

**POLITICAL PRISONERS
IN BANGLADESH**



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Bangladesh, which came into being in December 1971 after a bloody war of self determination is passing through the worst economic and political crisis in the history of the Third World. People who have sacrificed so much during the war of 1971 now realize that they have only changed to a set of masters who in spite of their avowed pledges for democracy and socialism are following the same brutal courses of their predecessors. The Awami League government, whose leaders fled helter-skelter to India during the 1971 war with Pakistan, leaving behind the leaderless and unorganized common people of Bangladesh to die before the Pakistani bullets, who returned behind the shield of Indian tanks, shamelessly proclaiming great victory for their leadership and who, from then onward, have unleashed a reign of terror to keep the awakened people of Bangladesh from claiming their rightful shares of economic and social benefits, typically proclaim anybody opposing their corrupt rule as an "enemy of the state".

The condition of people of Bangladesh has become so bad that foreign journalists had to use apocalyptic terms to describe it. For example, the headlines of the news-story in the Wall Street Journal (Nov. 27, 1974) read "Land of Despair..... Death and Suffering Are the Country's Themes"; the headlines for the articles in the Manchester Guardian (Nov. 9, 1974) say "Death of a Nation....." "At feeding time it's just like Belsen."

Prime Minister Mujib, the so-called "friend of Bengal" and his Awami League Party, have done away with even the facade of democracy in order to throttle the rising crescendo of voices against their criminal misrule. The newspapers

Haq Katha, Gana Sakti, Spokesman, Lal Pataka, Banglar Mukh, Mukhapatra are banned on grounds of flimsy security. Even the editors could not escape the anger of the Government. Erfan Bari, Habibur Rahman, Faizur Rahman and Obaid Chaudhury, editors of Haq Katha, Gana Sakti, Mukhapatra and Lal Pataka respectively have been put in prison.

It is quite well-known by now that the number of political prisoners at present detained in the various jails of Bangladesh has by far surpassed the record which was ever reached under any regime in this country between 1947 and 1971. Thousands and thousands of prisoners are at present detained in jails without any specific charges on grounds of suspicion and so-called security of the state. In some cases specific charges have been laid down but such charges are so fictitious and ludicrously false that the government does not dare to produce them before the properly constituted courts. Most of these detained persons are poor and helpless and that is the reason why their cases do not come up before the law courts and they continue to languish indefinitely behind the bars under conditions which may justifiably be described as inhuman.

Government sources are extremely reticent over giving out the exact number of political prisoners now held in custody. But unofficial estimates claim that this number will be somewhere between 12,000 and 14,000, taking into account arrests made up to the end of September, 1974.

PRISON CONDITIONS

Alarming news of the conditions of political detenus is being reported from

the different jails in Bangladesh. Bad living conditions, lack of water supply for washing and cleaning, foods unfit for human consumption, over-crowding in wards, chronic absence of proper medical facilities, and above all, negligence on the part of different jail authorities have all contributed their respective shares to make life inside jails unbearably miserable.

In Dacca Central jail, a number of political prisoners were recently reported to have fallen ill. Masihur Rahman, 52-year-old general secretary of the National Awami Party (Bhashani), detained since last June under the Special Powers Act, has developed high blood pressure, gastric troubles and a heart condition. Until now he has been denied specialist treatment and is still in Dacca jail.

The young general secretary of JSD, A.S.M. Abdur Rab, after his arrest last March, was put in solitary confinement in Dacca jail, where he underwent severe mental and physical hardship. Rab's present cell is next to a ward housing over 20 madmen in the worst stage of mental disorder, whose screams and howls all day and night are a nerve-shattering experience to the inmates of nearby cells.

Ekram, 23-year-old younger brother of the revolutionary leader Wahidur Rahman of Rajshahi, has reportedly been mentally affected, largely because of long months of intolerable suffering at Dacca jail. Ekram is an under trial prisoner whose alleged crime is yet to be proved in a court of law. Consequently, his already long detention under the Special Powers Act has become seriously challengeable on grounds of his fast worsening physical condition.

About visiting political prisoners in jails the authorities follow a most disgustingly cruel and arbitrary system which is often changed without notice. Visits to prisoners, detained for alleged revolutionary activity, are seriously discounted and visitors who dare meet them in the jails will invariably become targets of police harassment. Each application to visit a political detenu, submitted beforehand, has to be processed by the ADC, the SB police and the Home Ministry by turn and may be hedged or refused without assigning any good reason.

During their long months of detention those who have not once been allowed to receive outside visitors are: Tipu Biswas in Comilla jail, Wahidur Rahman in Jessore jail, his wife, Parul, in Rajshahi jail, journalist Habibur Rahman, Ekram, Shahid, Refaz, Ahmedullah, Chanchal Sen, Subrata, all in Dacca jail, and hundreds of other political detainees who are living a lost and forgotten life behind prison walls.

Jail foods are names commonly given to a variety of most disgusting concoctions ever to come out from any kitchen worth the name. Menus in Dacca jail, if taken as something better than average, will clearly indicate what sort of gastronomical rubbish is served to prisoners in Bangladesh jails.

In Dacca, the standard bill of fare offers one half-cooked heavy-duty *chapati*, generously powdered with grits, dusts and available kindred ingredients, which goes with an evil smelling liquid, called *dal*, to make for breakfast. For mid-day meal two *chapatis* made under the same recipe are given with a curry of vile colour devoid of any touch of spice or flavour, cooked with bits of

vegetables, in which most prominently features *kotchu*, a root notoriously known for its extra-abrasive nature. (*Kotchu* works like sandpaper in one's inside). Before the evening lock-up the mid-day diet is repeated for supper, with rare exceptions when fish or meat curry replaces its baser vegetable cousin.

Many prisoners are known to have been reduced to chronic patients of gastro-intestinal diseases for eating jail foods regularly for a long period.

Overcrowding is another serious problem that inmates of a prison have to contend with. The Dacca Central jail, biggest and oldest in the country with a capacity of 1,500 prisoners, is now bursting at its timeworn seams with an influx of inmates well beyond the recommended capacity. At night prisoners, convicts and detenus together, bed down on the floor of a dormitory, known as *khata*, lying in rows, like sardines in a tin, with hardly a six-inch gap between two sleepers.

The long and narrow dormitories of Dacca jail notoriously inadequate for toilet facilities (busted old tin cans in corners used as urinals) keep as many as 300 prisoners per dormitory locked up during the hours between 6pm and 6am in crammed conditions and with the air inside heavily reeking with the smell of urine and sweat. At night bed bugs crawl out of the pores of unwashed blankets to engage the humans in knockout matches, with the latter always on the losing side.

Most jails do not have piped water. The remarkable absence of such elementary utility service in the jails was first designed during the British Raj mainly to evolve yet another form of physical

labour for convicts undergoing sentences of hard labour. Until today, as the old tradition dies hard, 27 years after the British had left, no piped water supply is allowed in the jail. Convicts, like beasts of burden, carry water from a distance in large buckets in relays, sometimes walking, heavily weighed down, miles to complete the rounds.

Water inside a jail is as rare as rain in the centre of the Arabian desert. Bathing and washing regularly are luxuries that prisoners are discouraged to indulge in. As a result, contagious diseases are rampant. As many as 80% of the inmates of jails suffer from scabies and other skin diseases.

The undertrials do not get change of clothes in jail. Many were seen wearing the same clothes, in which they were first arrested, for months, and which after long and constant use had turned into dirty rags.

There is a separate hospital ward in Dacca jail, with beds full of patients and cupboards empty of medicines. Patients usually come to the hospital more for a rest, which they immensely deserve, than for an actual cure. For most common ailments contracted in jail, patients mostly make do without any medicines.

There are two assistant surgeons under the overall supervision of a civil surgeon in whose care the sick and the infirm in Dacca jail repose their trust. But the civil surgeon's attitude towards his patients is distinctly callous; as often when his presence is required in the jail he is found to be missing.

For a serious patient needing removal to a general hospital outside, only the

civil surgeon's recommendation can initiate such plans. But because of his highly elusive nature, there arose occasions when emergency cases were delayed and patients' life hung in balance.

The two assistant surgeons at Dacca jail seem to be victims of their own profession, as they have been compelled to practice medicine without medicine. The hospital ward in Dacca jail with its large population of inmates needs to carry a permanent stock of the most useful medicines, including life-saving drugs that may be required at a moment's notice. The latest case of death in the hospital ward of 60-year-old Nibaran Chandra Majumdar, an undertrial detenu, who died last September from a heart attack, points to the most degrading state of affairs in the hospital ward.

The doctors are also extremely reluctant to do their rounds in the cells because they feel that comforting words alone cannot be a cure to a disease. Recently an ugly incident occurred when a number of political detainees in a cell in Dacca jail demanded a visit from a doctor, which was not done for weeks, to their cell and expressed their refusal to be locked up unless their demand was met.

In response to this most justifiable demand, instead of sending a doctor to attend the sick, the jail authorities raised a frightful din by ringing the *pagla ghanti* (emergency alarm) and in a spirit of open mischief mounted an attack on the cell.

There are many inmates in the different prisons in Bangladesh who are in need of immediate medical care. Refaz, a political detenu in Dacca jail, is suf-

fering from serious eye trouble contracted as a result of his long detention. If nothing is done for him immediately the unfortunate man is almost sure to lose his sight, and for which the prison authorities will largely be held responsible.

Mohir, a mill-worker with a political background, sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment, is in Rajshahi jail suffering from cancer of the throat. Under a less oppressive system Mohir would have had a chance to have his case reviewed before a medical board, and most probably because of the serious nature of his illness would have been recommended for a reprieve.

Instead of compassion, good sense and basic human decency, to which prisoners like Mohir are entitled, the state prescribes cold, indecent and repulsive treatment to all languishing in jails. Mohir's case has become particularly poignant, as he clanks around in his cell wearing bar fetters (*danda beri*) 24 hrs. of the day, although the prisoner is known to be of the mildest demeanour.

Oscar Wilde, in his 'Ballad of Reading Gaol', with melancholy spoke of "that little tent of blue which prisoners call the sky". Those with heads to think and hearts to feel realise that prisoners like Refaz, Mohir, Ekram and many others unknown to the outside world, shall not have their faculties long impaired, if left in their present misery. Beyond the tomb of the four walls of jail stretch the beautiful sights which a mortal's eye banquets on. No longer will this fiesta of life be for them who will wear permanent scars of official neglect suffered in jails on their persons, when the tidings of freedom will finally catch up.

TORTURE IN PRISON

Certain macabre happenings of the recent past involving the government-controlled forces, the Jatyo Rakkhi Bahini being the most prominent, had spotlighted the role of these forces as instruments of coercion. Arrests, among other things, made by the Rakkhi Bahini were in total disregard of the minimum requirement of the law. The most unorthodox manner of Rakkhi Bahini operations became an object of public outcry and judicial censure.

The Rakkhi Bahini, now numbering 10,000 was raised after liberation with the so-called intention to combat anti-socials, miscreants, etc., to halt normal political activities of the democratic parties in the country.

Spearheading government moves the Rakkhi Bahini was seen in the past to break up peaceful protest marches, strikes and meetings, which, in most cases, ended in bloodshed resulting from the Rakkhi Bahini's attack. One such attack was in last March when a demonstration led by the JSD was fired upon by the Rakkhi Bahini resulting in 50 demonstrators dead and more than hundred wounded.

The conduct of the Rakkhi Bahini now a *bete noire* to the public eye, came under the sharpest criticism by the Committee for Civil Liberties and Legal Aid, a body mainly devoted to uphold the rights of political prisoners. A co-sponsor of the Committee and a prominent lawyer of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, Mr. Moudud Ahmed, commenting on the Activities of the Rakkhi Bahini, said recently in Dacca, "The allegation that the Rakkhi Bahini is not

only torturing their captives by systematically killing people, particularly young men, is not a new one. Usually it is done without leaving any trace of records anywhere. In such cases where they (Rakkhi Bahini) are caught, the usual excuse is either that the detenu has escaped or had been released. Absence of rules of procedure or code of conduct may be intentionally maintained only to do what they like without having to be accounted for".

The Rakkhi Bahini's *modus operandi* sometimes rivalled in bestiality the most villainous operations known to history and undertaken by the notorious *schutzstaffel* of Hitler's Third Reich. Of course, lessons of the Third Reich, one must recall, had proved beyond all doubts that the vanity and presumption of governing violence was the most ridiculous and bankrupt of all tyrannies. Very few who survived torture at the Rakkhi Bahini camps ever found courage to report their woeful experiences to the press.

A boy recently released from the Rakkhi Bahini's custody near Dacca reported that he was clubbed over the head and had pins driven under his nails, blows from a blunt weapon—all this in the process of interrogation.

Cases in which hot water was forced through the nostrils of the captive causing damage to the brain were but some of the allegations the Rakkhi Bahini is charged with. Women at the hands of the Rakkhi Bahini reportedly suffered worse fate. Mrs. Aruna Sen, 55 year-old wife of a Communist revolutionary, who was arrested by the Rakkhi Bahini earlier this year along with two girls, Rina Sinha, 19, and Hanufa Begam,

15, accused their captors of committing brutality on them (HOLIDAY, Oct. 6, 1974).

The Special Branch of the police is also no stranger to the field of torturing captives. Old hands, apprenticed from Pakistani days in methods of torture, are still enjoying regular supply of human guinea-pigs at the Rajarbagh headquarters to practise their grotesque art.

It is widely believed, Communist revolutionaries and left-wing political workers are almost certain to receive special attention of their Special Branch captors in the torture chamber.

Parul, teen-aged wife of the revolutionary leader Wahidur Rahman, arrested in January last in Dacca had been incommunicado for 15 days at Rajarbagh where remorseless interrogation and relentless torture alternately followed.

Ahmedullah of Noakhali, now detained in the Dacca jail under the Special Powers Act, was arrested in July this year and taken to Rajarbagh for grilling, where he was alleged to have been tortured for days on end.

Iqbal Hossain, a JSD secretary from Pabna, was seriously wounded by the police party that came to arrest him from a house in Dacca where he was living. Whether the wounding of Iqbal was at all warranted or the police action was purely arbitrary was never correctly ascertained.

Even children could not expect reprieve from the horrors of prison in this blessed land. 12-year-old Shampa—who in normal condition shall not have to face trial of any kind because

of her age—was arrested by some ignorant brute of a policeman for the singular crime of being a younger sister of a peasant revolutionary. The little girl has already spent over a year in custody and was last reported to be in Rajshahi Central jail passing her days in most disagreeable and obscene company.

There are far too many children—like Bakul and Mukul, the two 14-year-old girls at Kushtia jail whose alleged participation in politics somebody in his immense capacity for wickedness has interpreted as a threat to the foundation of the state to its last brick—held for months in preventive custody.

Shapan, the schoolboy son of Alauddin, the revolutionary leader, is now in Dacca jail suffering from serious illness that requires specialised treatment. Hope of a judicial enquiry into their condition and certain release from their cruel captivity is still denied to them. Each added day of these children's heart-breaking experiences in jail will continue to make those in power more guilty of the savage devilry rejected by all civilised nations of the world.

There are many such cases in which captives were known to have been subjected to torture. A citizen may be tapped on his shoulder and then taken away to bondage, ill-treatment or death. An ordinary political worker feels quite helpless in the face of an overwhelming show of authoritarian strength to defend himself. In the circumstances, it is not wholly inconsistent if he feels that his life may end before he has any chance of invoking the protection of the law.

WHAT CAN BE DONE

The increasing number of political prisoners undoubtedly indicate the increasing isolation of the Awami League and their government from the people. And the more they are getting isolated through their massive exploitation of the other nefarious activities the more they are becoming ferocious. Their ferocity has already reached a stage in which they do not any longer hesitate to violate and denigrate their own institutions, the institutions which they are supposed to maintain and uphold.

It will be absolutely senseless to think that the flow of political prisoners into the jails can be either stopped or slowed-down by making so-called humanitarian appeals to the government and the ruling party. They have tasted the fruits of plunder and they are determined to employ all available resources and power at their interests. And this can be done by them by repressing and suppressing the opposition political forces and their views. In order to achieve these ends they have necessarily to take resort to physical annihilation of the opposition elements and also to the detention of such elements inside the jails on fictitious charges or without any charges at all.

The only way, therefore; to get the political prisoners out of the jails is to initiate a movement for their release and to mobilise the masses for such purposes. The political prisoners have been thrown inside the jails by the Awami government because they stood for the interests of the common people, the workers, the peasants and the other sections of the exploited masses. And it is the people alone who can get their release, not by making "humanitarian" appeals to the existing government but

by mobilising themselves against the government.

Along with the demand for the release of political prisoners the people can immediately put forward another very important demand. They can demand that a body of citizens representing various educational, cultural and professional people must immediately be formed and they be allowed to visit the various jails of this country in order to investigate into the actual conditions at present prevailing in the jails and the treatment which is being accorded to the prisoners against most of whom there is no formal and valid charges at all.

This pamphlet has been compiled from the following three articles published in "The Holiday" a weekly published in Dacca, Bangladesh:

- (1) "Political Prisoners in Bangladesh" by Badruddin Umar. Oct., 1974
- (2) "Political Persecution Continues Unabated" by Fazle Lohani. Oct. 27., 1974
- (3) "Appalling Conditions in Bangladesh Prisons" by Fazle Lohani. Nov. 10, 1974