

Bangladesh: UN rights experts appeal to all sides to immediately stop the ongoing violence

United Nations

GENEVA (29 March 2013) – A group of United Nations independent human rights experts today called on all parties in Bangladesh "to cease violence immediately and return to peaceful demonstrations," after worrying levels of violence have been reported following large-scale protests across the country since 5 February 2013.

The protests have largely occurred in the context of the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal's trials and verdicts. The Tribunal was established by the Bangladeshi Government in 2010 as a domestic court to try and punish persons accused of committing atrocities, including genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, in Bangladesh, during the country's 1971 independence war.

Violent clashes between security forces and various groups as well as between the groups have so far claimed the lives of at least 88 persons and led to the injury of hundreds of other people. There have also been worrying reports on attacks against members of the Hindu community, their homes and places of worship, as well as against journalists and other media practitioners.

"I am extremely alarmed at reports that a large number of deaths may have resulted from excessive use of force by security forces, including the use of firearms against unarmed individuals," said Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Christof Heyns.

"International law provides that, even in the dispersal of violent assemblies, law enforcement officials shall exercise the utmost restraint before using firearms, and shall ensure that they are used with the sole and imminent objective of saving another life."

"I call upon the authorities in Bangladesh to ensure prompt, impartial and effective investigations of all killings committed irrespective of whether they were committed by a State or a non-State actor," he added.

The Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression, Frank La Rue, warned that journalists and other media workers, who have been victims of serious attacks during the clashes, are equally at risk. "The ongoing violence has threatened the safety of journalists in the country and led to the killing of at least one blogger, and injury of a large number of media workers. Twelve websites have also been shut down by the Bangladeshi authorities," he noted. "I call upon all sides to cease any attacks and other acts of intimidation against journalists and other media workers. At the same time, I urge all parties to refrain from inciting violence."

With regard to attacks on members of the Hindu community and their places of worship, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, Heiner Bielefeldt, emphasized that "the Government must ensure that the rights and freedoms of this community are protected in conformity with international human rights law." Together with the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, with Raquel Rolnik, he expressed particular alarm at the destruction of Hindu temples and homes in the context of the current violence in Bangladesh, which left tens of families homeless.

"The attacks against the Hindu community are of serious concern, due to the fact that it constitutes a minority group in Bangladesh which has been at risk of violence at various times of the country's history," added the Independent Expert on minority issues, Rita Izsák.

"States must protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories," she said, "and should ensure their effective participation in the process to work towards sustainable peace, unity and stability in the country."

The Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth and justice, Pablo de Greiff, underscored that "Governments should strive to achieve justice for victims of past human rights violations and restore trust in the rule of law including through criminal prosecutions."

"Criminal prosecutions must themselves strictly comply with the rule of law," noted the expert on transitional justice. "In the absence of due process guarantees, all verdicts, but particularly those which impose the death penalty may reignite the initial sources of conflict and entrench patterns of societal distrust."

Earlier this year*, the Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers, Gabriela Knaul, and the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Christof Heyns, expressed concern at the aspects of non-compliance with fair trial and due process reported during the proceedings before the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal, including the pronouncement of death sentences.

They stressed that international law requires compliance with the most stringent fair trial and due process guarantees in such proceedings, and called upon the authorities in Bangladesh to ensure these are upheld.

(*) Check – "BANGLADESH: Justice for the past requires fair trials, warn UN experts" (07/02/2013):

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=12972&LangID=E>