

07 BAN 1 – 07-04-20 Khulna

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<http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/03/31/d7033101085.htm>

Countrywide security alert

Staff Correspondent

Sat. March 31, 2007

Security measures have been beefed up in the capital as well as elsewhere in the country on suspicion of reprisal from militants following the execution of six kingpins of the outlawed militant group Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) early yesterday.

"Security measures were stepped up and members of the law enforcement agencies have been asked to remain alert on suspicion of reprisal attacks from militant outfits," Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Naim Ahmed said.

"Around 90 police check posts including 30 inside the diplomatic zone of the capital and 114 mobile check posts have been set up in Dhaka to search people and vehicles," the DMP commissioner told The Daily Star last night.

Additional law enforcers have been deployed at different strategic points in the city, police said.

Sources said the executions of the six JMB militants were kept secret recognising the possibility of subversive acts by followers of the JMB leaders following reports from an intelligence wing.

Apart from 3,000 DMP members, members from different intelligence agencies and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) personnel were deployed at different sensitive spots in the capital to thwart any untoward incidents, the DMP chief said.

Law enforcement agencies yesterday also checked devotees at different mosques in the capital including Baitul Mukarram Mosque. They closed the road from Paltan to Dainik Bangla to vehicles from 12.30pm to 2:00pm.

"We have taken foolproof measures to avert any untoward incidents," the DMP commissioner said.

As part of this beefed-up security measures, law enforcers in the last couple of days started raiding residential hotels, slums and houses in the capital.

Security forces in Khulna Metropolitan City (KMC) and the nine upazilas in the district have also been put on high alert on suspicion of reprisal from militants, our Khulna correspondent reports.

Security measures were beefed up in and around key strategic points and other important points in Chittagong City after the JMB kingpins were executed, our Chittagong correspondent reports.

Additional forces of Rab, riot police, and other law enforcement agencies were deployed in the port city to maintain law and order.

Law enforcers were seen patrolling the port city's streets in teams, searching the luggage of bus and train passengers and searching bags belonging to pedestrians. Rab personnel were posted at all entry and exit points of mosques, bus terminals, railway stations and the airport in Chittagong. The members of the elite force thoroughly checked empty train carriages before allowing passengers to get on them.

They also thoroughly searched the bodies of devotees before allowing them to enter mosque for the Juma prayers yesterday.

Our Dinajpur correspondent reports that security measures were stepped up at all the railway stations in the western railway zone.

An official of Parbatipur Railway Junction said law enforcers have been frisking passengers and checking their luggage at the station as well as in the carriages to pre-empt any subversive acts.

4 jute mills in Khulna closed after clashes

Staff Correspondent, Khulna

Fri. April 20, 2007

Four state-owned jute mills in Khalishpur industrial belt have been closed and its employees laid off amid violent labour unrest for the last three days over arrear payments of last 14 weeks.

By order of Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) Chairman M Ataharul Islam, the decision was to take effect from 5:00pm yesterday at Peoples Jute Mill, Platinum Jubilee Jute Mill, Crescent Jute Mill and Star Jute Mill.

The BJMC chairman has also requested the Khulna metropolitan police commissioner in an official letter to take necessary actions to contain the violent labour unrest in the industrial belt at any cost and ensure security of property of all jute mills and security of life of all officials and employees of the mills until the government allocates necessary funds for the payment of arrear wages.

Meanwhile, thousands of workers in Khalishpur industrial belt brought out processions yesterday evening protesting the layoff of jute mills in Khulna.

Bangladesh Trade Union Centre (BTUC) and Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal expressed concern over the clash between the jute mill workers and law enforcers at Khulna yesterday.

BTUC president Nurul Islam and its general secretary Wajedul Islam Khan in a statement urged the authorities to pay the arrears of the workers and to restart the factories immediately.

The workers and employees of the state-owned jute mills had been starving since they did not receive their salaries for the last couple of months. The tension in the Khalishpur area was just a manifestation of the situation, they said.

Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal in its statement expressed concern over the clash and urged the government to take necessary steps to resolve the problem and to pay the arrears of the workers. It also urged the government to provide treatment to the workers injured by the police.

Fate of 12,000 workers uncertain

Labour unrest for arrears forces BJMC to lay off four jute mills

4/20/2007

KHULNA, Apr 19 (UNB): Four state-owned jute mills in Khulna industrial belt were laid off today rendering about 12,000 workers jobless.

The action of the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) at about 4.00 pm came on the heels of agitation by workers for arrear dues since April 15. Workers-police clash left more than 100 people wounded during the last two days.

The laid off jute mills are -- Jubilee Platinum for 45 days and Easter, Crescent and Peoples for 21 days. Their arrear dues to workers is estimated at Tk 450 million (45 crore).

Announcement of lay-off angered the workers. Hundreds of workers gathered in front of Peoples Jute Mill in Khalishpur industrial area in the evening. They were chanting slogans for immediate payment of their dues.

Strong contingent of riot gear police cordoning them asked through hailer to remain calm and refrain from holding meeting or demonstration which is prohibited under the existing state of emergency.

BJMC officials admitted that arrear dues were estimated at Tk 600 million (60 crore) to workers of eight jute mills in Khulna zone, which were heavily losing.

All the 22 jute mills under the BJMC have arrear dues to workers totaling to about Tk 1000 million (100 crore), they said.

Labour leaders said the mills were sustaining loss for the highhandedness and corruption of BJMC. Workers always put up hard labour and they must be paid their dues.

Meanwhile, police have filed a case against about 3,000 workers and the labour leaders for involving in agitation and sustaining injuries to some of the policemen.

<http://libcom.org/news/bangladesh-today-and-tomorrow-21042007>

On Bangladesh today and tomorrow

April 21st, 2007 by Ret Marut

After six months of effective martial law and widespread political purges imposed by military anti-corruption squads under the caretaker government, we now begin to hear reports of class struggle reappearing.

Much of last year was spent in conflict between the two main parties, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL), as they squabbled over the details of rules and procedures for the General Election. In an apparent bid to end the stalemate, and the increasing social instability it brought, a caretaker government was put in place in January 2007. (It's likely this move was encouraged or even proposed by foreign diplomatic pressure from such as the USA, EU and UN.) This government quickly gave full powers to the military and police to begin a ruthless 'anti-corruption' purge of all the main political parties and many other related criminal elements in business. Over 100,000 people have been arrested and jails are overflowing; there have been 'deaths in custody'. Both the BNP and AL have had their leaders and organisers thrown into jail by fast-track mobile courts; the leaderships have been banished to permanent exile in the USA and Saudi Arabia. Since the declaration of emergency severe restrictions have been imposed on press reporting, political organising is banned (including trade unions) and the General Election has been postponed: originally for a few months, now at least until late 2008. The security forces have decimated the political elite of Bangladesh and repossessed much of their wealth gained from corruption, land grabs, imported luxury cars, real estate, unaccounted-for hoardings etc. It is uncertain, and will be determined partly by international influence, but is possible that a return to parliamentary democracy may continue to be indefinitely postponed as the military become accustomed to power. Class society knows many variations of rule.

Chittagong port

Of course the reality of this anti-corruption purge is not as it is represented, supposedly to create a fairer society for the impoverished of the country. The history of the emergence of an independent Bangladesh in the 1970s and its weak economic development has made ample opportunity for

political corruption on a grand scale. It has also perpetuated the underdevelopment. In this instance the culture of corruption has meant an inefficient economy with local greed undermining central planning, investment and accumulation. The present 'anti-corruption purge' is an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone; erase the old guard political elite who were a parasitical drain on economic growth, please modernisers at home and abroad and push ahead with privatisations. A recent move to deal with the rampant corruption at the main dock port, at Chittagong in the south of the country, is also an act of accelerating privatisation of various labour processes at the port. Previous proposals for privatisation in recent years were met with strikes. Now compulsory redundancy has been imposed on older workers and piecemeal privatisation of particular sectors of the dock operation have occurred.

The local Chittagong political clique was until recently headed by the city mayor as an outpost of the previous BNP government. His cronies acted as dock union officials and fleeced the businesses dependent for import and export trade on Chittagong as a main transport link. Bribery and extortion were the norm in securing safe passage for cargo and nothing moved on the waterfront without the mayor's say-so.

"It appeared that at the root of all the problems lay greed, corruption and parochial interests. The vested interest groups are composed of not only government and port officials and labor unions, but also corrupt politicians and private sector enterprises providing services to maritime transportation.

It's a huge and complex Gordian knot with many layers." (Ghulam Rahman, former shipping ministry secretary, 'Forum', March 07)

For years the dock was one of the most expensive and least efficient - it was also said to be "the second most pirate infested port in the world,". This apparently benefitted the workers to a degree, in terms of pace of work rather than financially (though surely, like dockworkers the world over, they will top up their 'social wage' by regular pilfering of cargo when possible). The mayor and his clique here had an interest in a slower normal turn-around time (6-12 days) for ships as it meant those in a hurry to fulfill orders in a competitive market would always pay more for faster service. (Chittagong has much slower processing times than other international ports of comparable size. This can only partly be accounted for by less investment in machinery/infrastructure.)

But the military anti-corruption squads have now taken the mayor and his clique out of circulation, sending them to jail, exile or into hiding. Investment in new equipment such as cranes has also improved efficiency. One must bear in mind though that crackdown on corrupt union officials will also likely be part of a wider crackdown attacking workers' militancy; the union officials were probably like most unions in Bangladesh, who call strikes mainly to protect their own narrow political and financial interests. Whereas most strikes in the workers' own direct interests appear to be organised by workers themselves. To the cops and the bosses right now, the difference is probably irrelevant and beside the point.

Chittagong port is also a target for the security forces as it is the centre of the country's arms smuggling trade which has been dominated by the ruling parties. Several of the illegal gun factories in the town have been shut down.

Jute mill strikes

In the last two weeks there have been reports of strikes in the jute mill industry at Khalishpur industrial belt in the south western city of Khulna, the country's third largest city . On the morning of Wednesday 19th April 2,000 workers from four mills demonstrated to demand payment of owed back wages. Clashes with cops occurred when workers began to block roads with burning tyres and

attempted to build barricades. Workers said police fired tear gas and rubber bullets. At one point police retreated into a 'police box' [presumably a sentry box or small hut] near one of the mill gates. The workers promptly set fire to it. Clashes continued until the evening; there were 50 injuries in the clashes, including 4 cops.

Prices of essential foodstuffs continue to rise and inflation eats further into some of the lowest wage levels in the world of the Bangladeshi poor. Whether the class struggle has dramatically lessened since the state of emergency or press reports stopped due to pressure and reporting restrictions from the caretaker government is uncertain. Perhaps a little of both - seeing the blatantly corrupt political elite experience military repression for a change must have its attractions for the poor, though it could also encourage illusions in anti-corruption squads as a new saviour come to solve the problems of class society.

Policing of the garment industry, centre of class struggle in the country (see previous reports), has presumably tightened too. The wage rises agreed by garment bosses last year have never been delivered and have anyway long ago been eaten away by inflation; though some workplace improvements have been reported, mainly as a response to pressure from western buyers worried about damage to corporate image from revelations of use of sweatshop labour.

The future?

There are two directions the security forces and their caretaker government can take in relation to the working class; if the military see themselves as a liberalising force (as a section of the Portuguese Army did in the 1970's - though in very different circumstances) then they may not provoke a decisive clash with workers and the wider poor and will probably eventually sanction labour reforms in the factories. The fact that there have not been any such major clashes reported so far lends some validity to this view (though like much of what is said here, it is speculation based on the limited available information). The dominant faction of the military may be identifying with the modernising RMG (ready made garment) sector, the country's dominant industry, with its growing international trade and rapidly expanding economy. This may explain why there has been very little reported anti-corruption activity against the RMG bosses or repression of garment worker trade unionists. The most forward thinking elements in the military would, in their terms, be correct to see this as the right horse to back for long term interests of capitalist development in Bangladesh. But, alternatively, if the security forces are settling in for a long term military rule they will at some point have to confront the working class. In the absence of establishing more subtle mediations such as workers rights and union representation which would be more likely outcomes of a move towards parliamentary democracy, then more blunt methods may be deployed. In order to consolidate its power base and defeat its greatest ultimate threat, the military may feel they have to show who is boss by a decisive clash with the working class. A working class that in Bangladesh, more than in most places, has little to lose and everything to gain.

<http://libcom.org/news/bangladesh-more-clashes-jute-mills-party-leaders-be-exiled-23042007>

Bangladesh: Strikes, clashes and party leaders to be exiled?

April 23rd, 2007 by Ret Marut



Following on from our previous report, workers at the four Khulna jute mills were locked out by bosses last week.

The lockout occurred in the south-west of the country on Thursday 20 April, following a week of strikes and demonstrations demanding payment of wage arrears and holiday allowances.

"Daily-basis labourers at Star Jute Mills have not been paid for the last 22 weeks and regular workers for six months, labourers at Peoples Jute Mills for 19 weeks and workers for seven months, labourers at Crescent Jute Mills for 18 weeks and workers for six months, and labourers at Platinum Jubilee Jute Mills for 17 weeks and workers for five months." (New Age, 22/Apr/07)

Wages are owed to 22,000 workers.

Clashes with cops continued on Saturday afternoon when 100 people were injured, including 9 cops. Workers threw bricks at the police, who replied with truncheons, tear gas rubber bullets and road blocks.

"Eyewitnesses said the workers reorganised and began to shower brick bats [i.e. pieces of brick] on police at about 4:00pm. Police then raided on the workers' colonies and started beating the residents, when the entire area turned into a battlefield.

Police fired teargas shells and rubber bullets again during the repeated chases and counter-chases at five points of the belt, said eyewitness.

They said police also fired with shotguns at the workers, which the police denied.

The rumour of the death of a worker, Aslam, in police fire spread in the area, making the workers even more violent.

At least 60 workers were injured in the clashes at this time and the police arrested 50 others, police and eyewitnesses said.

The workers launched another attack with brick bats from various hiding places at about 5:45pm but no clash ensued this time." (New Age)

70 workers were arrested. Under the current state of emergency legislation, introduced the day before the caretaker government came to power in January, all demonstrations and political assemblies are illegal. Trade unions are also banned from functioning so the jute workers struggle is not being mediated or represented by union officials. Bangladeshi workers have anyway low and transient levels of unionisation and have shown themselves consistently capable of high levels of self-organisation.

The state-owned mills suffer from regular work stoppages due to shortages of raw materials and interruptions to power supplies. Workers are not paid for these stoppages, late wage payment is a common problem, and the industry has been in decline due to competition from synthetic materials; this all combines to make the workers now increasingly desperate after so long without pay to feed their families.

Police also clashed with 500 schoolkids, children of the striking workers, who walked out of school in support of their parents. 20 were injured as they fought cops and threw bricks.

An agreement has now been reached for small interim wage payments to be made this week and for the lockout to end. Workers today complained that police used torture when they raided workers' houses after the riot.

"The local police administration Sunday used loudspeakers to ask the workers to stay calm. The call however warned the workers, saying toughest action would be taken if anybody dared to criticise

the government or shelter the troublemakers since a state of emergency is in force." (New Age, 23/Apr/07)

Party leaders forced into exile?

Khaled Zia, chairperson and leader of the former ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP) is trying to resist being banished into exile in Saudi Arabia. The caretaker government has her under apparent house arrest and has ordered her imminent departure. It's intended she will leave with a dozen family members, but her eldest son Tarique will remain in jail to face extortion charges relating to the last BNP term of government.

Meanwhile her opposite number Sheikh Hasina, leader of the rival Awami League and a former Prime Minister, is in London and has been refused a seat on a British Airways plane after the caretaker government informed BA the plane would not be allowed to land in Bangladesh with Hasina on board. Though she has stated her wish to return it seems she too is set to take up enforced exile, perhaps in the USA. Absurdly, at the same time the government is denying her re-entry a Bangladeshi court has issued a warrant for her arrest for absconding from justice! She faces charges of being, with other Party officials, implicated in the deaths of rival political activists in street battles several months ago. Brutality, murder and corruption are routine in Bangladeshi politics; so whether or not the present allegations against Zia and Hasina are true, it is certain that they have both risen to their position by using the normal methods.

The two leaders are trying to fight the banishments, both legally and by appealing for support from influential governments - but the USA, UK and UN have been generally supportive of the caretaker government's actions since their takeover and the declaration of an indefinite state of emergency.

<http://www.thedailystar.net/2007/04/24/d70424061989.htm>

Cop action on family members of jute workers condemned

Staff Correspondent

Tue. April 24, 2007

Different organisations yesterday expressed grave concern over the police atrocities on family members of workers of different jute mills in Khalishpur industrial area in Khulna.

They also demanded proper investigation and trial of the persons responsible.

Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) in a press release urged all to find a peaceful solution to the problem and take immediate measures to protect the family members of the jute mill workers from further harassment.

In a press release, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) condemned the incident and demanded immediate trial of the people responsible following proper investigation.

Move to pay arrears to agitating jute workers

Staff Correspondent, Khulna

Wed. April 25, 2007

Zonal coordinator of Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) Shamim Ahmed has said Tk 19.77 crore has been allocated by the government for payment of arrear wages and salaries of workers and employees of eight state-owned jute mills in Khulna-Jessore area.

This fund will be placed under the disposal of Khulna zonal office of BJMC tomorrow (Wednesday), he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Shamim Ahmed who is also General Manager of Crescent Jute Mills said Tk 15 crore out of Tk 19.77 crore would be required for payment of arrear wages and salaries to agitating workers of the four laid-off jute mills.

He said the Privatisation Board will have to intervene to sell the four state-owned jute mills laid off in the wake of labour unrest in Khalishpur industrial belt.

BJMC is no more able to run the mills due to severe financial crisis. The laid-off mills are heavily burdened with bank loans and other liabilities amounting to more than Tk 1300 crore, he said.

Admitting government's alleged indifferent attitude towards reopening the laid-off mills, Shamim said there is a plan to sell those to private entrepreneurs.

He did not give any details of the conditions BJMC might place in case the mills are finally sold out.

Meanwhile, security forces are still in full control of Khalishpur industrial belt.

The labour colonies are also being guarded by law enforcers.

Concern over cop action on jute mills workers

Staff Correspondent

Thu. April 26, 2007

Sramik Nirapotta Forum (a forum for protection of workers) leaders yesterday at a meeting expressed concern over and condemned the police action on the workers of jute mills in Khulna, says a press release.

Dr Hamida Hossain, convenor of Sramik Nirapotta Forum, presided over the meeting held at Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies auditorium in the city.

The forum is a conglomeration of 17 organisations working on labour affairs.

Condemning the police brutality, the forum leaders urged the government to withdraw lay-off order, pay salary arrears and release all workers.

They also demanded withdrawal of false cases against them and an end to all kinds of harassment.

The Forum leaders urged the authorities to address the issue of labour unrest amicably and ensure livelihood of the members of the jute mills workers' families.

Sultana Kamal of Ain o Salish Kendra, Khushi Kabir of Nijera Kari, Nurul Islam and Nazrul Islam Khan of Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), Mahfuzullah of Centre for Sustainable Development, Farida Yasmin of BLAST and Rokeya Rafique Baby of Karmojibi Nari spoke at the meeting.