

Bangladesh: human rights situation

The human rights situation in Bangladesh has been continually worsening, and what makes it even more alarming is that the state is largely responsible for this. In its September 2014 session, the European Parliament adopted a very detailed resolution expressing its deep concern over human rights violations and working conditions in the country.

Working conditions and labour rights

In recent years, the garment industry of Bangladesh has been the scene of a number of disasters, the deadliest being the 24 April 2013 [Rana Plaza building collapse](#), with 1 137 workers confirmed dead and over 200 missing. In the aftermath of this tragedy, the Government of Bangladesh and Western retailers set up [inspection](#) regimes for more than 3 500 garment factories, in order to review their structural integrity as well as their fire and electrical safety. While Western retailers have been carrying out inspections on a regular basis and have made their findings public, the government has not yet publicised the findings from its own inspections. The [Donor Trust Fund](#), which was set up by the Rana Plaza Coordination Committee to help victims and survivors, brings together representatives of the government, the garment industry, national and international trade unions, and NGOs, and is chaired by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). This fund has not reached its early target of [€54 million](#) and is still some way off the most recent revised estimated requirement of €27 million. According to [the Clean Clothes Campaign](#), only half of the mainly Europe- and US-based companies connected with the factories that had been located in the Rana Plaza building have made contributions to the Donor Trust Fund. As far as labour rights are concerned, notwithstanding a few labour law reforms, the [International Trade Union Confederation](#) (ITUC) notes that workers continue to report harassment and intimidation intended to stop them joining or forming unions, and that trade union organisers continue to be the target of violence. According to the International Labour Office (the ILO's permanent secretariat), [the Labour Act of 2013](#) continues to fall short of [international standards](#) with regard to freedom of association, including the right to strike and to collective bargaining.

Human rights

State of play

As highlighted in the 2014 [Human Rights Watch \(HRW\) report](#) on Bangladesh, restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, enforced disappearances (often with the alleged involvement of the state security forces), the use of torture and other forms of ill-treatment persist in Bangladesh, despite the safeguards laid down in the Constitution, the Penal Code and the Torture and Custodial Death Prohibition Act. The general elections of 5 January 2014 were [boycotted](#) by the [Bangladesh Nationalist Party](#) (BNP, the main opposition party) and were overshadowed [by the BNP-instigated strikes and the resulting violence](#). In [a statement](#) issued on 2 September 2014, Amnesty International deplored the steps taken by Prime Minister [Sheikh Hasina's Awami League](#) government to limit civil rights. Independent human rights organisations, such as [HRW](#), allege that the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), created ten years ago from among military and police officers to counter security threats from militant groups, is accountable for some 800 deaths, without this entailing any prosecution or punishment for those responsible. On 6 August 2014, the Government published its [new media policy](#), which contains elements limiting media freedom, for example by banning speeches addressed against the state. Bangladesh ranks 146th out of 180 countries on the [2014 World Press Freedom Index](#). At least four bloggers and two human rights defenders have been charged in the past two years under [Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology \(ICT\) Act](#). Furthermore, the passing of a new piece of legislation sought by the Government – the [Foreign Donations Regulation Bill](#) – would, it is feared, place severe restrictions on NGOs. It would regulate operations and funding for any group in receipt of foreign funding, and give the NGO Affairs Office, within the Prime Minister's Office, authority

over foreign-funded projects. It would also require anyone involved in voluntary activities to obtain approval prior to travelling out of the country for purposes related to their work on a project. On 27 August 2014, [Hana Shams Ahmed](#), coordinator of [the International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission \(CHTC\)](#) and monitor of the human rights situation in this highly militarised region in southern Bangladesh which is home to a large indigenous population, was attacked by people allegedly associated with the Bengali ultra-nationalist group Somo Odhikar Andolon, during a private visit in the region. Ethnic and religiously motivated violence continues, as shown by an attack by several dozen armed men in early July 2014 on [the convent of the Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions \(PIME\) nuns](#) in the town of Boldipuku. The [Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal \(ICT\)](#), which was set up to investigate crimes connected with the country's war of independence, has handed down ten verdicts so far, including eight death sentences and two life sentences. Islamist politician [Abdul Quader Mollah](#) was the first to be executed. There is strong and repeated [criticism](#) that the Tribunal does not comply with international standards. Italian NGO '[Hands off Cain](#)', which campaigns for the abolition of the death penalty worldwide, claims that 49 persons were sentenced to death in Bangladesh in 2014 and that [1 071 people](#) are on death row.

UN human rights instruments

A member of the UN since September 1974, Bangladesh [has ratified](#) the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two optional protocols (one on the involvement of children in armed conflict and the other on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In 2010, Bangladesh [ratified](#) the [Rome Statute](#) for an International Criminal Court (ICC). During its 16th session in Geneva in 2013, the UN Human Rights Council's Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review invited Bangladesh to continue its [efforts](#) to harmonise its normative framework with international human rights norms.

Bangladesh and the EU

The EU has [long-standing relations](#) with Bangladesh, including through the [2001 Cooperation agreement on partnership and development](#). The EU has consistently engaged with Bangladesh to support the consolidation of democracy in its territory. Article I of the Agreement contains a human rights clause, emphasising that respect for human rights and democratic principles underpins the domestic and international policies of the parties and forms an essential part of the Agreement. Although Article 16 stipulates that either party may hold the other responsible for failure to act in compliance with the Agreement, it has never been enforced in the context of EU-Bangladesh relations.

EU statement

In a [declaration](#) on Bangladesh on behalf of the EU, former High Representative Catherine Ashton strongly condemned the acts of violence which occurred in the run-up to and during the January 2014 elections, and particularly the attacks against women, children, religious and ethnic minorities.

EP's position

During the past term, the EP, expressed its concerns on Bangladesh's human rights situation on many occasions, through adopting several important resolutions: the Resolution of [17 January 2013](#) on recent casualties in textile factory fires, the Resolution of [14 March 2013](#) on the outbreak of violence in Bangladesh following ICT verdicts, the Resolution of [10 October 2013](#) on caste-based discrimination, and the two resolutions of [21 November 2013](#) and [16 January 2014](#) on human rights and the outcome of the elections.

On 18 September 2014, the EP adopted a [Resolution on human rights violations in Bangladesh](#), voicing its concerns about the continuing human rights violations in general and by the RAB in particular. The EP reiterated its call for the abolition of the death penalty, urged the Government to recognise and respect freedom of the press and media, and to allow human rights groups to play an important role in Bengali society. Finally, the EP called on the Government to ensure the enforcement of labour laws and urged further reform to bring them into line with ILO standards, in particular the possibility for workers to freely form and join labour unions.