

“Crossfire” by the Rapid Action Battalion

Exploring the extent of human rights violation in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh's record for human rights has deteriorated since 2004 after the introduction of the RAB, an elite force added to the existing contingent of the law enforcing agencies. They are accused by different human rights organizations of grave abuses of human rights, including extrajudicial summary execution, excessive use of force and the use of custodial torture. This research seeks to precisely understand the extent of human rights violation caused by the RAB in Bangladesh. This research substantiates significantly to the existing popular literature in the field of human rights.

Context

The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) was established in 2004 to stop spiraling crime and alarming rise of the Muslim militants in Bangladesh. They have been known as Bangladesh's elite anti-crime and anti-terrorism security force. Since 2004, the RAB has flaunted its violent behavior as a way to intimidate and scare people. To date, RAB was responsible for the deaths of 1100 people around the country since its creation two-and-a-half years earlier – an average of more than 13 per month. They are responsible for widespread torture and killing the suspects in custody. The youngest victim was 14 years old, the oldest 65, and all were male.

The government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has defended RAB killings by saying the victims were “wanted criminals” or “top terrors” who died when they resisted arrest or were caught in “crossfire” between the force and criminal gangs.

The government justifies the killings by using the term "crossfire," which it refers to as gunfights between any alleged criminal group or "hardened" criminals and the RAB or police. The term "death in an encounter" is used in other countries to mean the same thing, but the term "crossfire" is preferred by law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh. The sinister connotation associated with the word demonstrates the utter powerlessness of the people facing extrajudicial killings that are taking place in Bangladesh.

Torture methods used by the force include beatings, boring holes in suspects with electric drills, and the application of electric shock. Add impunity, abduction, inhuman torture, arrogance, intimidation, and absolute terror.

It has been aired that the government had given the force a mandate to kill suspected criminals instead of making arrests and the government had drafted a list of most-wanted

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criminals for RAB to kill. However, the tenure of the BNP government expired in October 2006 and since then Bangladesh has been experiencing a different types of governance. From October till early January 2007 Bangladesh has been under caretaker government and interim government after 11 January 2007.

Questions: I argue that killing could not be justified by using the word “crossfire”. The government as well as the RAB is held responsible for a widespread human rights violation in Bangladesh by executing extra judicial killings.

Objectives: This research seeks to explore the extent of human rights violation by this elite force of the government of Bangladesh as measured against the article 31 of the constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights² (those protection human rights). This further tries to explore the dimensions of methods of “crossfire” and torture. The human rights situation in Bangladesh specifically needs to be seen in a sequence of four perspectives, according to Global Human Rights Defense. Information needs to be given on the legal and constitutional system of Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi campaign of apartheid, crimes against humanity within Bangladesh and the effects of terrorism on human rights.

Methods and feasibility: Of all reported RAB killings, 32 percent took place in Dhaka division, followed by Khulna division with 29 percent. A proportional sample was drawn from six divisions. Families (HH) of the victims were interviewed in-depth to grasp their life histories and know what they know about the killings of their family members. Newspapers and relevant documents of the human rights organizations were extensively reviewed. Some policy makers of the Home Ministry and human rights activists were interviewed. By this time, huge literature has been produced on this issue. The whole list of the victims (with their addresses) recorded already by the ASK (Ain O Shalish Kendro) and other human rights organizations in Bangladesh.

RAB’s extra judicial killings called concerns of the world conscience immediate after the introduction of the RAB in 2004. Human rights organizations, activists, civil society organizations, UN systems and international community have been expressing their concerns over this issue while no good explanation has so far been provided by the

² Article 31 of the constitution of Bangladesh states: "To enjoy the protection of law, and to be treated in accordance with law, is the inalienable right of every citizen, wherever s/he may be, and of every other person for the time being within Bangladesh, and in particular no action detrimental to the life, liberty, body, reputation or property of any person shall be taken except in accordance with law." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) declares in Article 3 that "everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." Bangladesh is also a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which carries provisions in Articles 6 and 14 to protect a person's rights to life and fair trial and to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to the law.

government. This research is therefore, going to precisely answer to many questions relating to the issues of human rights violated by the RAB.