

Bangladesh: Halt extrajudicial execution of alleged drug offenders and ensure right to life and fair trial

Bangkok/Kathmandu, 8 June, 2018: The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns the serial extrajudicial killings of more than 130 suspected drug offenders, carried out in a fortnight's time in May, 2018 without conforming to the basic international human rights norms and constitutional obligations of the government of Bangladesh. FORUM-ASIA is gravely concerned about the continuous blatant abuse of human rights by the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a paramilitary wing of Bangladesh Police having previous records of alleged extrajudicial executions, and demands an immediate halt of the executions.

On 3 May, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina approved RAB to continue armed operations against drug abuse reportedly to combat the spread of 'Yaba', a mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine, widely known in Asia.¹ Since then, around 130 people have been killed in alleged gun fights and 13,000 people have been arrested.² Bangladesh has an estimated seven million drug addicts, with up to four-fifths addicted to Yaba which streams across the border from Myanmar³.

The Government forces taking part in the drive repeatedly claim that the killings took place during fire exchanges (popularly called 'gun fights') with the suspected drug offenders. However, information shared by family members of the victims with media reveals planned custodial killings.⁴ *Modus operandi* in most of the killings was similar and took place at night. One case raised a widespread public outcry. Akramul Haque, 46 year old, was allegedly killed during a gun fight, by members of RAB. Four days later, his wife released audio recordings of phone conversations with her husband.⁵ In one of those recordings, gunshots can be heard, which allegedly resulted in his death. Those recordings indicate a planned custodial killing.⁶ Kazi Reazul Hoque, the chairman of the National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh expressed his deep concern⁷ over this incident of arbitrary deprivation of rights guaranteed by the constitution and called for a magistrate's inquiry.⁸

Multiple cases have been reported in the last one month that counter RAB's narrative. Azim Sheikh, the brother of a deceased informed media that his brother, Habibur Rahman Sheikh, was detained in his home on 17 May, by the security forces. His body was later discovered on 19 May.⁹ In another case, Rezaul Islam Rony was murdered by RAB under dubious circumstances.¹⁰

¹<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/25/bangladeshs-philippines-style-drugs-war-creating-atmosphere-of-terror>

²<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/06/audio-clip-captures-bangladeshi-police-killing-drugs-suspect-akramul-haque>

³<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/01/bangladesh-drugs-war-used-hide-political-assassinations/>

⁴<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/05/19/three-killed-in-alleged-rab-shootout-in-jessore>

⁵<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/06/audio-clip-captures-bangladeshi-police-killing-drugs-suspect-akramul-haque>

⁶<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/murder-it-was-1584580>

⁷ ibid

⁸<http://www.newagebd.net/article/42645/nhrc-for-independent-inquiry-into-gunfights>

⁹ ibid

¹⁰<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2018/05/24/probe-team-meets-family-of-tongi-crossfire-victim-rony>

International and national human rights organisations¹¹ have condemned and urged for an investigation into the killings. On 6 June, the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, expressed concerns and urged that the fundamental criminal justice principles like presumption of innocence and the right to due process must be at the forefront of any efforts to tackle crimes".¹² There are allegations that the drug war is used to hide political assassinations¹³ keeping in mind the upcoming general election later this year.

These extrajudicial killings are in clear violation of Bangladesh's international legal obligations and the Constitutional parameters that guarantee fair trial and right to life, which must be protected by the state at all times. Despite this, the Government of Bangladesh continues to exhibit a pattern of wrongful killings and arrests.¹⁴

Drug abuse is a serious issue and the government of Bangladesh must first frame rules and regulations to combat that without compromising the right to life and other constitutional safeguards. FORUM-ASIA urges the Government of Bangladesh to immediately halt the executions, establish an independent body or committee to investigate the extrajudicial killings and to fix accountability for those killings.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratization.

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¹¹<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/drug-purge-so-killing-1584022>

¹²<https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/06/1011501>

¹³<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/01/bangladesh-drugs-war-used-hide-political-assassinations/>

¹⁴<https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=25983>