladesh.
88. Indian BSF are torturing or shooting Bangladeshi citizens to death, violating the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the two countries and international law.<sup>128</sup> Despite a series of brutal attacks by the BSF on Bangladeshi nationals, the Bangladeshi government has not taken any effective action in this regard and/or has not even strongly protested.
89. **From April to June 2020, nine Bangladeshis were killed by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). Among them, eight were gunned down and the body of a cattle trader was found in the river after he was caught by BSF members. Furthermore, 11 were injured by the BSF. It is to be noted that, to date, not a single incident has been tried by the BSF.**<sup>129</sup>
90. On 2 April 2020, a young man named Joynal Abedin (35) was shot dead by members of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF) of Chaklagarh camp at Pillar No. 171 at the Chochpara border under Baliadangi Upazila in Thakurgaon District.<sup>130</sup>
91. On 19 April 2020, BSF members shot dead a SSC candidate named Shimon Roy (18) after entering Bangladesh at the Shingrod-Pradhanpara border under Panchagarh Sadar Upazila. Shimon Roy's father Paresh Chandra Roy said that he and some men, including his son, were fencing their jute fields with yarn. The barbed wire fence of India is about one hundred and fifty yards away from the jute field. Suddenly, a BSF member entered Bangladesh and came inside their field and started an altercation with his son. At one point, the BSF member shot his son in the stomach and fled.<sup>131</sup> Shimon Roy died on the same day after being admitted to Rangpur Medical College Hospital with serious injuries.<sup>132</sup>
92. On 23 April 2020, BSF members tried to push a mentally disabled Indian citizen into Bangladesh through the Burimari Land Port border under Patgram Upazila in Lalmonirhat District. When the Bangladeshi nationals and members of the

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<sup>128</sup> Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/12/09/trigger-happy/excessive-use-force-indian-troops-bangladesh-border>

<sup>129</sup> For more information, see *Odhikar*, Annual Human Rights Report 2017; [http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Annual-HR-Report-2017\\_English.pdf](http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Annual-HR-Report-2017_English.pdf)

<sup>130</sup> The daily Jugantor, 2 April 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/295080/>; Report sent by local human rights defender associated with *Odhikar*, from Thakurgaon.

<sup>131</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 19 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1651868/>

<sup>132</sup> Report sent by local human rights defender associated with *Odhikar*, from Panchagarh.

Border Guard Bangladesh jointly resisted, the BSF members fired rubber bullets at them. Four Bangladeshi nationals, including BGB member Khokon Mia, were injured in the incident. One woman was also among the injured.<sup>133</sup>

93. On 10 June 2020, Shariful Islam (25), a cattle trader was shot dead by BSF members of the Jhaudanga camp in India on his way back with cows at Sharsha border in Jashore District, his body was later dumped in the Ichhamati River.<sup>134</sup>

### ***Genocide against Rohingya Population***

94. The Myanmar army and Buddhist extremists began the process of genocidal operations on the Rohingya population and expelling them from Myanmar from 25 August 2017. Members of the Rohingya community took shelter in 34 refugee camps in Ukhia and Teknaf Upazilas of Cox's Bazar District in Bangladesh, after being subjected to various forms of violations, including murder, torture, enforced disappearance, gang rape and arson on homes and their farm and agricultural land. Rohingya refugees are at serious risk of contracting COVID-19. The first COVID-19 patient was detected in Rohingya Refugee camps on 14 April 2020. According to the World Health Organisation, as of 29 June, a total of 50 Rohingya refugees have been infected with the Coronavirus. Five of them died. A 150-bed isolation center and a specialized hospital have been set up in Ukhia by UNHCR, BRAC and Relief International for the treatment of Coronavirus infected Rohingyas.<sup>135</sup>
95. One month before the expiration of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) deadline<sup>136</sup> to protect the Rohingya population from genocide, the President's Office of Myanmar issued a directive on 8 April 2020 to comply with the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and to preserve evidence of all violence committed in the Rakhine State of Myanmar. The President's order instructed all ministers, state governments and local administration, military and civilian security forces to abide by Article 2 and 3 of the Genocide Convention.<sup>137</sup> The Gambia had to submit documents on the genocide against Rohingyas to the International Court of Justice by 23 July 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Gambia filed an application on 24 April for an extension and the court accordingly fixed 23 October 2020 as the date for submission of documents instead of 23 July. Under the new

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<sup>133</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 24 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1652684/>

<sup>134</sup> The daily Jugantor, 10 June 2020; <https://www.jugantor.com/country-news/314506/>

<sup>135</sup> Report sent by local human rights defender associated with *Odhikar*, from Cox's Bazar.

<sup>136</sup> On 23 January 2020, the International Court of Justice issued four interim orders to Myanmar to protect the Rohingya people from genocide. It was stated in the directives that Myanmar must protect the Rohingya living in the country; it must ensure that the Army or any other security forces under their control could not commit genocide against Rohingyas. No evidence relating to the genocide committed in the country can be destroyed. The report should be submitted within four months regarding implementation of the interim directives. From then until the final verdict, a report should be made at intervals of every six months. The daily Manabzamin, 24 January 2020; <http://www.mzamin.com/article.php?mzamin=209747>

<sup>137</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 9 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1649814/>



arrangement, Myanmar will present its evidence on 23 July next year.<sup>138</sup> Meanwhile, attacks on Rohingyas in Rakhine continue during investigations carried out by the ICC and ICJ and following orders from the Myanmar President; and as a result, they are fleeing the country and entering into Bangladesh. In this regard, Maung Zarni, one of the coordinators and researchers of the Free Rohingya Coalition, said that no statement from the Myanmar army and the NLD government was credible. Rohingyas are reportedly trying to cross the border into Bangladesh in the wake of continued crackdown by Myanmar's security forces in Rakhine State.<sup>139</sup>

96. Some fishermen of Teknaf who were fishing in the Bay of Bengal said that on 19 April 2020, they saw hundreds of Rohingya refugees floating on two trawlers in the south of St. Martin Island (at the Myanmar side) of the Bay of Bengal. The Myanmar Navy had set up guards near the two trawlers (in Myanmar's water) to prevent the trawlers from heading towards Myanmar. The Rohingya-laden trawlers were not able to move towards Teknaf either, as the Bangladesh Coast Guard and Navy are patrolling the coast off the St. Martin Island.<sup>140</sup> On 7 May, 280 Rohingyas out of more than 500 Rohingya refugees were rescued from the Bay of Bengal where they were floating on two trawlers for more than three weeks, and sent to Bhasanchar in Hatiya of Noakhali.<sup>141</sup>
97. On 26 May 2020, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released some new satellite pictures of Myanmar's Rakhine state. These pictures show a fire burning in Let Kar Village on 16 May. The Organisation's analysis shows that about two hundred houses were burnt down.<sup>142</sup>



*HRW has published the picture of burning houses in Rakhine. Photo: Bangla Tribune, 17 May 2020*

<sup>138</sup> Bangla Tribune, 27 May 2020; <https://www.banglatribune.com/national/news/625472/>

<sup>139</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 9 April 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1649814/>

<sup>140</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 21 April 2020

<sup>141</sup> The daily Prothom Alo, 7 May 2020; <https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/article/1655169/>

<sup>142</sup> Human Rights Watch, 26 May 2020; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/26/myanmar-imagery-shows-200-buildings-burned>

## Hindrance to Human Rights Activities

98. In order to gag *Odhikar*'s voice against human rights violations, the government's crackdown on *Odhikar* that began in 2013, continues. In 2014, *Odhikar* applied to the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) under the Prime Minister's Office for renewal of its registration. *Odhikar* filed a writ petition (No. 5402/2019) in the High Court Division of the Supreme Court on 13 May 2019, as the NGOAB did not renew the registration even till 2019. The court issued a Rule upon the NGOAB stating as to why the inaction of the Respondent (NGOAB) to grant renewal of *Odhikar*'s registration, pursuant to application made by the Petitioner (*Odhikar*) on 25 September 2014, shall not be declared to be without lawful authority and of no legal effect; and why the Respondent shall not be directed to renew registration of the Petitioner from 2015 onwards in accordance with law. The NGOAB was asked to respond to the rule within two weeks, but the Bureau did not take any steps to renew *Odhikar*'s registration and it has not been renewed to date. In order to halt all human rights activities, the NGOAB has stopped fund clearance for all of *Odhikar*'s projects for the last six years and completely barred approval of any new project. As part of the government's repression, the Standard Chartered Bank also suspended *Odhikar*'s accounts and harassed *Odhikar* in various ways. Furthermore, human rights defenders associated with *Odhikar* have been subjected to various forms of harassment, including surveillance, due to their bold position on human rights violations. The case filed under the Information and Communication Technology Act 2006 (Amendment 2009) against the Secretary and Director of *Odhikar* is still ongoing. *Odhikar* also has to maintain self-censorship while reporting on human rights abuses, due to its persecution and the curtailment of freedom of expression.

## Recommendations

1. Ensure people's access to accurate information on the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative that a National Committee is immediately constituted to review the real situation, formulate appropriate policy and strategy and determine effective mechanism to contain the pandemic. The Committee among other experts from public health must include health professionals, virologists, epidemiologists, economists and sociologists that can earn the trust of the people. The National Committee must have the support of all political parties to ensure credibility.
2. Freedoms of speech, expression and the media must be ensured and protected. The ban on the publication of the daily Amar Desh and on the broadcasting of Diganta TV, Islamic TV and Channel 1 must be removed. All repressive and abusive laws, including the Special Powers Act, 1974, the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006 (amendment 2009 and 2013) and the Digital Security Act, 2018 and its Rules 2020 should be repealed immediately.
3. The government must immediately stop protecting the interests of rich businesspersons, and adopt a policy, plan and immediate steps to provide relief to the workers, the working people, especially the needy and unemployed. Arrangements should be made to pay workers' wages and other payments at the end of the month. Coordinating public and private initiatives and involving the people whose problems need to be addressed is a must. Stealing of relief allocated for the people must be stopped.
4. The country's public health system has collapsed as a result of the privatization of healthcare and free market centered development policy, undermining the public responsibility of the state. We have to immediately abolish the market-oriented health system and build a people-oriented health system. Effective measures must be taken to protect the affected people by immediately adopting a universal and inclusive health care programme instead of a discriminatory health system. Adequate security arrangements should be made for doctors and health workers. Prisoners detained for political reasons and elderly inmates must be released immediately.
5. The government must stop extrajudicial killings on any and all pretext, including in anti-drug drives. Concerned members of law enforcement agencies involved in extrajudicial killings and torture should be brought to justice.
6. The government must accede to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture; and effectively implement the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013, and follow the directives of the High Court and the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in the matter of BLAST and Others Vs. Bangladesh and Others, to stop torture.
7. Members of the state security forces and other law enforcement agencies who are involved in enforced disappearances must be brought to justice. The government

must accede to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Those who have disappeared must be retrieved and returned to their families.

8. The government should refrain from repressive, unconstitutional and undemocratic activities. The government must allow the opposition political parties and people who have alternative beliefs to hold peaceful rallies and meetings by respecting the right to freedom of assembly and association as guaranteed in the Constitution and ICCPR.
9. Pro-government activists must be brought to justice, for their their criminal acts in order to stop political violence. The government must end the harassment of innocent people by stopping the filing of cases against unidentified persons so as to discourage sweeping arrests.
10. Workers' rights must be implemented in accordance with the ILO Convention, including the right to form trade unions in all factories, including ready-made garment factories. Workers in other sectors need to create a conducive working environment and fair policies for their work, including the prevention of discrimination.
11. Perpetrators must be punished by ensuring justice through proper implementation of laws, to stop violence against women and children. Criminals affiliated with the ruling party who are attacking women should not be given immunity.
12. The Indian Border Security Force (BSF) must stop human rights violations, including killing and torturing Bangladeshi citizens, along the border areas; and the Indian government should compensate the victims of violence. The construction and operation of the hazardous Rampal Power Plant must be stopped to save Bangladesh's environment and ecology and a balance has to be maintained in unequal trade between India and Bangladesh.
13. In order to protect the lives and rights of the members of the Rohingya community, peace must be established in the Rakhine State of Myanmar with the initiative of the United Nations and full civil and political rights of the Rohingya people must be ensured.
14. The on-going state of repression on *Odhikar* must stop. The case filed against *Odhikar's* Secretary and its Director under the Information and Communication Technology Act, 2006 (Amended in 2009) must be withdrawn as it lacks credibility and evidence. Harassment on human rights defenders associated with *Odhikar* must cease. The NGO Affairs Bureau must renew *Odhikar's* registration, the application of which is pending since September 2014. The government must release the funds of *Odhikar* to enable it to continue its human rights activities.

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**Notes:**

1. *Odhikar* seeks to uphold the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of the people.
2. *Odhikar* documents and records violations of human rights and receives information from its network of human rights defenders and monitors media reports.
3. *Odhikar* conducts detailed fact-finding investigations into some of the most significant violations, with assistance from trained local human rights defenders.
4. *Odhikar* is consistent in its human rights reporting and is committed to remain