

# Bangladesh 2023 Human Rights Report

## Executive Summary

There were no significant changes in the human rights situation in Bangladesh during the year.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings; enforced disappearance; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; political prisoners or detainees; transnational repression against individuals in another country; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for alleged offenses of a relative; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, censorship, and enforcement of or threat to enforce criminal libel laws to limit expression; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental and civil society organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious

and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic and intimate partner violence, sexual violence, workplace violence, child, early, and forced marriage, and other forms of such violence; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of ethnic minority groups or Indigenous peoples; laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; significant restrictions on independent trade unions and workers' freedom of association; and existence of the worst forms of child labor.

There were numerous reports of widespread impunity for human rights abuses. In most cases, the government did not take credible steps to identify and punish officials or security force members who may have committed human rights abuses.

## **Section 1. Respect for the Integrity of the Person**

### **a. Arbitrary Deprivation of Life and Other Unlawful or Politically Motivated Killings**

There were reports that the government or its agents committed arbitrary

or unlawful killings, including extrajudicial killings. Police policy required internal investigations of all significant uses of force by police, including actions that resulted in serious physical injury or death, usually by a professional standards unit that reports directly to the inspector general of police. The government, however, neither released official statistics on total killings by security personnel nor took transparent measures to investigate cases. Human rights groups expressed skepticism regarding the independence and professional standards of the units conducting these assessments. In the few known instances in which the government brought charges, those found guilty generally received administrative punishment.

Law enforcement raids occurred throughout the year, allegedly to counter terrorist activity, drugs, and illegal firearms. Suspicious deaths occurred during some raids, arrests, and other law enforcement operations.

Extrajudicial killings decreased from the previous year. Domestic human rights organization Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) reported eight individuals died from January to September in alleged extrajudicial killings or while in custody, including two in shootouts with law enforcement agencies and three due to physical torture before or while in custody. According to another domestic human rights organization, of 12 incidents of alleged extrajudicial killings between January and September, four deaths resulted from law enforcement crossfire killings, four persons were shot to death by law enforcement officers, and four others died from alleged torture while in

custody.

On March 26, Sultana Jasmine died in custody of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) due to brain bleeding. RAB officials said she suffered a stroke and fell while detained. Family members called the story a cover-up and pointed to evidence of a head injury. The commanding officer of the RAB unit involved told media they picked up Jasmine pursuant to a financial fraud complaint. The case filed against Jasmine under the Digital Security Act (DSA) “for siphoning money off from job seekers using her Facebook account,” however, was not recorded until the day after she was picked up. Following widespread media coverage of the death in custody, the High Court ordered the government to submit a report detailing the RAB officers involved in the incident and explaining why the RAB picked up Jasmine before a case was even filed. In May, the government formed a committee to examine the death and provide a report within 15 days. The committee turned over a report of the findings to the High Court in August, but the report was not made public. In October, two High Court justices stated the report was unclear and did not provide an adequate explanation of the circumstances of her arrest and detention. At the time of the justices’ comments, the report had still not been released to the public.

On March 18, plainclothes RAB officers shot and killed a man and injured another during an attempt to arrest a murder suspect in Narayanganj’s Sonargaon sub-district. According to witnesses, the man saw individuals in

plainclothes who refused to identify themselves as they detained the suspect. Fearing an abduction, the man and other neighbors reportedly tried to intervene and as more individuals joined the commotion, the RAB resorted to gunfire and shot the man in the stomach. Authorities claimed "miscreants" opened fire on the RAB officers, injuring four officers and causing them to return fire in "self-defense." Witnesses contradicted that story and said the individuals were unarmed.

There were no public reports of accountability for RAB officers who conducted alleged extrajudicial killings in 2022 against Shaheen Miah and Mohammad Raju.

## **b. Disappearance**

There were reports of disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities. Human rights groups and media reported disappearances and kidnappings continued, allegedly committed by security services. Between January and September, a local human rights organization reported 32 persons were victims of enforced disappearances. The government made limited efforts to prevent, investigate, or punish such acts. Civil society organizations reported most victims of enforced disappearance were opposition leaders, activists, and dissidents. Following alleged disappearances, security forces released some individuals without charge and arrested others.

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report* noted, "security agencies continue to commit human rights abuses including enforced disappearances, the use of secret prisons, arbitrary arrests, and torture."

Throughout the year, families of enforced disappearance victims called on the government to return their family members and prosecute members of law enforcement agencies involved in their abductions. Mayer Dak, an organization advocating for victim families, held rallies and issued a statement saying its members received no legislative, administrative, or judicial remedy for the incidents of enforced disappearances.

In February, media outlets reported UN rapporteurs, including the UN chair-rapporteur of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID), sent a letter to the government in December 2022 expressing concern over harassment of Mayer Dak and local human rights organization Odhikar.

In March, the government stated it was looking into the cases of 28 victims of enforced disappearance but criticized civil society organizations for allegedly providing inflated numbers of enforced disappearance victims to the United Nations.

In June, opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Salahuddin Ahmed, who was stranded in India for eight years without valid documents

after being forcibly disappeared in Bangladesh, secured a travel pass to return home. In 2015, Ahmed was abducted from his home in Dhaka and disappeared for two months before being released across the border in India.

### **c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and Other Related Abuses**

Although the constitution and law prohibited torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, local and international human rights organizations and media reported security forces, including those from the intelligence services, police, and soldiers seconded into civilian law enforcement agencies, employed such practices. The law allowed a magistrate to place a suspect in interrogative custody, known as remand, during which questioning of the suspect could take place without a lawyer present. Human rights organizations alleged many instances of torture occurred during remand. Some victims who filed cases under the Torture and Custodial (Prevention) Act were reportedly harassed and threatened, while some withdrew their cases due to fear of reprisal.

According to multiple organizations, security forces reportedly used torture to gather information from alleged militants and members of political opposition parties. These forces reportedly used beatings with iron rods, kneecappings, electric shock, rape and other sexual abuse, and mock

executions. Organizations also claimed security forces were involved in widespread and routine commission of torture, occasionally resulting in death, for the purpose of soliciting payment of bribes or obtaining confessions. According to civil society and media, impunity was a pervasive problem in the security forces, including but not limited to the RAB, Border Guards Bangladesh, Detective Branch of Police, and other units.

Politicization of crimes, corruption, and lack of independent accountability mechanisms were significant factors contributing to impunity, including for custodial torture. While police were required to conduct internal investigations of significant abuses, civil society organizations alleged investigative mechanisms were not independent.

In July, human rights organizations and media reported a fellow inmate abused Runa Laila in Dhaka's Kashimpur prison, with the support of the prison guards. According to the reports, Shamima Noor Papia, an expelled leader of the ruling Awami League's (AL) youth wing, attempted to steal money from Laila through physical force. Papia and prison guards allegedly beat Laila, stripped her naked, coerced her to drink sewer water, and subsequently denied her medical treatment.

In June, media reported Ekramul Hossain Ershad died after alleged beatings in police custody. Police arrested Ershad on May 31 and took him to the hospital on June 3 where he was pronounced dead. His relatives claimed he died after severe beatings following his arrest.



Also in June, a senior judicial magistrate in Shariatpur asked police to act against two police officers over the alleged abuse to extort bribes of four accused persons in custody. The victims alleged the accused officers blindfolded them, beat them with a hammer, and removed their fingernails and toenails with pliers.

### **Prison and Detention Center Conditions**

Prison conditions were harsh and at times life threatening due to severe overcrowding, inadequate facilities, and physical abuse.

Local human rights organization ASK reported 77 prisoners, of whom 42 were on trial and 35 were convicted, died in jail custody from January to September. Former detainees reported some inmates who died in prison were transported to a hospital and pronounced dead due to natural causes. Another local human rights organization claimed 94 individuals died in jail between January and September.

**Abusive Physical Conditions:** According to the Bangladesh Prisons Directorate (BPD), over 80,000 prisoners were held in 68 facilities across the country designed to hold approximately 42,600 inmates.

Conditions in prisons, and often within the same prison complex, varied widely. Authorities held some prisoners in areas subject to high temperatures, poor ventilation, and overcrowding.

In August, the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General provided a report to parliament on prison conditions and noted prison meals were smaller than the minimums prescribed.

**Administration:** Prisons lacked any formal process for offenders to submit grievances and authorities rarely conducted investigations of credible allegations of mistreatment. Prisons had no ombudsperson to receive prisoner complaints.

**Independent Monitoring:** The government permitted visits from government inspectors and nongovernmental observers who were aligned with the ruling party. No reports on these inspections were released. The International Committee of the Red Cross continued to support the BPD and assisted 68 prison centers across the country. According to the BPD, district and magistrate judges visited the prisons at least once every month.

#### **d. Arbitrary Arrest or Detention**

The constitution prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention, but the law permitted authorities to arrest and detain an individual without an order from a magistrate or a warrant if authorities perceived the individual might constitute a threat to security and public order, or if authorities perceived the individual was involved with a serious crime. The constitution provided for the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court, but the government did not generally observe these

requirements. Authorities often held detainees for a few days without divulging their whereabouts or circumstances to family or legal counsel, or without acknowledging having arrested them.

## **Arrest Procedures and Treatment of Detainees**

The constitution required arrests and detentions be authorized by a warrant or occur because of observation of a crime in progress, but the law granted broad exceptions to these protections.

Under the constitution detainees had to be brought before a judicial officer to face charges within 24 hours, but this was not regularly enforced. The government or a district magistrate could order a person detained for 30 days to prevent the commission of an act that could threaten national security; however, authorities sometimes held detainees for longer periods with impunity.

There was a functioning bail system, but police routinely rearrested bailed individuals on other charges, despite directives from the Supreme Court's Appellate Division prohibiting rearrest of persons on new charges without first producing them in court.

Authorities generally permitted defense lawyers to meet with their clients only after formal charges were filed in the courts, which in some cases occurred weeks or months after the initial arrest. Detainees were legally entitled to counsel even if they could not afford to pay for it, but the country

lacked sufficient funds to provide this service. Many detainees were not permitted to communicate with others outside of detention.

**Arbitrary Arrest:** Arbitrary arrests occurred, often in conjunction with political demonstrations or speech, or as part of security force responses to alleged terrorist activity, and the government held persons in detention without specific charges, sometimes to collect information regarding other suspects. The expansiveness of the 1974 Special Powers Act granted legal justification for arrests that would often otherwise be considered arbitrary, since it removed the requirement that arrests be based on crimes that have occurred previously. Human rights activists claimed police falsely constructed cases to target opposition leaders, workers, and supporters, and that the government used law enforcement agencies to crack down on political rivals.

Police continued to arbitrarily arrest members of opposition political parties. In August, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) and CIVICUS Monitor issued a joint statement noting media had reported police sent over 800 BNP leaders to jail prior to protests at the end of July. The statement called on authorities “to release all those arrested for exercising their peaceful right to protest and to undertake a prompt and independent investigation into human rights violations and abuses committed by security forces and ruling party activists.”

**Pretrial Detention:** Arbitrary and lengthy pretrial detention continued due

to bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited resources, lax enforcement of pretrial rules, and corruption. Lawyers attributed the overuse of laws such as the DSA, some of which had provisions that generally did not allow for bail, as another explanation for the high numbers of pretrial detentions. In some cases, the length of pretrial detention equaled or exceeded the sentence for the alleged crime.

In July, the Bangladesh Appellate Court extended the pretrial detention without bail of Khadija Kubra for four more months. Khadija, age 17, was a university student arrested in September 2022 under the DSA after a guest on a webinar she hosted in 2020 made remarks critical of the ruling party. In February, the High Court granted bail to Khadija but the state appealed the decision. In November, she was released on bail, but the charges against her remain.

## **e. Denial of Fair Public Trial**

The constitution provided for an independent judiciary, but corruption and political interference compromised its independence. The government generally did not respect judicial independence and impartiality.

Human rights observers maintained that lower courts often ruled based on influence from or loyalty to political patronage networks, particularly in cases filed against opposition political party supporters. Observers claimed judges who made decisions unfavorable to the government risked transfer to

other jurisdictions.

Observers alleged judges sometimes accepted bribes from attorneys or other court officials for bail or acquittal in criminal cases.

Corruption and a substantial backlog of cases hindered the court system, and the granting of extended continuances effectively prevented many defendants from obtaining fair trials. In some cases, defendants remained in custody during trial for longer than the maximum sentence of the crime for which they were charged. Media reported in June over 500,000 cases were pending with the High Court alone, with around 90,000 new cases filed every year. According to the Supreme Court Annual Report, the High Court disposed of 690 pending cases annually on average since 2018.

Defendants who could not afford an attorney or chose to remain undefended were not eligible for bail during proceedings. The National Legal Aid Services Organization offered some services to defendants who could not afford private attorneys, but access to those services often required burdensome formalities and extensive periods of time. Many defendants were unaware of these services.

## **Trial Procedures**

The constitution provided for the right to a fair and public trial, but the judiciary did not always protect this right due to corruption, partisanship, and weak human resources. Legal experts noted prosecution witnesses

often did not show up in court to give oral testimony and there were insufficient judges to handle the pending caseload in a timely manner.

Defendants did not have the right to a timely trial. Indigent defendants had the right to a public defender, but in many cases public defenders were not well prepared or adequately acquainted with details of the case. Trials were conducted in the Bengali language; the government did not provide free interpretation for defendants who could not understand or speak Bengali.

The government frequently did not respect the rights of accused persons to confront prosecution or plaintiff witnesses and present their own witnesses and evidence. Authorities did not always respect the right not to be compelled to testify or confess guilt, and defendants who did not confess were often kept in custody. Some defendants claimed police pressured them to confess under duress.

The administrative process by which lower court and jail authorities were notified of the outcome of High Court appeals was very slow.

Mobile courts headed by executive branch magistrates rendered immediate verdicts that often included prison terms for defendants who did not have legal representation.

In October, media reported the court granted the RAB additional time to submit its probe report in a high-profile case involving the killing of two journalists in 2012. This was the 104th deferral of the probe deadline. Law

enforcement officials arrested and charged eight individuals with the double murder, but the RAB had not submitted its report.

## **Political Prisoners and Detainees**

There were reports of political prisoners or detainees. Political affiliation was often a factor in claims of arrest and prosecution of members of opposition parties, including through spurious charges under the pretext of responding to national security threats.

Former prime minister and chairperson of the lead opposition political party BNP Khaleda Zia remained confined to her home. She was barred from receiving needed medical treatment abroad but was being treated in a Bangladeshi hospital. In 2018, she was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment on corruption and embezzlement charges first filed in 2008. Zia was transferred from prison to a hospital in 2019 and released to house arrest in 2020. International and domestic legal experts noted the lack of evidence to support the conviction and suggested a political ploy to remove the leader of the opposition from the electoral process, even as multiple corruption charges against Prime Minister Hasina were dropped by prosecutors.

The Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal, established in 2010 to conduct trials of those accused of war crimes and atrocities that took place during the 1971 War of Independence, continued to issue sentences, including the death penalty, to those accused of crimes during the war.



Many observers viewed the proceedings as politically motivated, as the court had almost exclusively indicted members of opposition political parties.

## **f. Transnational Repression**

The government used transnational repression to intimidate or exact reprisals against individuals outside its sovereign borders, including against members of diaspora populations, such as political opponents, civil society activists, human rights defenders, and journalists.

**Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, and Coercion:** According to the press, police and intelligence agencies continued to threaten, harass, and surveil human rights defenders, civil society leaders, and the family members of critics based outside of the country. Journalists living abroad continued to report police and intelligence agencies harassed and intimidated their relatives in the country to silence criticism. In March, four men allegedly associated with the ruling party attacked the brother of London-based journalist Zulkarnain Saer Khan, beating him with iron rods in retaliation for Khan's *Al-Jazeera* reporting on the prime minister.

In July, the prime minister instructed the country's overseas diplomats to "be vigilant" against persons spreading "antistate" propaganda so that the international community would not be "misled."

In August, police arrested and detained Anisha Siddika on charges of

conspiring to commit sabotage, three days after a widely shared Facebook post by her U.S.-based son, Michigan State University graduate student Tanzilur Rahman, criticizing the trial process of late war crimes convict Delwar Hossain Sayedee, an Islamic leader. A court granted her bail eight days later, after first denying it twice.

**Misuse of International Law Enforcement Tools:** There were credible reports that the government attempted to misuse international law enforcement tools for politically motivated purposes against specific individuals located outside the country. In July, media reported police flagged three journalists for Interpol as “cyber terrorists” propagating antigovernment propaganda.

**Bilateral Pressure:** There were credible reports the government, for politically motivated purposes, attempted to exert bilateral pressure on other countries aimed at having them take adverse action against specific individuals. In May, media reported the Ministry of Home Affairs sent Bangladesh missions abroad a list of those spreading “propaganda against the country” in foreign countries, instructing those missions to pressure host governments to take legal action against them under their existing laws.

## **g. Property Seizure and Restitution**

The government did not implement a 2001 act to accelerate the process of return of land primarily to Hindu individuals. The act allowed the

government to confiscate property of anyone whom it declares to be an enemy of the state. It was often used to seize property abandoned by minority religious groups when they fled the country, particularly after the 1971 independence war.

Minority groups continued to report land ownership disputes that disproportionately displaced members of Indigenous communities and ethnic minorities, especially in areas near new roads or industrial development zones. They also claimed local police, civil authorities, and political leaders were sometimes involved in evictions or shielded politically influential land grabbers from prosecution. While the law allowed for land restitution for Indigenous persons living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), this rarely occurred.

## **h. Arbitrary or Unlawful Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence**

The law did not prohibit arbitrary interference with private correspondence. Intelligence and law enforcement agencies could monitor private communications with the permission of the Ministry of Home Affairs, but police rarely obtained such permission when monitoring private correspondence. Human rights organizations alleged police, the National Security Intelligence, and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence employed informers to conduct surveillance and report on citizens

perceived to be critical of the government.

There were reports that government authorities arbitrarily entered homes; accessed, collected, or used private communications or personal data of targeted individuals based on exercise of their human rights; and punished family members for offenses allegedly committed by relatives.

In January, Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* alleged the country's National Telecommunication Monitoring Center purchased vehicle-mounted surveillance devices from an Israeli company. As the two countries did not have diplomatic ties, the purchase was allegedly conducted via a firm registered in Cyprus.

## **Section 2. Respect for Civil Liberties**

### **a. Freedom of Expression, Including for Members of the Press and Other Media**

The constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media, but the government frequently contravened this right. There were significant limitations on freedom of expression.

Members of media and bloggers self-censored their criticisms of the government due to harassment and fear of reprisal.

**Freedom of Expression:** The constitution equated criticism of the

constitution with sedition. Punishment for conviction of sedition ranged from three years to life imprisonment.

The law limited hate speech but did not clearly define it, which permitted the government broad latitude to interpret it. The government could restrict speech deemed to be against the security of the state; against friendly relations with foreign states; and against public order, decency, or morality; or which constitutes contempt of court, defamation, or incitement to an offense. The law criminalized any criticism of constitutional bodies.

The DSA, passed ostensibly to reduce cybercrime, provided for sentences of up to life imprisonment for spreading “propaganda” against the Bangladesh Liberation War, the national anthem, or the national flag. Throughout the year the government widely used the DSA against persons criticizing the government. Media and the law minister reported over 7,000 DSA cases pending across the country, with one nongovernmental organization (NGO) reporting police brought cases against 20 children aged 13 to 17 years.

The law was used against speech found on social media, websites, and other digital platforms, including for commentators living outside of the country. From January 2020 to March 2023, international rights organization Article 19 reported 229 journalists were indicted and 56 arrested under the DSA. The Centre for Governance Studies reported journalists made up 27 percent of those accused under DSA.

In May, the United Nations' special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights expressed grave concern over the DSA's misuse to create a climate of fear and censorship. Recommending immediate suspension of the law, he stated journalists, human rights defenders, opposition politicians, and academics were detained under the DSA for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and opinion.

Human rights organizations protested news in February that Hindu teen Poritosh Sarkar was put into solitary confinement for eight months after facing DSA charges for "hurting religious sentiments" through a 2021 social media post. Prison authorities told Sarkar's family he was being kept in a solitary confinement cell without windows "for his safety" from local individuals offended by his post. The Rangpur Cyber Tribunal denied him bail three times before finally granting it in May 2022. In February, however, the court revoked his bail and sent him back to jail.

In August, the government announced it would replace the DSA with the Cyber Security Act (CSA); parliament passed the CSA in September. The CSA reduced penalties for many crimes, made some crimes bailable that previously were not, and eliminated jail time as a punishment for defamation. The CSA, however, recycled almost all DSA sections, and the law continued to allow police the power to search, seize, and arrest suspects without a warrant. Observers charged the CSA was simply the same law with a new name and that the law continued to criminalize free speech.

Cases initiated under the repealed DSA continued under the CSA.

**Violence and Harassment:** Authorities, including intelligence services and student affiliates of the ruling party, subjected journalists to violence, harassment, and intimidation, especially when tied to the DSA, which human rights activists called a government and ruling party tool to intimidate journalists. Individuals faced the threat of being arrested, held in pretrial detention, subjected to expensive criminal trials, fines, and imprisonment, as well as the social stigma associated with having a criminal record.

ASK reported 119 instances of journalist harassment from January to June. Another local human rights organization reported 309 cases of attacks on or harassment of journalists between January and September, including 138 journalists injured.

In late March, an allegedly pro-ruling party lawyer filed a DSA charge against the editor and a reporter of prominent newspaper *Prothom Alo*, accusing them of using print, online, and electronic media to “tarnish the image and reputation of the state.” Police detained the reporter, Shamsuzzaman Shams, for 20 hours on unclear grounds. The charges against Rahman and Shams stemmed from a March 26 story *Prothom Alo* published on the country’s 52nd anniversary of independence. The situation sparked a public outcry against the DSA, as students, lawyers, human rights activists, civil society organizations, the Editors’ Council, and political parties

demonstrated across the country to demand the law's amendment or repeal.

In June, the RAB arrested a union council chairman in Jamalpur, and police arrested several others accused of the murder of journalist Golam Rabbani Nadim. On June 14, a group of men ambushed Nadim, a correspondent for website *Banglanews24* and broadcaster for Ekattor TV, while he was traveling home on his motorcycle. The men beat Nadim and left him unconscious; bystanders took him to the hospital. After he died the next day from a severe head injury, his family said he was targeted in retaliation for a series of reports in May for *Banglanews24* about Mahmudul Alam Babu, chair of a local government unit and member of the ruling AL party.

**Censorship or Content Restrictions for Members of the Press and Other Media, Including Online Media:** Both print and online independent media were active and expressed a variety of views; however, media outlets that criticized the government were pressured by the government. Independent media could not operate freely or without restrictions.

The government maintained editorial control over the country's public television station and allegedly mandated private channels broadcast government content for free. Civil society organizations stated political interference influenced the licensing process, since all television channel licenses granted by the government were for stations supporting the ruling party.



In January, the government ordered the closure of 191 websites it accused of publishing “anti-state news.”

In February, the government shut down *Dainik Dinkal*, a broadsheet Bengali-language newspaper and the only paper of the main opposition BNP. Dhaka district authorities first ordered the shutdown of the paper in December 2022, saying the paper violated the country’s printing and publication laws. *Dainik Dinkal* continued to publish, however, after lodging an appeal at the Press Council. The council rejected the appeal, upholding the district magistrate’s order to the paper to stop publication. Two Dhaka-based journalist unions issued a joint statement that the decision was a “reflection of the repression of opposition voices.”

*Prothom Alo* journalist Rozina Islam continued to face charges in an Official Secrets Act case. In January, police opened further investigation into the case despite having submitted to the court a report in October 2022 stating that police found no evidence against her. The government arrested Islam in 2021 under the 1923 Official Secrets Act and sections of the penal code for investigating a corruption story involving the Ministry of Health, accusing her of taking photographs and stealing official documents from the ministry. If convicted, Islam could be sentenced to up to 14 years in prison or the death penalty.

Independent journalists and media alleged intelligence services influenced media outlets in part by withholding financially important government

advertising and pressuring private companies to withhold their advertising. The government penalized media that criticized it or carried messages of the political opposition's activities and statements.

Privately owned newspapers usually were free to carry diverse views except on politically sensitive topics or those that criticized the ruling party.

Political polarization and self-censorship remained a problem. Investigative journalists often complained of their management and of editors "killing" reports due to fear of pressure from the government and intelligence agencies. Some journalists received threats after publishing stories.

According to journalists and human rights groups, journalists engaged in self-censorship due to fear of security force retribution, prosecution under the DSA, and the possibility of being charged with politically motivated cases. Although public criticism of the government was common and vocal, some media figures expressed fear of harassment by the government.

**Libel/Slander Laws:** Libel, slander, defamation, and blasphemy were treated as criminal offenses, most often employed against individuals speaking against the government, the prime minister, or other government officials. Laws referring to defamation of individuals and organizations were used to prosecute opposition figures and members of civil society.

Minority rights organizations criticized the arbitrary detention under the DSA of minority community members on the pretext of blasphemy.

**National Security:** Authorities stated the DSA was essential to protect national and cyber security and prevent communalism, though they allegedly used the law to arrest or punish critics of the government or deter criticism of government policies and officials.

**Nongovernmental Impact:** Societal pressures limited freedom of expression. Atheist, secular, religious minority, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) writers and bloggers reported they continued to receive death threats from extremist organizations.

## **Internet Freedom**

The government restricted and disrupted access to the internet and censored online content in numerous incidents. Laws banned virtual private networks and voice-over-internet-protocol telephone, but authorities rarely enforced the prohibition.

In a number of incidents, the government interfered in internet communications, filtered or blocked access, restricted content, and censored websites or other communications and internet services.

Throughout the year, the government blocked or slowed internet services in cities and neighborhoods where opposition parties held rallies. It suspended or closed many websites based on vague criteria, or with explicit reference to their pro-opposition content being in violation of legal requirements.

Local NGOs reported at least 17 internet shutdowns since 2012 under various circumstances, including communal riots, civic and political protest, and elections. In a survey, 88 percent of respondents said they had experienced an internet shutdown in the past three years and 50 percent said they had had such an experience within the previous year.

The Bangladesh Telecommunications Regulatory Commission was charged with regulating telecommunications. It carried out law enforcement and government requests to block content by ordering internet service providers to act. The commission regularly ordered social media companies to take down content it deemed critical of the ruling party or harmful to religious beliefs. Sweden-based website *Netra News* remained blocked since 2020 after it published reports alleging corruption by a government minister.

## **b. Freedoms of Peaceful Assembly and Association**

The government restricted freedoms of peaceful assembly and association.

### **Freedom of Peaceful Assembly**

The law provided for the right to peaceful assembly, but the government generally did not respect this right. The law gave the government broad discretion to ban assemblies of more than four persons. The government required advance permission for gatherings such as protests and demonstrations.

Press reporting documented authorities often prohibited gatherings by opposition groups and imposed unreasonable requirements for permits. Police and especially ruling party activists in many instances used force to block or disperse demonstrations assembled by opposition parties, organizations, and activists.

Government authorities frequently denied the lead opposition BNP and other opposition parties permission to hold events. Government authorities allowed ruling party activists to intimidate and attack opposition supporters at their events.

In August, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch called on authorities to end use of excessive force against protestors following clashes during BNP sit-ins on July 28 and 29. Human Rights Watch reported police indiscriminately fired rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons, and beat opposition party supporters with batons during protests.

Media reported over 300 persons were injured on August 19 as BNP leaders and activists clashed with police during the party's road march in Habiganj. BNP marchers allegedly hurled brick chips at police, and police officers opened fire and used tear gas. The BNP claimed their leaders and activists sustained bullet injuries, but police claimed they fired rubber bullets.

## **Freedom of Association**

The law provided for the right of citizens to form associations, subject to

“reasonable restrictions” in the interest of morality or public order, and the government generally respected this right. The law restricted the receipt of foreign funds by NGOs and provided for punishment of NGOs making derogatory comments regarding the constitution or constitutional institutions. The government’s NGO Affairs Bureau increasingly withheld or delayed approval for foreign funding to NGOs, especially those working on matters the bureau deemed sensitive, such as human rights, labor rights, Indigenous rights, LGBTQI+ rights, or humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees. Activists and NGOs in-country reported increasing instances of government scrutiny and bureaucratic restrictions and delays, including restricting funding to NGOs and use of other coercive tools such as bank account freezes, tax audits, and summary tax judgments.

### **c. Freedom of Religion**

See the Department of State’s *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>

### **d. Freedom of Movement and the Right to Leave the Country**

The law provided for freedom of internal movement, emigration, and repatriation, and the government generally respected these rights, except in three sensitive areas: the CHT, Rohingya refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar, and

on the island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal.

**In-country Movement:** The government enforced restrictions on access to the CHT by foreigners and restricted movement of Rohingya refugees. The refugee camps in Cox's Bazar were surrounded by barbed and concertina wire fencing with few pedestrian gates to allow Rohingya to move among the camps or into the local community. Bhasan Char, an island with no regular transport links to the mainland, sheltered over 30,000 Rohingya refugees who voluntarily relocated there at the urging of the government. Authorities caught and detained many Rohingya who tried to leave Bhasan Char or camps in Cox's Bazar and returned them to the registered camps.

**Foreign Travel:** While foreign travel was allowed, some senior domestic civil society and international NGO representatives, as well as opposition party members, reported harassment and delays when applying for a visa, entering, or departing the country. The government prevented war crimes suspects from the 1971 independence war from leaving the country.

CEOs of privately-owned banks reported they were not permitted to leave the country without obtaining express governmental permission, which was on occasion withheld. Some opposition political leaders also reported delays and harassment on attempting to leave the country.

## **e. Protection of Refugees**

The government cooperated with the Office of the UN High Commissioner

for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to Rohingya refugees.

The government was not a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. As a result, the government claimed it was not under legal obligation to uphold the basic rights enshrined in this treaty.

Prior to the 2017 Rohingya arrivals, the government and UNHCR provided temporary protection and basic assistance to approximately 33,000 registered Rohingya refugees from Burma living in two official camps (Kutupalong and Nayapara), while the government and the International Organization for Migration aided approximately 200,000 undocumented Rohingya living in makeshift settlements in Cox's Bazar. In 2017, more than 750,000 Rohingya fled genocide in neighboring Burma to seek safe haven in Bangladesh. As of September 30, because of this influx, 965,467 registered Rohingya refugees were living in refugee camps. The government claimed actual numbers totaled more than 1.2 million. The government did not recognize the arrivals as refugees, referring to them instead as "forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals," but abided by many of the established UN standards for refugees. One notable exception was that Rohingya did not enjoy full freedom of movement throughout the country. Government officials stated repatriation was the government's only goal, stressing privileges such as freedom of movement, postsecondary education, or



livelihood opportunities could not be afforded to the Rohingya population.

A National Task Force of 25 ministries and department representatives and chaired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs provided oversight and strategic guidance for the overall Rohingya response. The Ministry of Home Affairs coordinated and maintained law and order for the response, with support from the Armed Police Battalion. At the local level, the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission, under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, was responsible for the management of the camps.

As of September 30, Bhasan Char hosted 30,748 Rohingya refugees. Media reported the government spent 31 billion taka (\$310 million) to prepare for the eventual transfer of 100,000 refugees to the island. Programs operated under a 2021 memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the government and UNHCR that outlined the humanitarian and protection framework underlying UN operational engagements on the island. The MOU had provisions to improve protections and services for Rohingya refugees on Bhasan Char. It proposed expanded access to services, such as education, skills and vocational training, livelihoods, health care, and uninterrupted telecommunication services, which were funded by some international donors through the *2023 Joint Response Plan*.

In July, the High Court dismissed a bail application for a suspect in the murder of Mohammad Mohib Ullah, chairman and founder of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights. In 2022, the government

brought charges against 29 Rohingya in connection with the September 2021 killing. In October, authorities arrested a suspect for his alleged role in Mohib Ullah's murder.

**Access to Asylum:** The law did not provide for granting asylum or refugee status, nor had the government established a formal system for providing protection to refugees. Nonetheless, the government provided significant protection and assistance to Rohingya refugees residing in the country. Prior to 2017, the government cooperated with UNHCR to provide temporary protection and basic assistance to registered refugees residing in two official camps. After the 2017 arrival of more than 750,000 additional Rohingya refugees, the government started to register the refugees biometrically and provided identity cards. UNHCR continued to operate registration centers to update individual and family status due to marriages, divorces, births, and deaths.

**Abuse of Refugees and Asylum Seekers:** The government mostly cooperated with UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to Rohingya refugees, despite security concerns in the camps. Observers reported human trafficking and smuggling were common in the camps, with few cases prosecuted. When discovered, government officials returned trafficking victims to the camps.

International organizations reported gender-based violence directed against women in the camps. Intimate partner violence comprised 81 percent of

the cases for the first half of the year.

Accountability for crimes against refugees remained a problem. Rohingya relied on government officials responsible for each camp (also known as the Camps in Charge, or CiC) to address allegations of crime. The CiCs were largely autonomous and varied in terms of responsiveness to camp needs. According to international organizations, some CiCs were susceptible to corruption. Observers alleged some border guard, military, and police officials were involved in facilitating trafficking of Rohingya women and children, ranging from “looking the other way,” to bribes for allowing traffickers to access Rohingya in the camps, to direct involvement in trafficking.

The NGO Fortify Rights reported in August that members of the Armed Police Battalion, a specialized unit of the Bangladesh police with responsibility for security in the Rohingya camps, arbitrarily detained and allegedly tortured refugees while systematically extorting camp residents. According to media reports, battalion officers killed four Rohingya in crossfire gunfights.

Police arrested at least 924 Rohingya outside the camps throughout the year. News sources reported that as of October 1, at least 54 Rohingya, including 19 Rohingya leaders (Majhis), 18 gang members, and a Rohingya volunteer worker, were killed in clashes or gunfights between gangs in the camps.

**Freedom of Movement:** There were restrictions on Rohingya freedom of movement. According to the 1993 MOU between the government and UNHCR, registered Rohingya refugees were not permitted to move outside official camps. After the 2017 influx, police set up checkpoints on the roads to restrict travel by both registered refugees and arrivals beyond the Ukhiya and Teknaf subdistricts. Rohingya located at Bhasan Char had little means to exit the island or travel to camps in Cox's Bazar, where many claimed to have family members, leading some human rights groups to label the situation on the island as "detention."

The government allowed at least two trips per month from the island to the camps in Cox's Bazar for family visits. Regular and reliable connections to and from the mainland for logistics, trade, family visit, medical, and other reasons did not exist. Refugees complained to donor representatives that they often had to wait months for an opportunity to visit Cox's Bazar, that visits were only permitted when deemed "urgent," and that unpaid government-appointed Rohingya community leaders had to be bribed to certify a visit request as urgent enough to merit approval and vouch for the visitors' intent to return to Bhasan Char.

Many camp authorities conducted curfews and law enforcement patrols, particularly at night, in response to reported concerns regarding violent attacks, abductions, or kidnappings in the camps. Stating a desire to better secure the camp and protect Rohingya from migrant smuggling, the

government maintained watchtowers and fencing in the camps in Cox's Bazar. Humanitarian agencies said fencing hindered delivery of services to refugees and exacerbated tensions between refugees and host communities.

**Employment:** There were credible reports the government imposed restrictions on refugees' ability to work. The government did not formally authorize Rohingya refugees in the country to work, although it allowed some volunteer opportunities with small stipends and limited cash-for-work activities for Rohingya to perform tasks within the camps. A skills development framework endorsed by the National Task Force outlined the skills and training that could be provided to refugees and host communities, with UN support, based on assumptions of the kinds of livelihoods generally available to Rohingya in Rakhine State.

On Bhasan Char, skills development and livelihood opportunities were limited but appeared to increase during the year.

Despite movement restrictions, some refugees worked illegally as manual laborers on the informal economy, where some were exploited as labor trafficking victims.

**Access to Basic Services:** While agencies made significant efforts to support those refugees who were most vulnerable, the shortage of land remained a central problem hindering the ability of Rohingya to access basic services.

During the year, multiple cuts to food rations due to funding shortfalls dramatically reduced refugees' access to adequate and nutritious food. This increased food insecurity throughout the camps.

Public education remained a problem. Higher education remained out of reach of most of the population, but in July, UNICEF completed implementation of the Burmese curriculum and reported over 300,000 Rohingya children were enrolled in kindergarten and grades one through 10. The government continued to forbid education outside this program.

Government authorities allowed registered and unregistered Rohingya regular access to public health care, but the Rohingya needed authorities' permission to leave the camp. Humanitarian partners ensured their health-care expenses were covered and that they returned to the camps. The health sector maintained information on all the health facilities within the camps and the surrounding areas. Based on available data, overall coverage met the minimum requirements.

Bhasan Char had primary healthcare facilities but lacked secondary and tertiary facilities, necessitating referrals to medical facilities off the island for advanced-level care. The transfer of patients to mainland facilities was hampered by required authorizations to depart the island, weather conditions, and boat availability.

## **f. Status and Treatment of Internally Displaced Persons**

Societal tensions and marginalization of Indigenous persons continued in the CHT because of a government policy initiated during an internal armed conflict from 1973-97. This policy relocated landless ethnic Bengalis to the CHT with the implicit objective of changing the demographic balance to make Bengalis the majority. The most recent national census revealed Indigenous people were now a minority in two of the three CHT districts.

The internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the CHT had limited physical security. Community leaders maintained Indigenous persons faced widespread violation of their rights by settlers, sometimes supported by security forces.

The number of IDPs in the CHT was in dispute. NGOs estimated the number could exceed 500,000, which included non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous persons. In 2020, the independent CHT Commission estimated slightly more than 90,000 Indigenous IDPs resided in the area.

For further information about IDPs in the country, please see the materials of the Internal Displacement Monitoring Center: <https://www.internal-displacement.org>.

## **g. Stateless Persons**

Rohingya in the country were legally or in fact stateless. They could not

acquire Bangladeshi citizenship, nor did the government of Burma recognize them as citizens.

Every individual born in Bangladesh was a citizen of the country by birth by law. This provision, however, was not afforded to Rohingya. A 2009 amendment to the law allowed anyone born in the country to either a Bangladeshi mother or father the right to claim citizenship. This amendment was not retroactively applied to Rohingya children born in the country to stateless fathers prior to 2009, so these children remained stateless. There were cases in which children born to one Bangladeshi parent and one Rohingya parent were not recognized as citizens, despite the 2009 amendment.

## **Section 3. Freedom to Participate in the Political Process**

The constitution provided citizens the ability to choose their government in free and fair periodic elections held by secret ballot and based on universal and equal suffrage. International observers reported recent elections were neither free nor fair because they were marred by serious irregularities.

### **Elections and Political Participation**

**Abuses or Irregularities in Recent Elections:** National elections were widely reported to not be fair or free of abuses and irregularities. Observers



considered 2018 parliamentary elections neither free nor fair and marred by irregularities including ballot box stuffing and intimidation of opposition polling agents and voters. During the campaign leading to the election, there were many credible reports of harassment, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and violence that made it difficult for opposition candidates and their supporters to meet, hold rallies, or campaign freely.

Intimidation, irregularities, and violence during campaigns and voting marked almost all parliamentary by-elections and local government elections during the year.

Campaigning for a July 17 parliamentary by-election, independent candidate and social media star Ashraful "Hero" Alam was attacked, reportedly by AL-aligned activists. Local police officials refused to accept his filing of a case against his attackers. On election day he was attacked again and hospitalized after police ejected him from a polling station and, according to reporters present, refused to protect him from a mob of governing party supporters. Authorities arrested 10 suspects in relation to the second assault.

**Political Parties and Political Participation:** The government mobilized law enforcement resources to level civil and criminal charges against opposition party leaders and activists. Press reporting supported claims by the BNP and other parties that police criminally charged thousands of BNP members related to political demonstrations during the year and detained many of

the accused. Human rights observers claimed most of these charges were baseless.

Opposition activists faced criminal charges. Leaders and members of Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), the largest Islamist political party in the country, said they could not consistently exercise their constitutional freedoms of speech and assembly because of harassment by law enforcement authorities. The police granted Jamaat permission to hold rallies in a few instances but frequently denied it in others. As it was not registered as a political party, Jamaat candidates were prohibited from seeking office under the Jamaat name.

AL-affiliated organizations, particularly its student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, carried out violence and intimidation around the country with impunity against nonpartisan individuals as well as opposition groups and others deemed critical of the government. On April 10, after the prime minister's denunciation in parliament of the country's leading newspaper *Prothom Alo*, AL youth activists broke in and vandalized the newspaper's offices, livestreaming their actions on social media.

A series of BNP and AL rallies in July saw clashes as BNP activists tried to stage sit-ins at main roads and entry points to Dhaka and met with pushback from police and reportedly AL affiliates. In a common pattern, police withdrew from a BNP protest site and allowed AL activists to attack. In the July clashes scores of persons were injured, including some BNP leaders.

Political rallies sparked violence again in late October, as the police and BNP supporters clashed, resulting in more than 13,700 arrests, and leaving at least 14 dead as of November.

Press reported in June that police headquarters ordered units across the country to speed up pending criminal cases – often dormant or old – to legally entangle potential candidates from the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami ahead of possible national elections. Potential candidates reportedly faced dozens or hundreds of cases. Minutes of a July 6 meeting leaked to the press documented officials from police headquarters instructing police around the country to implicate BNP and Jamaat supporters in criminal cases filed since 2013, stating, "BNP and Jamaat have to be declared disqualified for the election...all BNP and Jamaat leaders who are expected to contest elections are accused in some cases." Police were instructed to collaborate with the judiciary to speed up cases and coordinate witness testimony.

In August, Human Rights Watch reported authorities filed cases against more than 1,500 named opposition leaders and activists and 15,000 unnamed individuals in the weeks leading up to BNP rallies at the end of July. In October, less than 90 days before expected elections and ahead of major political rallies in Dhaka, the BNP claimed authorities detained 200 of its leaders and activists within a 15-hour period.

In numerous instances, the government interfered with the right of

opposition parties to organize public functions and restricted broadcasting of opposition political events. Press reported that government authorities hindered telecommunications connectivity for rallygoers attending opposition events, even as ruling party rallies on the same day were undisturbed.

### **Participation of Women and Members of Marginalized or Vulnerable**

**Groups:** No laws limited participation of women or members of minorities in the political process, and they did participate. Freedom House noted in its annual report that societal discrimination against women, as well as against LGBTQI+ persons, limited their participation in politics. Religious, ethnic, and other marginalized groups remained underrepresented in politics and state agencies.

## **Section 4. Corruption in Government**

The law provided criminal penalties for conviction of corruption by officials, but the government did not implement the law effectively. There were numerous reports of government corruption during the year, and officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), set up in 2004 to serve as an independent monitoring mechanism, was mandated to focus on investigating cases of corruption, including but not limited to bribery, embezzlement, extortion, abuse of discretion, and improper political

contributions. Local human rights organizations questioned the independence and effectiveness of the ACC, which they claimed was evidenced by the acquittal of most cases brought against ruling party officials and bureaucrats, while legal processes, investigations, and filing of cases against leaders of the opposition parties continued. In August, media sources reported the ACC faced a backlog of over 6,500 cases.

**Corruption:** Corruption remained a serious problem. Freedom House’s annual report noted “corruption is endemic, and anticorruption efforts have been weakened by politicized enforcement.”

In January, the ACC opened an inquiry based on allegations Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority managing director Taqsem A. Khan bought 14 houses and several cars in the United States during his 13-year tenure as the authority’s managing director. According to the allegations, Taqsem stole money from foreign-loan funded projects to fund his luxury purchases.

In February, media outlets broke news of an internal government report outlining corruption allegations against the former mayor of Gazipur, Mohammad Zahangir Alam. Corruption claims included payments for garbage pickups which never took place, road construction projects which were not performed, skimming lease payments owed to the Gazipur City Corporation, and charges for public events which did not take place. The government did not publicly release the internal report.

For additional information about corruption in the country, please see the Department of State's *Investment Climate Statement* for the country, and the Department of State's *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, which includes information on financial crimes.

## **Section 5. Governmental Posture Towards International and Nongovernmental Monitoring and Investigation of Alleged Abuses of Human Rights**

Several domestic and international human rights groups investigated and published their findings on human rights cases, but they generally operated with significant government restrictions. Government officials were rarely cooperative and responsive to their reports, occasionally verbally attacking critical organizations and activists by name.

Although human rights groups often sharply criticized the government, they also practiced self-censorship. Observers alleged the government strategically reduced the effectiveness and inhibited operations of civil society through restrictions. Even civil society members affiliated with the ruling party reported receiving threats of arrest from the security forces for public criticism of government policies.

The government continued to restrict the funding and operations of the human rights organization Odhikar following its rejection of the

organization's registration in 2022. The organization's officials continued to report harassment, intimidation, and surveillance by government officials and security forces.

The Dhaka Cyber Tribunal continued to conduct hearings in a case against Odhikar's secretary Adilur Rahman Khan and director Nasiruddin Elan over alleged violations in 2013 of the Information and Communications Technology Act. In July, three UN special rapporteurs called on the government to stop harassing Odhikar and ensure respect for due process, calling the case emblematic of the use of criminal proceedings to silence human rights defenders and organizations. On September 14, the tribunal convicted Khan and Elan and sentenced them each to two years in prison and a fine of 10,000 taka (\$90). On October 15 authorities released them on bail for one year and stayed the fine, following their appeal to the High Court and its subsequent ruling.

The government required all NGOs, including religious organizations, to register with the Ministry of Social Welfare. Some local and international NGOs working on human rights issues claimed intelligence agencies monitored them. The government sometimes restricted international NGOs' ability to operate through delays in project registration, cease-and-desist letters, and visa refusals.

The NGO Affairs Bureau continued to block project approval and release of funding to several NGOs. Several NGOs said they received informal

notification from the government to cease or slow down activities. Others faced repeated formal roadblocks to get projects approved despite submitting all the required paperwork. In some cases, banks refused to release funds to NGOs working on sensitive governance and rights issues. Lengthy delays caused some NGOs to curtail activities as they could not pay their staff.

The law included what rights groups reported were punitive provisions for NGOs making “derogatory” comments regarding the constitution of the country, its founding history, or constitutional bodies.

**Retribution against Human Rights Defenders:** The government filed numerous cases against human rights defenders. Human rights defenders claimed they were under constant government surveillance and they and their family members experienced frequent harassment.

In July, the Centre for Governance Studies released a report on the status of human rights defenders in the country. The report found at least 65 percent of surveyed human rights defenders said that the ruling AL party, law enforcement, and intelligence services obstructed their work. The report noted 62 percent of those surveyed claimed the overall environment of their work was “very unsafe” or “unsafe,” and 42 percent noted threats, intimidation and persecution from sources connected to the state, including law enforcement, state intelligence agencies, and government officials.



**The United Nations or Other International Bodies:** Since 2013 the government had not responded to a request from the UN WGEID to visit the country. The Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in the country reported several other pending requests for UN special rapporteurs to visit the country since 2017, including the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions; the special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; and the special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. Some UN special rapporteurs visited throughout the year, including the rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights in May and the rapporteur on the human rights of migrants in January.

**Government Human Rights Bodies:** The National Human Rights Commission's primary activities were to investigate human rights abuses, address discrimination in law, educate the public on human rights, and advise the government on key human rights matters. Most human rights organizations questioned the independence and effectiveness of the commission, alleging the government used state institutions including the commission to implement its political agenda.

## Section 6. Discrimination and Societal Abuses

### Women

**Rape and Domestic Violence:** The law prohibited rape of girls and women by men and physical spousal abuse, but the law excluded marital rape if the girl or woman was older than 13. Conviction of rape was punishable by life imprisonment or the death penalty. The government did not enforce the law effectively.

Human rights organizations found rape remained a serious issue in the country. There were allegations of rapists blackmailing survivors by threatening to release the video of the rape on social media. There were many reports of sexual violence committed with impunity.

In February, police arrested five men for the gang rape of a woman the month prior. According to news reports, the woman hired a rickshaw pulled by one of the accused, who then abducted her and took her to a building under construction where a group of five men raped her. In July, police arrested a man for raping a woman college student in Dhaka. According to police, the accused lured the student to the third floor of a shopping mall where he raped her.

According to guidelines for handling rape cases, the officer in charge of a police station had to record any information relating to rape or sexual

assault irrespective of the place of occurrence. Chemical and DNA tests had to be conducted within 48 hours from when the incident was reported. Guidelines also stipulated every police station was required to have a woman police officer available to survivors of rape or sexual assault during the recording of the case by the duty officer. The statements of the survivor had to be recorded in the presence of a lawyer, social worker, protection officer, or any other individual the survivor deemed appropriate. Survivors with disabilities were supposed to be provided with government-supported interpretation services, if necessary, and the investigating officer along with a woman police officer was required to escort the survivor to a timely medical examination.

According to human rights monitors, many survivors did not report rapes due to lack of access to legal services, social stigma, fear of further harassment, and the legal requirement to produce witnesses. The burden was on the rape survivor to prove a rape occurred, using medical evidence.

**Other Forms of Gender-based Violence or Harassment:** Some NGOs reported violence against women related to disputes concerning dowries, despite dowry demands being illegal. By law, an individual convicted of demanding or giving a dowry could be imprisoned for up to five years, fined, or both, but the practice remained common throughout the country. From January to September, ASK found 114 incidents of dowry-related violence against women, with 51 women killed because of dowry disputes.

In late July, six persons allegedly beat four girl soccer players in Khulna for wearing shorts during soccer practice. Though one of the victims filed a case with the police against the attackers, the alleged attackers continued to threaten the girls with promises to file false cases against them, acid attacks, harm to their family members, and death. Police arrested the main accused individual and pledged to provide security to the victims and other players; however, half of the players at the academy stopped attending practice due to the threats.

ASK reported five incidents of fatwas (religious edicts) used to target women between January and August. A Supreme Court Appellate Division ruling allows the use of fatwas only to settle religious matters; fatwas could not be invoked to justify punishment, nor could they supersede secular law. Nevertheless, in some cases, these declarations resulted in extrajudicial punishments, often against women, for perceived moral transgressions.

Cases of vigilantism against women occurred. The incidents included whipping, beating, and other forms of physical violence.

Assailants threw acid in the faces of survivors, usually women, leaving them disfigured and often blind. Acid attacks were in some instances related to a woman's refusal to accept a marriage proposal or to land or other money disputes.

Although sexual harassment was prohibited by a 2009 High Court ruling,

harassment, also known as “Eve teasing,” was common according to multiple NGOs.

**Discrimination:** The constitution declared all citizens equal before the law with entitlement to equal protection under the law. It also explicitly recognized the equal rights of women to those of men “in all spheres of the state and of public life.” According to NGOs, the government did not always enforce gender equality laws effectively. Women did not enjoy the same legal status and rights as men in family, property, and inheritance law. Family and inheritance laws varied by religion.

The labor law prohibited wage discrimination based on sex, but it did not prohibit other forms of labor-related discrimination. Women were generally underrepresented in supervisory and management positions and earned less than men counterparts even when performing similar functions.

**Reproductive Rights:** There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

A full range of contraceptive methods, including long-acting reversible contraception and permanent methods, were available through government, NGO, and for-profit clinics and hospitals. Low-income families were more likely to rely on public family planning services offered free of cost. Government district hospitals had crisis management centers providing contraceptive care to survivors of sexual assault. These facilities

did not provide postexposure prophylaxis. Due to cultural and religious factors, many women were unable to access contraception without their husbands' permission. The UN Population Fund's (UNFPA) *State of World Population 2023* report claimed contraceptive prevalence rate was 64 percent, but that two-thirds of women lacked decision-making authority on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Weaknesses in the public-health system, such as lack of trained providers and equipment in rural areas, resulted in inequitable access to information and services.

Taboos and stigma surrounding menstruation created social and religious barriers for menstruating women. In conservative communities some menstruating women could not use the kitchen or observe religious practices due to fear of contamination. A civil society organization estimated one in four girls stayed home from school while menstruating. The cost of menstrual products was relatively high compared to average wages, due in part to being heavily taxed, prompting some women to use potentially unhygienic materials while menstruating.

Civil society organizations reported survivors of child marriage had less negotiating power to make family planning choices.

LGBTQI+ groups reported nonmale persons faced legal, cultural, and social barriers that impeded access to sexual and reproductive health services. In

many cases, there were requirements for a third party, such as a spouse or male guardian, to authorize access to health-care services.

Many health practitioners expressed discomfort in discussing sexual activity, and shamed patients that discussed sexually transmitted infections.

Discussions of women's sexuality were particularly taboo. Civil society organizations and LGBTQI+ activists often cited social stigma against HIV and AIDS and against higher-risk populations as a barrier for accessing health services, especially for the transgender community.

## **Systemic Racial or Ethnic Violence and Discrimination**

The law provided for the protection of members of some marginalized ethnic or racial communities; however, these laws were rarely enforced. NGOs reported national origin, racial, and ethnic minorities faced discrimination. For example, some Dalits (lowest-caste Hindus) suffered from restricted access to land, adequate housing, education, and employment.

Members of the estimated 300,000 Urdu-speaking population (known as Biharis, originally Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to then East Pakistan before the Bangladesh Liberation War) stated their requests to obtain passports were sometimes rejected by immigration officers due to their lack of a permanent address. Almost all of this population still resided in refugee-like camps established by the International Committee of the Red

Cross in the 1970s, when Biharis believed they would return to Pakistan following the 1971 war. In 2008, a High Court ruling that the Bihari community had rights as citizens prompted the international donor community to cease support because the community was technically no longer stateless. While the government provided some basic services, including water and electricity, Biharis reported social and economic discrimination as well as a lack of initiatives integrating them into society, leaving them isolated in crowded camps.

## **Indigenous Peoples**

The Indigenous communities of the CHT and other areas throughout the country experienced widespread discrimination and abuse despite nationwide government quotas for participation of Indigenous residents in the civil service and higher education. These conditions also persisted despite provisions for local governance in the 1997 Peace Accord, which was not fully implemented. Indigenous persons were unable to participate effectively in decisions affecting their lands due to disagreements regarding land dispute resolution procedures under the Land Commission Act. Local organizations claimed the army and intelligence forces carried out extrajudicial killings and arbitrary arrests; beat, harassed, threatened, and jailed Indigenous people on false charges; and labeled rights activists as terrorists and extortionists.



Indigenous activists claimed ethnic minorities were drastically undercounted by the census, impacting land rights and the development budget of the CHT and other Indigenous lands. The official census reported 1.65 million minority persons, while the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum estimated there were around three million ethnic minority persons. While the country had a 20 percent poverty rate, poverty in the plains, where some Indigenous persons lived, was more than 80 percent and more than 65 percent in the CHT. Organizations corroborated health care available to Indigenous persons was well below the standard available to non-Indigenous persons in the country.

Human rights organizations continued to allege evictions and communal attacks occurred against local populations in the CHT, often at the direction of the government, army, and intelligence agencies. To mark International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples on August 9, the Bangladesh Adivasi Forum organized a discussion to demand constitutional recognition of ethnic minorities as "indigenous people."

In January, media reported 100 persons armed with sticks attacked an Mro village in the CHT's Bandarban district. Attackers vandalized and burned a dozen Mro houses, and looted the homes for mobile phones, household utensils, clothes, cattle, and poultry. Community members alleged the attackers were affiliated with Lama Rubber Industries and sought to drive villagers from the area. The rubber plantation company responded that

Indigenous people were building houses on company land. Indigenous communities in areas other than the CHT reported the loss of land to Bengali Muslims, and Indigenous peoples' advocacy groups reported deforestation to support Rohingya refugee camps and other commercial pursuits caused severe environmental degradation in their land, adversely affecting their livelihoods.

In January, CHT political group the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) noted in an annual report 235 incidences of human rights violations by security forces, armed extremist groups, and land grabbers in the CHT the previous year. The PCJSS also stated the government escalated "military measure" to manage the situation in the CHT, instead of using political and peaceful means through the implementation of the 1997 accord.

Reports of sexual assaults on Indigenous women and children by Bengali neighbors or security personnel remained unresolved.

## Children

**Birth Registration:** The government did not register births for nor extend citizenship to Rohingya refugees born in the country, although it permitted UNHCR to register births within the refugee camps.

**Education:** Education was free and compulsory through eighth grade by law, and the government offered subsidies to parents to keep girls in class through 10th grade. Enrollments in primary schools showed gender parity,

but completion rates fell in secondary school, with more boys than girls completing that level. Early and forced marriage was a factor in girls' attrition from secondary school.

**Child Abuse:** Many forms of child abuse, including sexual abuse, physical and humiliating punishment, child abandonment, kidnapping, and trafficking, continued to be serious and widespread. The law prohibited child abuse and neglect with the penalty for conviction of up to five years' imprisonment, a fine, or both. The Department of Social Services operated "Child Helpline – 1098," a free telephone service designed to help children facing violence, abuse, and exploitation. The hotline received approximately 80,000 calls a year on average and was accessible from anywhere in the country. The hotline center provided services such as removal, referral, and counseling.

During the year, former students detailed multiple allegations of sexual abuse at the hands of teachers and older pupils in Islamic madrassas. In February, a Dhaka court sentenced a madrasa teacher to life in prison on charges of raping a student, age nine, in 2019. In May, a madrasa teacher reportedly raped a girl, age eight, after calling her to his room when she went to the madrasa to study around 4:00 p.m. In May, the AL student league suspended a local leader after police arrested him on charges of raping two teenage boys. In July, media reported police recovered the body of a girl, age eight, from a pond in Rajshahi after she was kidnapped from

her house. Her body showed signs of rape.

Despite advances, trafficking of children and inadequate care and protection for survivors of trafficking continued to be problems. Child labor and abuse at the workplace remained problems in certain industries, mostly in the informal sector, and child domestic workers were vulnerable to all forms of abuse.

**Child, Early, and Forced Marriage:** The legal age of marriage was 18 for women and 21 for men. The law included a provision for marriages of women and men at any age in “special circumstances.”

UNFPA’s 2023 report assessed 51 percent of girls married before the age of 18. High rates of child marriage resulted in girls leaving school at a higher rate than boys. UNICEF noted girls who marry in childhood were less likely to remain in school.

The government’s own statistics were lower than UNFPA’s estimate but still high. In June, the BBS reported the number of early marriages involving girls under 15 and 18 years of age increased significantly in 2022. According to BBS, 40.9 percent of girls under 18 years of age married in 2022, compared to 32.4 percent in 2021. The rates were higher in rural areas than urban ones. The statistics further showed that 6.5 percent of girls under the age of 15 married in 2022, up from 4.7 percent in 2021.

To reduce early and forced marriages, the government offered stipends for

girls' school expenses beyond the compulsory level. The government and NGOs conducted workshops and public events to teach parents the importance of their daughters waiting until age 18 before marrying.

According to the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, two mobile services were available to report cases of child marriage and provide other services; the Joya App and a "109 Hotline." The ministry's website hosts a digital library to provide information on existing laws and other resources to prevent child marriage.

**Sexual Exploitation of Children:** The law prohibited sexual exploitation of children; the penalty for conviction was 10 years to life imprisonment. Child pornography and selling or distributing such material was prohibited. Child sex trafficking victims in brothels were able to produce notarized certificates stating they were older than age 18, and some observers claimed corrupt government and law enforcement officials condoned or facilitated these practices. In addition to cross-border trafficking, traffickers lured girls from around the country into domestic commercial sexual exploitation in legal and illegal brothels and hotels.

## **Antisemitism**

There was no Jewish community in the country. Politicians and imams made antisemitic statements, reportedly to gain support from their constituencies.

## Trafficking in Persons

See the State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## Forced Organ Harvesting

Organ harvesting continued in the country. In July, the RAB publicized the arrests of suspects in a kidney trafficking ring. The accused leader of the ring claimed he was underpaid for his own kidney by a broker in India in 2019. According to the RAB, the man noted the huge demand for kidney transplant patients in India and started the organ trafficking ring. After finding wealthy clients who needed kidneys online or through local brokers from different areas, the accused arranged for donors to be sent to India. During the arrests, the RAB recovered fake certificates for kidney donors and recipients, passports, bank cards, Indian rupees, and Bangladeshi taka. The organ traffickers allegedly charged recipients as much as five million taka (\$45,000) per kidney, but paid donors 500,000-600,000 taka (\$4,500-\$5,400). The RAB estimated the organ trafficking ring sold 50 kidneys before the arrests.

## Acts of Violence, Criminalization, and Other Abuses Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity or Expression, or

## Sex Characteristics

**Criminalization:** Same-sex sexual conduct was illegal under the penal code, which carried with it punishment up to life imprisonment. The government did not actively enforce the law. Members of LGBTQI+ groups reported the government retained the law because of societal pressure. There were no credible efforts to rescind discriminatory laws that targeted LGBTQI+ persons.

**Violence and Harassment:** Members of LGBTQI+ communities received threatening messages via telephone, text, and social media, and some were harassed by police. They stressed the need for online and physical security due to continued threats of physical violence. The government and police took few official actions to investigate, prosecute, and punish those complicit in violence and abuses against LGBTQI+ persons. LGBTQI+ advocacy organizations reported police used the law as a pretext to harass individuals who were perceived to be LGBTQI+ regardless of their sexual orientation. Some groups reported harassment under a suspicious behavior provision of the police code. LGBTQI+ individuals experienced high levels of fear, harassment, and law enforcement actions taken in the wake of violent extremist attacks in the past decade.

On August 20, media reported Islamic extremists killed Golam Kibria, a gay schoolteacher in Savar, claiming Kibria's sexual orientation contradicted

their beliefs. Human rights groups emphasized this incident was not an isolated occurrence but rather emblematic of the broader human rights abuses faced by LGBTQI+ individuals within the country.

NGOs reported high levels of sexual and gender-based violence against Rohingya LGBTQI+ individuals living in the refugee camps, who stated their ongoing physical and psychological needs were not adequately met.

**Discrimination:** The law did not prohibit discrimination by state and nonstate actors based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. LGBTQI+ groups reported official discrimination in employment and occupation, housing, and access to government services, including health care and access to justice. Though the government offered limited training and employment opportunities to help third-gender persons gain employment, rights activists stated only a small number of third-gender persons worked in the manufacturing and service sectors, and many faced workplace discrimination.

Mental health care was a top concern and, according to these groups, mental health-care providers tended to use moralistic terms to shame LGBTQI+ persons. Access to preexposure and postexposure medications that prevent transmittal of HIV during sex was limited. HIV testing was free, but stigma regarding testing and seeking treatment remained strong.

While some transgender women in the country identified as *hijra* (a cultural



South Asian term for some transgender women as well as some intersex and gender-nonconforming individuals), due to an affinity for the hijra subculture or a desire for increased social protection, not all chose to do so. Many transgender women asserted their transgender identities and corrected those that identified them as hijra. Meanwhile, transgender men received little support or tolerance, particularly in poor and rural communities. Transgender rights advocates claimed the government conducted genitalia checks on hijra in some cases, before allowing them access to services.

**Availability of Legal Gender Recognition:** Passports and legal identification documents, including voter registration forms, included the option to select “X” or “Hijra” as a third gender. The most recent national census included a “third gender” category. Although the government made some progress in promoting social acceptance of hijra persons, the government made limited efforts to promote the rights of others in the LGBTQI+ community and did not offer legal recognition.

**Involuntary or Coercive Medical or Psychological Practices:** LGBTQI+ activists reported so-called conversion therapy practices were widespread. Lesbian women and gay men recounted stories of being sent by their parents to drug rehabilitation facilities and forced to take sedatives, wear traditional clothing, and recite the Quran. The government did not condemn these practices.

**Restrictions of Freedom of Expression, Association, or Peaceful Assembly:**

Organizations working on LGBTQI+ topics in the country faced major hurdles to fund and implement projects due to their inability to register with the government as formal LGBTQI+ NGOs and thus receive international funding. Organizations specifically assisting lesbians were rare, though programming by LGBTQI+ organizations continued to expand beyond traditional male and hijra participants. Severe social stigma regarding sexual orientation was common and prevented open discussion of the subject.

**Persons with Disabilities**

The law provided for equal treatment and freedom from discrimination for persons with disabilities, and the government took mostly effective measures to enforce these provisions.

The law required physical structures be made accessible to those with disabilities, but the government did not implement the law effectively and government buildings had no accommodations for persons with disabilities. The law required persons with disabilities to register for identity cards to track their enrollment in educational institutions and access to jobs. This registration allowed them to be included in voter lists, to cast votes, and to participate in elections. Local NGOs estimated 50 to 60 percent of those with disabilities were unable to exercise their right to vote, as voting centers lacked accommodations for persons with disabilities.

According to NGOs, some children with disabilities did not attend public school due to lack of accommodation. The government trained teachers on inclusive education and recruited disability specialists at the district level. The government also allocated stipends for students with disabilities.

Many organizations reported persons with visual disabilities experienced difficulties accessing technology. While individuals reported government websites contained more user-friendly services for persons with disabilities, they also reported information for persons with disabilities was usually uploaded on portals as scanned documents, which made it incompatible for software used by persons with visual impairments. The government provided students with visual impairments with accessible books every year.

The government took some action to investigate those responsible for violence and abuses against persons with disabilities.

Government facilities for treating persons with mental disabilities were inadequate.

## **Section 7. Worker Rights**

### **a. Freedom of Association and the Right to Collective Bargaining**

The law provided for the right to join and, with government approval, to

form unions. The law did not cover workers in the informal sector, who make up about 85 percent of the labor force. The legal definition of workers excluded managerial, supervisory, and administrative staff. Civil servants, firefighters, security guards, and employers' confidential assistants were not allowed to join unions. Unions were not permitted in export processing zones (EPZ) and special economic zones. The law provided for workers in unions to bargain collectively and engage in legal strikes and prohibited antiunion discrimination.

The law provided for workers in a collective bargaining union to have the right to strike in the event of a failure to reach settlement, but the law placed limitations on this right. At least 75 percent of union employees had to support a strike action. The government could prohibit a strike deemed to pose a "serious hardship to the community" and could terminate any strike lasting more than 30 days. The law additionally prohibited strikes for the first three years of commercial production if the factory was built with foreign investment or owned by a foreign investor. Few strikes followed the cumbersome legal requirements, however, and strikes or walkouts often occurred spontaneously. Work stoppages, strikes, and workplace actions regarding wage arrears, improper or illegal shutdowns, layoffs, terminations, and discrimination were prevalent in several sectors during the year.

The law required every factory with more than 50 employees to have a participation committee. The law stated there was no requirement for a

participation committee if a trade union existed in the establishment. Employers often selected or appointed workers to participation committees rather than allowing worker elections to those positions as required by law. Employers also failed to comply with laws and regulations that provided for the effectiveness and independence of participation committees.

The law severely restricted the right to organize and bargain collectively for the nearly 488,000 workers in the EPZs. EPZ workers could establish worker welfare associations (WWA), but the law did not empower WWAs to independently represent workers in collective bargaining. WWAs were prohibited from establishing any connection to outside political parties, unions, federations, or NGOs.

WWAs remained dominated by the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) and continued to supplant independent unions. Among the 456 operating enterprises in the eight EPZs, WWAs were formed in only 288 enterprises. The law gave BEPZA discretion to ban any strike in EPZs it views as prejudicial to the public interest. The Ministry of Labour and Employment's Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) continued to face obstacles to conducting inspections in the EPZs, including the requirement to obtain prior approval from the BEPZA Executive Chairman. Following the issuance of the October 2022 EPZ Labor Rules, the DIFE conducted roughly 45 inspections in EPZ factories. The law provided for EPZ labor tribunals, appellate tribunals, and conciliators, but

those institutions were not established. Instead, 13 labor courts and one appellate labor court heard EPZ cases. The law did not empower the DIFE to file cases in the labor courts or give notice to an establishment for violations in EPZs factories, but the law required DIFE to send its observations directly to the BEPZA. More than 50 percent of WWAs in any particular zone of an EPZ were required to approve a federation.

There were 10 economic zones in operation under the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority. The DIFE, however, did not have the authority to inspect enterprises in the economic zones. Workers in the economic zones were prevented from forming trade unions and were not permitted to establish communication with external worker rights organizations.

The government did not effectively enforce laws protecting freedom of association, the right to bargain collectively, and the right to strike.

Penalties for unfair labor practices and antiunion discrimination were not commensurate with penalties for other laws involving denials of civil rights. Penalties were sometimes applied against violators, more often against workers than employers. The Department of Labor (DOL) within the Ministry of Labour and Employment reported that between January 2022 and August 2023, workers filed 17 complaints regarding unfair labor practices and antiunion discrimination, and as of November all complaints remained under investigation.

The law did not allow workers to file unfair labor practice or antiunion

discrimination cases directly with the labor courts. Workers first had to file complaints with the DOL alleging unfair labor practices. The DOL first investigated and attempted to bring the parties to consensus through arbitration. DOL's decisions were not binding. The DOL could file cases with the labor court if arbitration failed to reach a resolution between the parties. A labor court could order reinstatement of workers fired for union activities, but reinstatement was rarely awarded. The DIFE had authority to mediate wage-related disputes. Labor organizations reported the conciliation process slowed down workers' access to justice.

While the law allowed for more than one union in a factory, the DOL did not allow more than one union per factory in the garment industry. Labor leaders continued to report that only management-supported unions received quick union registration credentials.

Barriers to union formation remained in law and practice. The law required a minimum of 20 percent of workers at an enterprise for union registration. According to labor leaders and labor organizations, unions in large enterprises faced significant difficulties meeting the 20 percent membership threshold. From January to August, the DOL rejected 37 registration applications for not meeting the membership threshold. Labor groups also cited practical barriers to registration beyond the law, including the DOL's failure to review and issue registration certificates to unions within the 55-day legal limit, comparing worker signatures, and requiring unions to hold

two general meetings for registration. Labor rights organizations reported that politically affiliated factory owners interfered with the union registration process and trade union activities. The International Trade Union Confederation noted the labor law did not align with international labor standards and raised concerns over obstruction in forming trade unions and police interference with peaceful workers protests. The confederation also called for stronger measures to restrain interference in union elections.

Labor leaders, organizers, and workers faced violence, threats, and unfair labor practices for exercising the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. On June 25, assailants killed prominent labor organizer Shahidul Islam after he attempted to resolve a labor dispute over two months of unpaid wages and holiday bonuses at the Prince Jacquard Sweaters factory near Dhaka. Islam was the president of the Gazipur branch of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation. According to press reports, an autopsy report from August 9 indicated he died from profuse bleeding after sustaining a blow to his head. The Industrial Police, the lead agency on this case, reported the arrest of nine individuals and confessional statements from key suspects.

Following attempts by workers to organize at the Fashion Forum Limited factory, in March factory management beat three organizers of the proposed union and forced them to resign. The following day, workers



protested and clashed with the management. On March 31, factory management filed a criminal case against Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation general secretary Babul Akter for supporting union activity at the factory and allegedly encouraging workers to engage in violence in the factory. Criminal charges against Akter remained pending as of November.

Labor groups reported violence, intimidation and unfair labor practices against organizers, union leaders, and workers following the second attempted union registration of the Sommilito Sramik Union at Mondol Fashion. According to reports, on July 15, Mondol Fashion factory authorities detained, beat, and threatened union leaders and members. On July 29, factory management forced three union leaders to sign employment termination orders. Labor groups reported that at least six union leaders and members took shelter in the Sommilito Garment Shromik Federation office while others left the area in fear for their lives.

During the year, the Ministry of Labour and Employment reported the garment sector had 1,203 active trade unions and around 450 active participation committees. Labor leaders, however, claimed much lower numbers of trade unions, asserting intimidation, corruption, and violence suppressed union organizing. The ministry reported the fisheries sector had 71 active unions. Only 70 tanneries were unionized under the sector's single union. The tea sector had one union, the largest in the country,

representing around 150,000 workers at 167 plantations.

## **b. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's *Trafficking in Persons Report* at

<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **c. Prohibition of Child Labor and Minimum Age for Employment**

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

## **d. Discrimination (see section 6)**

## **e. Acceptable Conditions of Work**

**Wage and Hour Laws:** The National Minimum Wage Board established minimum monthly wages by sector. The minimum wage was not indexed to inflation, but the board occasionally made cost-of-living adjustments to wages in some sectors. None of the set minimum wages provided a sufficient standard of living for urban dwellers, but many were above the poverty level. Failure to pay the specified minimum wage was punishable by imprisonment up to one year, a fine, or both, and the employer was supposed to repay owed wages. There were 42 sectors under minimum wage regulation. During the year, the government did not include any new

industrial sectors under the minimum wage regulation. Despite a labor law requirement to revise the minimum wage every five years, wages in many sectors long remained unchanged. Wages received little attention in sectors lacking strong trade unions or labor organizations.

By law a standard workday was eight hours. A standard workweek was 48 hours, but the workweek could be extended to 60 hours subject to payment of an overtime allowance double the basic wage. Overtime could not be compulsory. Workers had to have one hour of rest if they worked for more than six hours a day, or a half hour of rest for more than five hours' work per day. The law stated every worker should be allowed at least 11 festival holidays with full wages in a year, fixed by the employer in consultation with the collective bargaining agent, if any. Factory workers were supposed to receive one day off every week. Shop workers received one-and-a-half days off per week. The labor law did not specify a penalty for forced overtime or failing to pay overtime wages.

**Occupational Safety and Health:** The law establishes occupational safety and health (OSH) standards, and amendments to the law created mandatory worker safety committees. The labor law specified sanctions when failure to comply caused harm. Penalties for violations of OSH laws were commensurate with those for crimes such as negligence.

Labor law implementing rules outlined the process for forming OSH committees in factories. The committees included both management and

workers nominated by the collective bargaining agreement or, in absence of an agreement, worker representatives of the factory's participation committee. Where there was no union or participation committee, the Ministry of Labour and Employment was responsible for arranging participation committee elections.

The highest number of workplace accidents took place in the transport, construction, production, and service sectors. The construction and clothing sectors were reportedly the deadliest for workers.

On May 4, a boiler explosion at the Rahima Industrial Complex Limited killed seven workers. According to the fire service, the explosion occurred due to excess temperature in the boiler chamber. During the investigation, the DIFE found several safety violations including absence of safety equipment.

In 2022 the Ministry of Commerce approved and issued a framework between the DIFE and the Ready-Made Garment Sustainability Council (RSC), a private, tripartite organization with a mandate to oversee safety standards at garment factories. Under the framework, the DIFE held meetings with RSC; shared data and reports in prescribed format; conducted technical discussion on safety monitoring; and established a joint working group. The Ministry of Commerce supervised the activities of the RSC through the Government Coordination Council. The council included participation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Textiles and Jute, Ministry of Labour and Employment, Ministry of Industry, Bangladesh

Economic Zones Authority, and BEPZA.

The building code failed to meet basic international fire safety standards, and government oversight of building safety outside the garment export sector remained limited. Although prior work under the brand-led Accord and similar programs improved structural, fire, and electrical safety conditions in 2,300 ready-made garment factories producing for Western brands, safety auditors reported fire detection and suppression systems in these factories often did not work because they were not maintained properly. The government's National Initiative covers 1,549 additional RMG factories producing for domestic sale or for export to other foreign markets. Under the DIFE, the government formed a Remediation and Coordination Cell to monitor and remediate National Initiative factories. The DIFE oversaw an Industrial Safety Unit, consisting of seven engineers, to oversee the National Initiative factories. The Industrial Safety Unit worked closely with the RSC to monitor and remediate industrial safety standards in the garment sector.

**Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement:** DIFE labor inspectors only had the legal authority to make unannounced inspections in establishments outside the EPZs. Within EPZs, the DIFE could only conduct announced inspections, with limitations. The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. Penalties for violations were not commensurate with those for similar crimes and were rarely applied against

violators.

DIFE inspectors did not have authority to issue penalties or initiate sanctions; they could notify establishments of violations in writing and file complaints with the labor courts. The DIFE regularly filed cases with the labor courts against employers for administrative violations of the law, such as not maintaining documents. The Ministry of Labour and Employment reported the DIFE filed cases against some factories for failure to pay minimum wages and overtime during the year, but labor organizations saw no cases.

There were criticisms regarding the DIFE's complaint mechanism. A worker had to enter their name, position, and identity number in the complaint form. Once the complaint was received, the DIFE issued a letter to factory management with reference to the complaint form, which identified the complainant. This mechanism provided inadequate protections to workers and raised doubts on efficacy. BEPZA maintains a helpline telephone number for EPZ workers.

DIFE's resources were inadequate to inspect and remediate problems effectively. The factory inspection department had only 401 inspectors and 31 inspectorate offices to review safety matters in more than 530,000 production units and shops.

Although increased focus on the garment industry improved safety

compliance, resources, inspections, and remediation across other sectors were inadequate. Legal limits on hours of work were routinely violated and a labor rights NGO found 95 percent of factories did not comply with overtime limits. Employers often required workers, including pregnant women, to work 12 hours a day or more to meet quotas and export deadlines, but they did not always properly compensate workers for their overtime. Employers in many cases delayed workers' pay or denied full leave benefits.

According to the *Labour Force Survey 2016-2017*, of a total of 61 million employed persons, 85 percent worked in the informal sector. Legal protection for workers in the informal sector was inadequate although most OSH incidents occurred there.