

BRITAIN AND BANGLADESH



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The Labour Campaign for Human Rights is a campaign within the Labour movement that seeks to ensure that human rights remain at the heart of Labour Party policy and practice.

In January 2019 we launched our 'Britain and Her Allies' campaign which seeks to develop a human rights-based foreign policy for the Labour Party. We work with a range of human rights organisations, charities and activist groups to draw attention to human rights violations by countries around the world that the UK has close economic, cultural or historical ties with and to develop policy proposals for the UK government to help end these abuses.

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FOREWORD

Rahima Begum - Human Rights Activist, Co-Founder and Co-Director of Restless Beings

Bangladesh has advanced in many areas in its nearly 50 year existence since independence. Advancements in the economy, in literacy rates and in development have been welcomed across the international community platform but none more so than the average Bangladeshi. However this is overshadowed by the growing abuse of human rights in an increasingly repressed Bangladesh.

Democracy and its many instruments such as the legal and judicial system, the free press and free speech have deteriorated significantly. Economic and political factors such as corruption and nepotism have particularly hampered the development of democracy. Rights associated with democracy such as equality in education, gender and the ability to protest have not matured and many face daily repression in these areas.

In recent years the various challenges of the Rohingya crisis and of children's rights have been most troubling. The longer the Rohingya crisis remains without a suitable diplomatic and political solution which includes citizenship for the Rohingya in Burma and accountability of those who perpetrated Genocide (Burma Military and Government), the more likely further human rights abuses will occur on Bangladeshi soil. The suggestion of measures such as the relocation has been turned down by the Rohingya community.

The failure to recognise the Rohingya as refugees in Bangladesh also reduces the rights that they have. The looming threat of repatriation to Burma which is not voluntary also remains in place. Bangladesh also has precedent in forcing through repatriation as in 1978 and 1991 and this must be avoided in the present crisis. Its approach to address this issue bilaterally with Burma under the auspices of China have so far proven unfruitful and the prospect of utilising the international arena must be realistically and coherently undertaken to search for a long lasting and rights-protecting solution.

Children's rights and particularly vulnerable children's rights need to be addressed. Parentless children still number in the hundreds of thousands who roam the streets of metropolitan areas and are not properly protected by the Government. The use of child labour is still ongoing and the Government of Bangladesh has not been contested robustly enough to change the conditions by development partners.

The UK must be a responsible and caring partner in development and enrichment which seeks the improvement of rights over the improvement of economic ties. Issues such as the UK's involvement in RAB forces which have been employed in forced disappearances, killings and arbitrary arrests must be addressed.

This report is a welcome and accurate depiction of the current human rights conditions that exist in Bangladesh. Whilst Bangladesh has made remarkable advancements in certain areas, human rights conditions must improve through collaboration and partnership. Although challenges remain and in certain issues are growing, Bangladesh has shown an appetite for reform, and this must be encouraged not only through the economic ties of development but through cultural and educational channels as well.

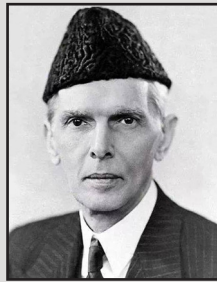
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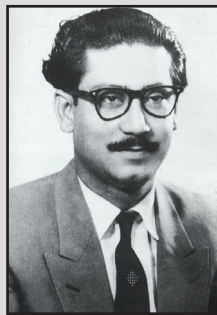
Muhammad Ali Jinnah

From 1913 he led the All-India Muslim League, a party which advocated for the establishment of a separate Muslim-majority nation-state. Became Pakistan's first Governor General in 1947 after the partition of British India.



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

A central figure in the liberation movement and considered the founding father of the country, later became the leader of the Awami League. Was assassinated in a military coup in 1975. His death resulted in several years of political turmoil.



Awami League

Founded in 1949, still one of the major two parties in the country today. Mujibur's daughter Sheikh Hasina is the current leader of the Awami League and also the current Prime Minister of Bangladesh.



Major General Ziaur Rahman

Came to power in 1977 after a military coup. Became President in 1978 and set up the BNP. He was later assassinated by army officers in 1981.



Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)

Formed in 1978, is now headed by Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of Ziaur (below left). Begum became the country's first Prime Minister in 1991.



General Hussein

Mohammad Ershad Seized power in 1982. Made himself President in 1983 and set up the Jatiya Party. Resigned in 1990 due to mass demonstrations against rule.



Jatiya Party

Formed in 1986 by Ershad. Is currently in an alliance with the AL in Bangladesh's Parliament and holds 47 seats



Jamaat-e-Islami

Opposed the independence of Bangladesh and break-up of Pakistan. Collaborated with the Pakistan army during the Liberation War in 1971. Its leaders were later charged with war crimes.



HISTORY OF BANGLADESH



Female students procession at Dhaka University, 1953
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Pakistani Rule and the Liberation War

Modern Bangladesh – formerly East Pakistan – is the product of two major tragedies: the partition of India in 1947 and the Liberation War with West Pakistan in 1971. Pakistan was formed in 1947 out of two Muslim-majority areas of the Indian subcontinent that were separated physically – by a distance of nearly 1,500 miles – linguistically and culturally.

Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's first Governor General, sought to unite the country through a common language, Urdu, which was used in the army and administration. By 1948, however, East Pakistanis had started to resent the non-acceptance of Bengali as an official language, the domination of the bureaucracy by non-Bengalis, and the appropriation of provincial functions and revenue by the central government in West Pakistan. Throughout the 1950s, military installations, economic aid and development continued to become concentrated in West Pakistan.

The tension found a voice in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known as "Mujib"), the founder of the Awami League – one of East Pakistan's main political parties. After being jailed repeatedly by the military, he became the League's leading figure and, in 1965, announced a plan for East Pakistani autonomy.

In 1970, the Awami League won an overall majority in the National Assembly. There were negotiations throughout March 1971 between Pakistan's President and Rahman until the army launched an attack that caused Awami League members to flee and set up a government in exile. East Pakistan was declared the independent state of Bangladesh, but Rahman was arrested and flown to West Pakistan.

Internal resistance was mobilised by some Bengali units of the regular army as well as various militia groups, particularly in the minority Muslim area of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. India provided support to Bangladesh's government in exile and helped it form a guerrilla force by providing training and arms.

In October 1971, India carried out a military intervention into East Pakistan, citing self-defence against Pakistani air attacks. Border battles between India and Pakistan eventually erupted into full-scale war. However, by December Pakistan had surrendered, ensuring Bangladesh's independence. A few days later, Pakistan's President was deposed and Rahman was released from jail and returned to Dhaka.

BANGLADESH UNDER THE BRITISH RAJ

The ties between Britain and Bangladesh date back to the British Raj. When the British East India Company took complete control of Bengal in 1793, it abolished local rule and developed Calcutta as its commercial and administrative centre for South-East Asia, as the region produced rice, tea, cotton, and jute.

A permanent settlement was later established, and property rights were granted to local landlords. This new, landed middle class was initially dominated by upper-caste Hindus, but the Muslim presence began to grow towards the end of the 19th century.

In 1919, in Amritsar in the Punjab, British troops fired into a crowd of unarmed Indian civilians who had gathered for a peaceful protest to condemn the arrest and deportation of two national leaders. Nearly 400 people were killed and over 1,000 were injured. This boosted the Non-Cooperation Movement in the early 1920s, which was led by Mahatma Gandhi and aimed to resist British rule in India through non-violent means – for example, protesters boycotted British textile goods by weaving their own cotton.

In Bengal, communal tensions persisted for most of the inter-war period. Although Muslim leaders had previously sought merely to secure Muslim rights within a greater Indian state, by the outbreak of the Second World War the idea of separation was strongly gaining ground.

When the Labour party came to power in July 1945, it was understood that the British state, devastated by war, could not afford to hold on to its over-extended empire. Louis Mountbatten, who became the last viceroy of British India in March 1947, was instructed to prepare the country for independence.

Mohammed Ali Jinnah, a leading figure in the Muslim League, advocated for the creation of two separate countries in the Indian subcontinent to ensure a home for India's minority Muslim population. Although Gandhi and the Congress Party strongly opposed this, Mountbatten accepted it as the most viable solution.

Therefore, when British colonial rule ended in August 1947, two new countries – India and Pakistan – were established. Bengal was split between them: West Bengal went to India, and East Bengal – now Bangladesh – became East Pakistan. Due to the speed of British withdrawal, partition was badly managed and led to a humanitarian disaster; over 10 million Indians were displaced and approximately two million were killed in sectarian violence.

In a meeting of the defence and overseas policy committee, British Conservative Foreign Minister Alec Douglas-Home, set out the UK's position: *"The British interest lies in recognising Bangladesh sooner rather than later. Once we have recognised, we shall be in a better position to seek to influence the general policies of the new government and to protect British interests in the area"*.

Tensions that still divide the country today are rooted in the fact that the Bihari Muslim minority in Bangladesh supported West Pakistan during the conflict. Armed paramilitary groups, such as Al-Badr, are held responsible for genocidal campaigns against Bengali nationalists and civilians. Bangladeshi authorities claim that as many as 3 million people were killed by these pro-Pakistan groups, although the official Pakistani government investigation claims there were 26,000 civilian casualties.

During the war, Britain offered shelter to diplomats and refugees escaping the conflict. British officials were concerned that recognition of Bangladesh might negatively affect the UK's relations with Pakistan, as Islamabad was a key ally during the Cold War and a member of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).

In February 1972, British officials at the High Commission in Dhaka discussed the issue of recriminations against the Bihari minority and, whilst recognising that "Bengalis have plenty to revenge", concluded that Pakistan was "over playing the risk to the Biharis". The risk of persecution of the new country's minority groups was considered an internal affair. Later that month, the UK government officially recognised Bangladesh. Other European and Commonwealth nations soon followed. Pakistan responded by leaving the Commonwealth in protest in April 1972, but later re-joined in 1989.

A British Foreign Office briefing described the scale of the problem facing the country after the war. Some 10 million Bengalis, mainly Hindus, fled over East Pakistan's frontier during the conflict and an estimated 20 million were internally displaced. UK officials put the cost of re-assimilating displaced people in the hundreds of millions, as many would return to find their villages destroyed.

Bangladesh Independence

After the war, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became the country's first President, and the 1973 constitution provided for a secular state, a parliamentary government, a bill of rights and a strong commitment to local government. However, there were still various local paramilitary forces that supported the Pakistani cause and so violence continued. In particular, there was widespread retribution against pro-Pakistani groups and many Biharis fled or were killed. Hundreds of thousands were placed in overcrowded refugee camps and decades later many still await asylum to Pakistan.

Furthermore, the country's economy and infrastructure were severely damaged by the war. Prices escalated, there were food scarcities, and in 1974 a great famine claimed tens of thousands of lives. The government tried to keep control by imposing limits on freedoms and corruption became widespread.

In 1975, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated by pro-Pakistan army officers and after a military coup, Major General Ziaur Rahman became the first post-war President. Ziaur Rahman strengthened the military, administration, and police and judicial systems, while also improving food production, irrigation, primary education, and rural development. He also initiated economic co-operation with nearby countries, which led to the establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation in 1985. However, at the same time his regime was violent and oppressive, and there were large numbers of political detentions and mass executions.

In 1977, James Callaghan became the first UK Prime Minister to visit the country. Many Bengalis and opposition groups in the UK criticised his visit, and some members of the Labour Party wrote to him to express their apprehension that the visit would add respectability to the military government. However, the visit went ahead, and was described by the British High Commissioner at the time as "warm, smooth, and met expectations".

Ziaur Rahman requested from Callaghan a development loan of £300 million to £400 million for the jute, power and transport sectors.



Mujib meets Ford (Source: Wikipedia)

The Rise of the Two Begums: Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina

Ziaur Rahman was assassinated in May 1981 by army officers, although this was not supported by the military high command in Dhaka and the conspirators were executed. In the 1981 Bangladeshi presidential election Abdus Sattar was elected as President. He formed a National Security Council to involve the Bangladesh Armed Forces. However, General Hussain Muhammad Ershad seized power in 1982 and declared himself President a year later. To try to legitimise the takeover, he called elections for the National Assembly and formed his own party, the Jatiyo Party. In May 1986, his party won most of the seats in the legislature, although the opposition parties boycotted the election.

The British High Commission's first country assessment paper in 1988 described "politics in Bangladesh as mainly about personality rather than policies". The report was concerned about human rights abuses committed by the army and especially the role played by the British Military Advice Team in training army officers in counter-insurgency measures. Amnesty International suggested at the time that the training encouraged human rights abuses.

Ershad's reign was plagued by a series of strikes and protests, which added to the poor state of the country's economy. In December 1990, after weeks of violent anti-government demonstrations, he finally agreed to step down. The BNP won the parliamentary elections held just two months later, and Khaleda Zia, wife of the assassinated President Ziaur Rahman, became Prime Minister.



Protest for democracy in Dhaka, 1987
(Source: Wikipedia)

It has been argued that Bangladesh's current instability is largely caused by the military reigns of Ziaur Rahman and Ershad, as both leaders normalised violence and corruption, as well as assassinations of political opponents and extrajudicial killings.

As Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia of the BNP succeeded in reinstating a parliamentary government, although this was hampered by strikes instigated by the Awami League, now led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wazed. The BNP won a further victory in February 1996, but the Awami League boycotted the election due to allegations of corruption. When fresh elections were held in June, the Awami League won and Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister.

In January 1997, Conservative Prime Minister John Major embarked on a three-day tour of the country. After his visit, Labour MP Mike Gapes asked what discussions he had during his visit about the situation of the Biharis living in Bangladesh. At the time tens of thousands were still raised in urban refugee camps. Major said: *"This issue was not raised during my visit. We regularly discuss human rights issues such as refugees and displaced people with the Bangladeshi authorities"*.

The political situation did not improve during Sheikh Hasina's time in office. Boycotts and anti-government demonstrations continued, and in 1998 a disastrous monsoon flooded some two-thirds of Bangladesh's territory for two months and left more than 30 million people homeless. The UK played a key role in assisting with the country's immediate relief and provided £4.5 million in aid.

Sheikh Hasina's government made progress in its relations with India, and signed a treaty for sharing water from the Ganges River. It also negotiated an agreement with guerrillas seeking greater autonomy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to surrender their arms after a 20-year insurgency. The tribal groups had long felt threatened by the government's construction of a national, homogeneous identity around Bengali Islamic values.

In 2001, Khaleda Zia's BNP came back into power for a second term. British Prime Minister Tony Blair visited the country in 2002, attending a Bangladeshi village run by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), the largest aid organisation in the world. At the time Bangladesh was the second biggest recipient of UK aid, receiving approximately £75 million a year.



Mohammad Mosaddak Ali meets with Tony Blair in Dhaka
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Khaleda Zia's term of office as Prime Minister came to an end in late 2006, and she transferred power to a caretaker administration until new elections could be held early the following year. Unrest between the BNP and the Awami League led the interim head of government to resign. A state of emergency was declared, and the new caretaker government embarked on an aggressive anti-corruption programme prior to holding new elections in 2008.

The caretaker government felt that the ongoing political battles between Khaleda and Hasina were damaging the country's stability, and in 2007 both women were arrested - Khaleda on charges of corruption and Hasina on charges of extortion. Both were released from custody in 2008.

In May 2008, Bangladesh's High Court ruled that the children of Urdu-speaking Bihari Muslims awaiting repatriation to Pakistan for over 37 years would be granted Bangladeshi citizenship.

During this period, Bangladesh and the UK jointly organised the London Climate Change Conference in September 2008. It was organised to highlight Bangladesh's plans to tackle climate change. The UK pledged £75 million in support. The acting head of government also visited the UK to discuss increasing British investment and co-operation in defence and trade, especially on counterterrorism.

In January 2009, the Awami League won fresh elections and Sheikh Hasina again became Prime Minister. This reign was characterised by severe repression. In March 2010, the government set up a tribunal to try war crimes cases from the 1971 war of independence. This tried many opposition leaders, especially those of the BNP, which its supporters claimed was political targeting.

OVERVIEW OF BANGLADESH TODAY

The Liberation War continues to shape the culture and politics of Bangladesh today and both sides are still largely imprisoned by wartime partisan mythologies.

The country has an estimated population of 160 million, and there are currently some 10 million Bangladeshis living outside the country, mostly in the UK and across the Gulf. There are 48 indigenous communities in the country, mainly in the north and the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the south-east, where about 3 million indigenous people live.

The country's high population density explains some of its human rights challenges. The competition for land has disadvantaged some groups, particularly ethnic and religious minorities, and resolving these disputes has resulted in judicial dysfunction and opened up space for corruption. Sexual and gender minorities are generally not open about their identity due to conservative social and cultural norms. Women do not have an equal social status to men, and marriage is seen as the main source of social acceptance.

Hindus, a minority religious group, have also been victims of the history of the war. However, they have occupied some of the important offices in the country, especially during the reigns of the Awami League. Nevertheless, religious tensions often lead to attacks on Hindus, and more than 11 million Hindus have left the country since 1964 due to religious persecution and discrimination.

Historically the country has run a large trade deficit, financed largely through aid receipts and remittances from workers overseas. However, poverty has dropped by around one third over the last decade, and there have been significant improvements in the human development index, literacy, life expectancy and per-capita food consumption. The economy is growing at nearly 6% per year, and more than 15 million people have been lifted out of poverty since 1992.

The role played by India and Pakistan during the Liberation War is still a cause of tension in the country. Bangladesh and India are generally on friendly terms as a result of India's support during the war but disputes about borders and rivers remain. In recent years, India has complained that Bangladesh does not secure its border properly. It fears an increasing flow of illegal Bangladeshi migrants and accuses Bangladesh of harbouring Indian separatist groups and alleged terrorist groups. India estimates that over 20 million Bangladeshis are living illegally in India. Despite some contentious issues both nations have cooperated on the issue of flood warning and preparedness, and the armed forces of both countries are now participating in joint exercises and training programmes.

Although Pakistan formerly recognised Bangladesh in 1974, the military establishment considers the war a sore wound. Issues that still need resolving between the two include the division of assets from the pre-1971 period, the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Biharis, and Pakistan's stance on the killings carried out by its army in 1971 which often leads to a breakdown in talks between the two.

Elsewhere in the region Bangladesh has good bilateral relations with Nepal, which views the country as a key access point to the sea that gives them the opportunity to develop potential transit and trade facilities – and be less dependent on India and China. With Myanmar, the presence of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is yet to be resolved. However, Bangladesh has sought greater trade, road and rail networks with Myanmar to boost the economic relations between the two countries.

China is the biggest arms supplier to Bangladesh and is the only country with which Bangladesh has signed a defence agreement. It is Bangladesh's biggest trading partner, with bilateral trade worth \$10 billion, and a significant investor in the country's manufacturing industry. It has also agreed to help Bangladesh develop its nuclear power capabilities. Bangladesh has signed the APSCO convention with six other nations to form a pact with China on space exploration.

Political Situation

Bangladesh has been a parliamentary democracy since a constitutional amendment passed in 1991. Members of its 300-seat unicameral parliament are directly elected from geographical constituencies. The 14th constitutional amendment, passed in 2004, decreed that parliament would include an additional 50 seats reserved for women appointed by political parties, proportional to their share of the elected seats. Members of parliament serve a maximum term of five years.

Although the head of the state is a President with the power to appoint members of the cabinet and judiciary, this role is largely ceremonial. Executive power in Bangladesh fundamentally lies with the Prime Minister, who heads the cabinet. The four major electoral political parties that are currently active are the Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami, the Awami League, and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP).



Parliament of Bangladesh (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Since 1996, the Awami League - centre-left and broadly secular - has been headed by Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the party's founder.¹ It receives most of its support from the working classes and rural agricultural communities, which make up 47.4% of the working population.² The opposition BNP - centre-right and more religious - is headed by Khaleda Zia, the widow of Ziaur Rahman, the first President. It has enjoyed significant support from the military.³ Since 1991, when Khaleda Zia first became Prime Minister, government power has pivoted between these two families.⁴

The most recent political crackdown followed the sentencing of Khaleda Zia to five years in prison for corruption in February 2018, and a further seven years in October 2018.⁵ A month later, the High Court ruled that persons imprisoned for over two years cannot contest elections for five years after their release.⁶ The order further fuelled rumours that the BNP leader's imprisonment was orchestrated by rival Sheikh Hasina to eliminate opposition to the Awami League in the December 2018 elections.

1 Forbes, [Bangladesh: Where a Darwinian battle for political survival is underway](#), 28/12/18

2 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, [Report on Labour Force Survey 2010](#)

3 Forbes, [Bangladesh: Where a Darwinian battle for political survival is underway](#), 28/12/18

4 BBC News, [Bangladesh Profile - Timeline](#), 26/02/19

5 Al Jazeera, [Bangladesh court jails ex-PM Zia for seven years for corruption](#), 29/10/18

6 Hindustan Times, [Jailed former Bangladeshi PM Khaleda Zia barred from contesting polls](#), 27/11/18

Human Rights Watch has reported on the oppressive measures taken against those who had criticised Sheikh Hasina's government, including extrajudicial arrests, disappearances and even executions, along with widespread surveillance and suppression of freedom of speech.⁷ Most alarming was the escalating inter-party violence, with the BNP Senior Joint Secretary General, Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, claiming that some 3,500 leaders and activists of the party had been arrested in September alone.⁸

The Awami League won 288 of the 300 seats in the December 2018 election, despite widespread claims of vote rigging, intimidation and violence.⁹ The election effectively sealed Bangladesh's political future as a one-party state.

7 Human Rights Watch, [Creating Panic: Bangladesh Election Crackdown on Political Opponents and Critics](#), 22/12/18

8 Dhaka Tribune, [BNP fears coercion, alleges police crackdown ahead of national polls](#), 15/19/18

9 CNN, [A disputed election and a dangerous new era for Bangladesh's politics](#), 1/1/19

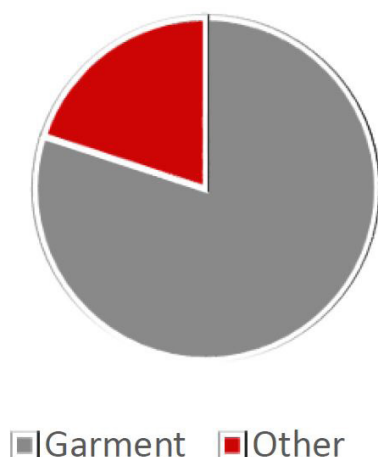
THE UK'S RELATIONSHIP WITH BANGLADESH TODAY

Economic Relationship

Today the UK is Bangladesh's third largest exports destination. In 2018, Bangladesh exported approximately \$4 billion of goods – mostly textiles – to the UK.¹⁰ It relies heavily on its ready-made garment industry, which is a major force behind its recent economic growth and is worth almost \$25 billion. According to a recent government report, Britain's biggest retailers have "chased the cheap needle around the planet", importing cheap clothing in vast quantities from countries including Bangladesh in the pursuit of "fast fashion".¹¹ However, this desire for cheap clothing products has come at the expense of the rights of those who make them. As Dr Mark Sumner noted in evidence to the Commons Environmental Audit Committee, the current "fast fashion model" means that consumers "are getting pleasure and enjoyment from fashion and that is coming at a cost to workers."¹²

The UK is the second largest foreign investor in Bangladesh, and the third largest single-country bilateral donor, after the US and Japan – mostly in the form of grants.¹³ Almost 100 UK businesses operate in Bangladesh, including HSBC, Unilever and GSK. Bangladesh is one of the top recipients of UK official development assistance. The UK is Bangladesh's fifth largest source of remittance and is home to the largest Bangladeshi diaspora in the western world, now numbered at about 500,000.

Bangladesh: exports



¹⁰ Bangladesh High Commission, [Trade between UK and Bangladesh](#)

¹¹ Environmental Audit Committee, [Fixing Fashion, Clothing, Consumption and Sustainability](#), 19/02/19

¹² Ibid

¹³ United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, [Ex ante assessment of the possible impacts of the graduation of Bangladesh from the category of Least Developed Countries \(LDCs\)](#), 01/04/19

Conditions for Workers in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's garment industry is the second largest worldwide. It employs approximately 4 million people, at least 80% of whom are women.¹⁴ Despite the wealth generated by the industry, which accounts for nearly four fifths of the country's exports, the safety and wellbeing of workers has traditionally been a low priority.¹⁵ Hazardous working conditions, low wages and poor trade union representation are widespread, and workers suffer intimidation, sexual harassment and sexual discrimination.¹⁶



Garment factory workers in Bangladesh (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Workers earn considerably below what is considered a living wage in Bangladesh.¹⁷ As a result, employees are often compelled to work overtime, which means that they often work extremely long hours and suffer exhaustion. It is not uncommon for workers to work for 14 to 16 hours a day 7 days a week, with some finishing at 3.00am only to start again at 7.30am. ActionAid reports that 80% of garment factory workers in Bangladesh have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment and violence at work, with 90% per cent saying that their jobs were negatively affecting their health.

Case Study: the Rana Plaza Factory Collapse

In 2013, a major tragedy temporarily focused international attention on the rights of Bangladeshi workers. On 24 April, the Rana Plaza factory complex in Dhaka collapsed, killing 1,134 employees and injuring over 2,500. Unions branded it "mass industrial homicide".¹⁸ Although the workers had raised concerns about the building's safety, the managers would not allow them to halt production to allow the cracks that had appeared in the building to be investigated.¹⁹ The Fashion Revolution campaign, founded after a fire at the Tazreen Fashions factory on the outskirts of Dhaka killed 112 just five months earlier,²⁰ described the disaster as the "direct result of the opaque, complex and speedy way in which the industry functions today".²¹ Britain is intimately connected to these tragedies: high street giants including Primark, Mango and Matalan have acknowledged using factories in Rana Plaza.²²

14 Clean Clothes Campaign, [Facts on Bangladesh's Garment Industry](#), 01/02/15

15 Ibid

16 Human Rights Watch, [Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers The Most](#), 22/04/15

17 The Guardian, [Why are wages so low for garment workers in Bangladesh](#), 21/01/19

18 The Guardian, [Rana Plaza: five years on the safety of workers hangs in the balance](#), 24/04/18

19 Human Rights Watch, [Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers The Most](#), 22/04/15

20 International Labour Organisation, [The Rana Plaza Accident and its Aftermath](#)

21 Environmental Audit Committee, [Fixing Fashion, Clothing, Consumption and Sustainability](#), 19/02/19

22 Clean Clothes Campaign, [Rana Plaza: a man-made disaster that shook the world](#)

Global retailers and Bangladesh's government promised widespread reforms to prevent further tragedy, but improvements for workers in Bangladesh have been limited. A study by Sheffield University found that, although some global fashion corporations have committed to deliver living wages, there has been little meaningful change.²³ The prices that global brands will pay for products have continued to fall. For example, the price of men's trousers has fallen by 13% since the Rana Plaza collapse.²⁴ Low wages persist, and production pressure continues to grow for Bangladesh's factory workers.



Rana Plaza disaster, 2013 (Source: Flickr)

Human Rights Watch has documented that physical assault, verbal abuse, forced overtime, unsanitary conditions, and failures to pay wages on time or in full have remained widespread in the years following the disaster. A 2016 report into corporate leadership on Modern Slavery found that of 71 leading brands in the UK, 77% believed there was a likelihood of modern slavery occurring at some stage in their supply chains.²⁵

In January 2019, over 5,000 garment workers in Bangladesh participated in strikes, leading to violent clashes between protesters and police followed by mass dismissals of factory workers. One protester was killed when the police suppressed the protests using cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets.²⁶

UK Aid

Two major changes are likely to alter the UK's economic and aid relationship with Bangladesh in the coming years. The first is that Bangladesh's success in reducing poverty means that it will soon be ineligible for several benefits that it currently enjoys. Bangladesh is a development success story and has made large gains in reducing infant mortality and improving education and life expectancy. It reduced poverty from 44.2% in 1991 to 13.8% in 2016-17.²⁷ It is currently on the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) list, which comprises the 50 countries with the lowest human development index ratings. As such, it is eligible for benefits including finance for development projects and preferential access to certain export markets under regional trade agreements.

Although 21 million people remain in extreme poverty,²⁸ Bangladesh is set to graduate from LDC status in 2024. This is an important milestone in its development, but will lead to some difficulties. For example, exports are set to decline by an estimated 5% to 7.5% as the cost of entering the export market rises and trade conditions are added.²⁹ It will therefore need to improve its export competitiveness and push industrialisation further.

23 Sheffield Political Economy Institute, [Corporate Commitments to Living Wages in the Garment Industry](#), 30/05/19

24 Penn State Centre for Global Workers' Rights, [Binding Power: The Sourcing Squeeze, Workers' Rights, and Building Safety In Bangladesh Since Rana Plaza](#), 22/03/18

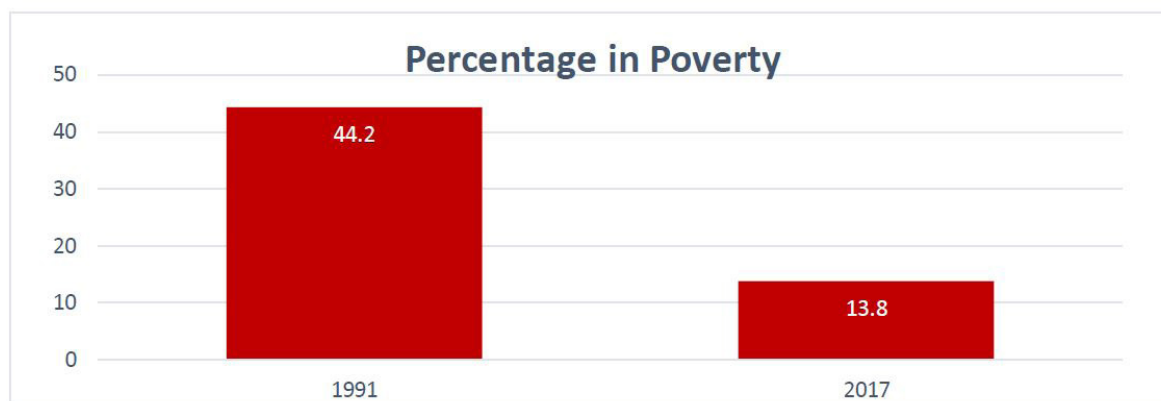
25 Hult Research and Ethical Trading Initiative, [Corporate Leadership on Modern Slavery](#), 01/11/06

26 Reuters, [Bangladesh garment manufacturers raise workers' pay amid further protests](#), 13/01/19

27 World Bank, [Bangladesh: Reducing Poverty and Sharing Prosperity](#), 15/11/18

28 Department for International Development, [DFID Bangladesh](#), 01/07/18

29 The Economist, [Graduating from LDC: will the benefits outweigh the losses?](#), 29/03/18



Graduation from LDC status will require the UK to review its aid to Bangladesh. The UK's aid priorities in Bangladesh have been evolving for several years, moving away from the direct delivery of services, such as health and education, and towards national capacity building. As the UN notes: *"A gradual change is already under way in the nature of assistance, which is shifting from direct delivery of services (for example in health and education) towards building national capacity. This is related to Bangladesh's overall development trajectory and its national plans, the United Kingdom's co-operation policies and strategic priorities and other factors."*³⁰

The second major factor that will affect Bangladesh's relationship with the UK is Brexit. Bangladesh's LDC status means that it currently enjoys tariff-free market access to the UK via the EU's "Everything But Arms" arrangement. It is thought that the UK will adopt a preferential market access scheme for Bangladesh after Brexit, but Bangladesh would be badly affected if there were a no-deal Brexit and no such scheme was in place.³¹

As Britain looks for international partners after Brexit, Bangladesh is a likely candidate for increased trade, given the two countries' established economic and historical relationship. The UK government has stated that "Bangladesh is an important trading partner, with untapped potential for British firms. Investments in raising the incomes of a population of 160 million and rising, will increase trading potential, as will boosting the investment climate. Development work, alongside trade and diplomacy, gives the UK a favoured and trusted position with the government and citizens of Bangladesh."³²

In 2017, the UK and Bangladesh set up the Bangladesh-UK Strategic Dialogue as a formal structure for regular engagement between the two governments. There have been three such meetings so far, with the third taking place in Dhaka in April 2019.

Although the UK government has committed to spend 0.7% of GDP on official development assistance, it has increasingly been using aid as a tool to pursue British interests and increase British exports. This has become even more acute in the context of Brexit. Penny Mordaunt, then International Development Secretary, said in 2018: "I will develop alongside the Department for International Trade a bold new Brexit-ready proposition to boost trade and investment with developing countries and promote sustainable economic development and job creation. Development policy will not exist in a vacuum."³³ There is therefore a danger that UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) will be used simply for the benefit of UK companies, rather than for effective development programmes. Indeed, DfID has explicitly stated that its "support to Bangladesh is designed to increase our prosperity by identifying greater opportunities for British businesses, increasing British exports of goods and services, and opening up future markets"³⁴.

30 World Bank, [Bangladesh: Reducing Poverty and Sharing Prosperity](#), 15/11/18

31 Center for Global Development, [No-deal Brexit, Europe's EBA & Bangladesh: Hitting home, fighting back](#), 14/02/19

32 Department for International Development, [DFID Bangladesh](#), 01/07/18

33 Department for International Development, [Penny Mordaunt's five pledges for the future of UK aid](#), 15/01/19

34 Ibid



International Development Secretary Penny Mordaunt meets UNICEF aid workers in Bangladesh (Source: Flickr)

Where does UK Aid go?

A significant proportion of the UK's aid to Bangladesh is channelled through local non-governmental organisations, the most significant of which is BRAC, the world's largest development NGO – an organisation so powerful that it has been called Bangladesh's second government.³⁵ £40.4 million of the UK's ODA budget for 2018-19 will be channelled through BRAC. The NGO was created in 1972 following Bangladesh's war of independence and now employs more than 100,000 people. Much of its aid work is conducted through the provision of microfinance. It has distributed more than £2 billion in microfinance loans.

Bangladesh is the birthplace of microfinance. Mohammad Yunus founded the organisation that was to become the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh in 1976, with the aim of reducing poverty by providing small loans to the country's rural poor. His idea was that donors could provide subsidised or cheaper loans to seed-fund micro businesses or individual entrepreneurs – in other words, to “bring capitalism down to the poor”³⁶. He was awarded the Nobel prize for his microfinance work in 2006.

Microfinance

Microfinance now includes myriad other services including savings, insurance, remittances and non-financial services such as financial literacy training and skills development programmes, and Bangladesh has one of the world's most developed microfinance ecosystems. More than 33 million Bangladeshis receive some sort of microfinance service, and there are more than 700 microfinance initiatives of various sizes throughout the country.³⁷

However, the UN has pointed out that Bangladesh's success in reducing poverty may be largely due to its wider economic growth and its export industries rather than microfinance initiatives: “The economy has developed largely through textile and garment exports. Remittances, natural gas, shipbuilding and seafood, as well as information communications and pharmaceuticals are all emerging sources of foreign exchange and economic growth.”³⁸ Indeed, many now argue that microfinance has few large-scale economic benefits. Diana Barrowclough, senior economist at the UN, has argued that “it should be obvious that lending very small amounts of money (usually less than \$100) to individual entrepreneurs-to-be is unlikely to be able to generate jobs and create a dynamic market on the scale needed to fundamentally change the economic environment, even at a very local level.”³⁹

35 The Guardian, [Growing discontent](#), 20/02/08

36 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, [The Ins and Outs of Inclusive Finance](#), 01/07/18

37 Md Aslam Mia, [An Overview of the Microfinance Sector in Bangladesh](#), 20/04/17

38 United Nations, [Leaving the LDC category: Booming Bangladesh prepares to graduate](#), 10/04/18

39 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, [The Ins and Outs of Inclusive Finance](#), 01/07/18

Others, like anthropologist Jason Hickel, have gone further: *“It turns out that microfinance usually ends up making poverty worse. The reasons for this are fairly simple. Most microfinance loans are used to fund consumption...As a result, borrowers don’t generate any new income that they can use to repay their loans so they end up taking out new loans to repay the old ones, wrapping themselves in layers of debt...The only consistent winners in the microfinance game are the lenders...Microfinance has become a socially acceptable mechanism for extracting wealth and resources from poor people.”*⁴⁰

In response to growing criticism of microfinance, DfID conducted a major study of its effect on poverty reduction. It concluded that “no clear evidence yet exists that microfinance programmes have positive impacts.” For example, although one of the main arguments used by proponents of microfinance is that it can be directed at women – many microfinance initiatives lend only to women – the DfID study found “no robust evidence of positive impacts on women’s status, or girl’s enrolments”.⁴¹ Despite DfID’s findings, the government remains committed to pursuing a microfinance-based approach to poverty reduction in Bangladesh, stating: “We will continue to support inclusive financial services and reforms to the investment climate, which will allow the poorest to start and grow small businesses, creating jobs and reducing poverty.”⁴²



Muhammad Yunus at weforum (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The Conflict, Security and Stability Fund

Under the Coalition and Conservative governments, the UK has been looking for ways to redefine other government spending as development spending so it can be counted within its 0.7% of GDP spending commitment. One such programme is the Conflict, Security and Stability Fund (CSSF), launched in April 2015 to deliver a “new, more strategic approach to [the UK’s] work in conflict-affected states”.⁴³ The CSSF has an annual budget of over £1 billion, which can be used by departments including the FCO, DfID and the MoD, although its priorities are set by the government’s National Security Council.

Essentially, it is a means of using UK aid spending to fund military and counterterrorism projects, in line with the government’s stated desire to spend UK aid in the “national interest”.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ LSE, [Jason Hickel – The Microfinance Delusion: who really wins?](#), 11/06/15

⁴¹ Department for International Development, [What is the evidence of the impact of microfinance on the well-being of poor people?](#), 01/08/11

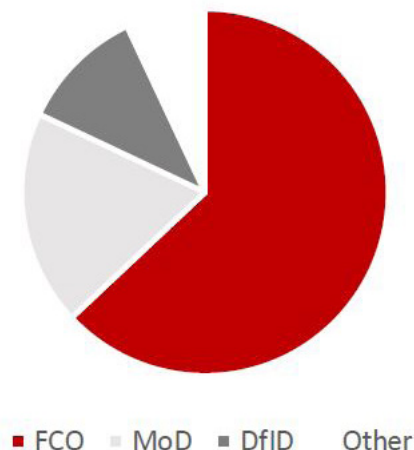
⁴² Department for International Development, [Single departmental plan](#), 27/06/19

⁴³ House of Commons, [Written statement](#), 12/03/15

⁴⁴ HM Treasury/Department for International Development, [UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest](#), 01/11/15

The government has explicitly stated that it aims to use the CSSF to pursue its post-Brexit aims: “The outcome of the EU referendum means that the CSSF has an even greater role in ensuring that the whole of government demonstrates that Global Britain is engaged in the world.”⁴⁵

Spending by Department



The CSSF has been criticised for channelling UK aid into military priorities. Global Justice Now writes: *“Latest figures show that 4.5 per cent of the UK’s total aid budget is now being spent through the CSSF. Much of this aid money is, however, being used to fund questionable projects that appear to be more about promoting the UK’s military or security interests than they are focused on promoting development or eradicating poverty. Many of these projects only count as aid now that the main rule-making body, the OECD, has changed the international aid rules, partly thanks to lobbying by the UK government.”*⁴⁶

Military Training

The Bangladesh High Commission states that a “number of Bangladeshi Armed Forces personnel are trained in UK every year at the Sandhurst Royal Military Academy, Royal College of Defence Studies and at the Joint Defence Command Staff Courses” and that the Royal Navy provide instructors and technical advice to the Bangladeshi Navy.⁴⁷

One of Britain’s military training programmes with Bangladesh is entitled ‘Professionalisation of the armed forces’, under which *“the UK provides professional education, mentoring and advice to all three branches of the Bangladesh Armed Forces, to assist with their development programme and to highlight governance, transparency and oversight of all military activities.*

⁴⁵ [Written evidence submitted by HM Government, 14/09/16](#)

⁴⁶ Global Justice Now, [The Conflict, Stability and Security Fund Diverting aid and undermining human rights](#), 01/12/17

⁴⁷ Bangladesh High Commission, [Bangladesh-UK Defence Partnership](#)

*The programme focusses on group training courses delivered in Bangladesh, with a small number of selected individuals studying on in-depth courses in the UK. The UK is providing advice on manning structures and force development, as well as providing specific assistance for capabilities such as the integration of military disaster response into the wider civilian, national and international effort.”*⁴⁸ The Ministry of Defence states the focus of this defence partnership is solely on educating and professionalising the Bangladeshi military while ensuring “compliance with ethical behaviours and International Humanitarian Law”.⁴⁹ However, internal documents bluntly state that the purpose of the programme is to show the Bangladesh military “in a positive light”.⁵⁰

Rapid Action Battalion

The Bangladesh military’s Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an elite counterterrorist force, was established in March 2004 in response to heightened crime rates, widespread public mistrust in existing enforcement institutions amid corruption allegations and against the backdrop of the War on Terror. It is comprised of senior officials from the Bangladesh Police, Army, Navy, Air Force, Border Guard and Bangladesh Ansar, a paramilitary force. Its 12 battalions operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Its operations typically fall under the brief of law enforcement, but it has cracked down on left-wing groups and has attempted to severely restrict the activities of the BNP opposition party.⁵¹ Although the Awami League fiercely criticised the Rapid Action Force whilst in opposition, it has made extensive use of it since it has been in government.⁵²



Bangladesh army commandos (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

In 2010, documents published by WikiLeaks showed the UK provided training to the RAB on “investigating interviewing techniques” and “rules of engagement”.⁵³ However, when the cables were leaked, the Foreign Office suggested that the RAB was being given “human rights training”.⁵⁴ Today, the UK continues to work closely with Bangladesh on counterterrorism measures, despite accusations that the RAB continues to be responsible for carrying out extrajudicial killings and torture.⁵⁵

48 HM Treasury/Department for International Development, [UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest](#), 01/11/15

49 Ministry of Defence, [Annual Report and Accounts 2016-7](#), 19/07/17

50 [Review of Bangladesh CSSF Programme](#), 01/03/15

51 Shah Mohammad Mushfiqur Rahman, RAB: Eradicating Crimes or Crimes of the State?, published in Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 2005

52 The Guardian, [Bangladesh's Philippines-style drugs war creating 'atmosphere of terror'](#), 25/05/18

53 The Guardian, [Government faces legal challenge over training of Bangladeshi 'death squad'](#), 23/12/10

54 The Guardian, [Bangladesh interrogation centre where Britons were taken to be tortured](#), 17/01/11

55 Amnesty International, [Bangladesh: Launch a full investigation into alleged extrajudicial executions](#), 12/6/18

Arms Sales

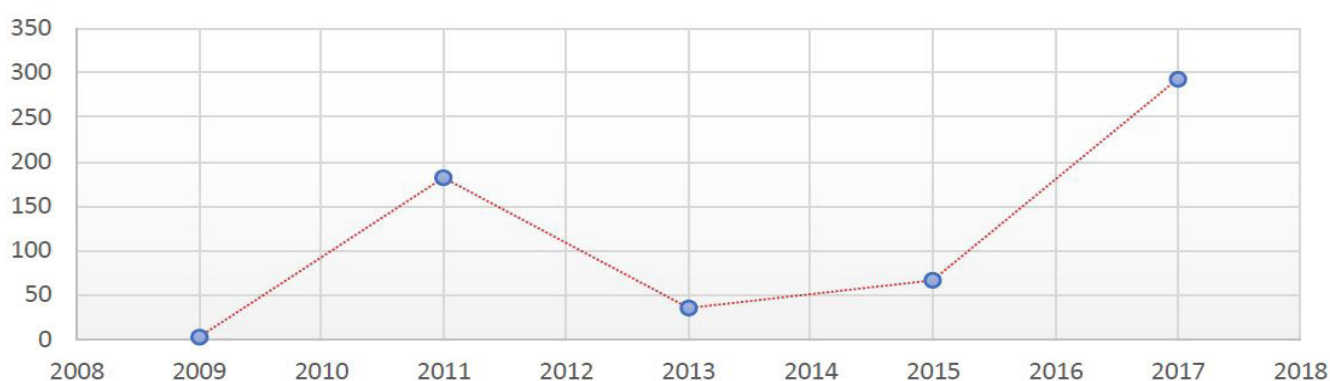
Although Bangladesh is on the Foreign Office's human rights priority countries list, the UK remains a major supplier to its military, with which it has a longstanding relationship – for example, the Royal Navy has long been a major supplier of ships to the Bangladesh Navy.⁵⁶

Despite the reported political suppression in Bangladesh over the past decade, Britain's arms sales are increasing, and one of the chief pillars of the Bangladesh-United Kingdom Strategic Dialogues is to deepen the two countries' military ties. According to Action on Armed Violence, *“the number of arms export licences granted by the UK government to Bangladesh spiked hugely in the first full year of the UK coalition government, more than tripling from 59 to 182. In the following years, the number of approved export licences decreased but remained consistently higher than pre-2010 levels. In 2016 and 2017, under the Conservatives, the number of licences spiked again, to 159 and 293, respectively. In total, 995 military arms export licences were approved to Bangladesh between 2008 and 2017.”*⁵⁷

Bangladesh is currently expanding and modernising its military capacity under a programme entitled Forces Goal 2030, launched in 2009 with the aim of developing a three-dimensional force capable of conducting multi-platform warfare.⁵⁸ It has therefore increased its purchases from its principal military suppliers, including the UK.

In 2018, the Bangladesh Air Force bought an unknown quantity of C-130J aircraft from the Royal Air Force, and Cambridge firm Marshall Aerospace and Defence Group has signed a contract to provide maintenance, secured “in close co-operation with the UK MoD's defence equipment sales authority.”⁵⁹ The contract will require Marshall Aerospace to “deliver a total support solution to the Bangladesh Air Force C-130J covering aircraft maintenance, logistics support including the provision of spare parts and ground support equipment for establishing local capabilities, as well as engineering services to ensure the effective operation of the fleet.”⁶⁰

Approved military arms export licences to Bangladesh by UK government (2009-2017)



Source: CAAT (Campaign against the Arms Trade) and AOA (Action on Armed Violence)

56 Bangladesh High Commission, [Bangladesh-UK Defence Partnership](#)

57 AOA, [UK arms exports to Bangladesh](#), 28/11/18

58 The Diplomat, [Bangladesh's Ambitious Military Modernization Drive](#), 09/01/18

59 Dhaka Tribune, [BAF signs deal with UK's Marshall Aerospace for C-130 aircraft maintenance](#), 14/05/18

60 Defense Aerospace, [Marshall Aerospace and Defence Group to support Bangladesh Air Force](#), 10/05/18

BAE Systems is in talks with the Bangladesh Air Force to supply two 16-plane squadrons of Eurofighter Typhoon Multi-Role Combat Aircraft. The Bangladesh Navy is working with Cammell Laird and Babcock to provide a 4,000 tonne guided missile frigate, to be commenced by 2020. The Royal Navy is trying to sell four of its River-class Offshore Patrol Vessels and two Sandown-class minehunters to the Bangladesh Navy.⁶¹

If these arms are being used in the abuse of human rights, this would contravene the British licensing criteria. The Consolidated EU and National Arms Export Licensing Criteria 2000 permit the granting of licences if the arms will be used for internal repression or in an act of aggression against another country, or if they will adversely impact the UK's national security.⁶²

Information Sharing

Britain and Bangladesh also co-operate on information sharing. This includes bilateral co-operation such as “sharing of best practice, and information in preventing radicalisation and xenophobia”.⁶³ However, this information is shared in a context where there is little doubt that human rights of persons in custody in Bangladesh are routinely abused. Amnesty states that there is neither the political will, nor the awareness, to stop torture or ill-treatment.⁶⁴ Moreover, a 2011 Guardian investigation found that under the previous Labour government the UK authorities passed on information about British nationals who were “held at a secret interrogation centre where inmates are known to have died under torture”.⁶⁵

61 BDMilitary, [UK defence companies offer equipment to Bangladesh](#), 29/09/18

62 Ibid

63 GOV.UK, [Third Bangladesh-United Kingdom Strategic Dialogue](#), 05/05/19

64 Amnesty International, [BANGLADESH 2017/18](#)

65 The Guardian, [UK linked to notorious Bangladesh torture centre](#), 17/01/11

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Successive Bangladeshi governments have used military and security forces to commit human rights abuses, but, according to the US Department of State, the situation has worsened since the Awami League came to power in 2009. The government has committed unlawful and arbitrary killings, detentions and forced disappearances, while fostering a culture of impunity.⁶⁶ The government has failed to hold law enforcement agencies to account for these abuses, and calls by human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International, for impartial investigations have fallen on deaf ears.⁶⁷

Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances

The most serious accusations of human rights abuses relate to extrajudicial killings by the RAB, which are reported to be “gunfight”, “crossfire” or “encounter” killings. Following a “crossfire” killing, the RAB will claim to have acted in self-defence and that the deaths were the result of “gunfire exchange” with criminals.⁶⁸ However, Human Rights Watch reports that many victims were executed or tortured in custody and later transported to the scene of their arrest and killing.⁶⁹ Bangladesh human rights group Ain o Salish Kendra reports that extrajudicial killings by security forces increased from 162 in 2017 to 466 in 2018.⁷⁰ Human rights activists have stated that this new wave of killings has “created an atmosphere of terror across the country”.⁷¹

The number of “disappearances” also increased after the Awami League came to power in 2009. The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) reports that, since then, 507 individuals have disappeared, 62 of whom were found dead. 286 have returned alive, and the locations of 159 are still unknown.⁷² The number of disappearances increased again between the 2014 and 2018 general elections, and Odhikar reports that between January and March 2019, 12 people have disappeared after being arrested by law enforcement agencies.⁷³ The systematic nature of this targeting suggests that enforced disappearances are used as a “political tool by the government to silence criticism and dissent”,⁷⁴ and has helped foment a culture of impunity whereby the rule of law is suspended.⁷⁵

Case study: Ahmad Bin Quasem

Ahmad Bin Quasem is a Bangladeshi barrister who trained and was called to the Bar in the UK. He was abducted while representing his father before the International Crimes Tribunal, a tribunal set up by the Bangladesh government in 2009 to try crimes committed during the war of liberation against Pakistan.⁷⁶

On 5 August 2016, a group of eight men, four wearing RAB uniforms, came to the Dhaka apartment where Bin Quasem was living with his wife and two young daughters, after recently moving to escape harassment, and asked him about his living arrangements. Four days later, at about 11pm, another group of men in plain clothes entered the apartment without a warrant and dragged him into an unmarked van.

66 US Department of State, 2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh, 13/03/19

67 Amnesty International, Bangladesh: Launch a full investigation into alleged extrajudicial executions, 12/06/18

68 US Department of State, 2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh, 13/03/19

69 Human Rights Watch, Crossfire, 10/05/11

70 The Daily Star, [Rights Situation in 2018: ‘Extremely alarming’](#), 11/01/19

71 The Guardian, [Bangladesh’s Philippines-style drugs war creating ‘atmosphere of terror’](#), 25/05/18

72 Al Jazeera, [Long wait for families of Bangladesh forced disappearance victims](#), 26/05/19

73 Odhikar, [Three-month Human Rights Monitoring Report on Bangladesh](#), 27/04/19

74 FIDH, [Vanished Without A Trace: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh](#), 01/04/19

75 Amnesty International, Bangladesh: Launch a full investigation into alleged extrajudicial executions, 12/06/18

76 Counsel, [Barrister Abducted without a Trace for Two Years](#)

There has been no official confirmation of his status since his abduction and he has not been charged with any offence, although there are unconfirmed reports that he was initially held at the RAB headquarters. Bin Quasem's abduction appeared to be part of a crackdown on people with links to opposition parties: three sons of senior opposition leaders who were arrested at around the same time.⁷⁷

Bin Quasem has not been seen in the three years since his disappearance, and there are grave concerns about his physical and psychological wellbeing. He has had no access to his family or lawyers. Despite concerns raised by UK lawyers and the international press, no more information has been forthcoming.

Torture

Torture is illegal in Bangladesh but remains a routine feature of the criminal justice system.⁷⁸ Bangladesh is party to the UN convention against torture, and the Torture and Custodial Death (Prohibition) Act 2013 stipulates that torture is punishable by up to five years' imprisonment, and causing death by torture by life imprisonment.⁷⁹ However, the prohibition of torture is frequently disregarded, and law enforcement agencies enjoy considerable immunity from prosecution. For example, authorisation must be obtained from the government before officers are prosecuted, and personnel can avoid charges if they demonstrate that they were acting in "good faith". A reported 129 people have died as a consequence of custodial torture between 2009 and 2018.⁸⁰ Detainees report being subjected to severe beatings, kneecapping, suspension by the hands, exposure to loud sounds, mock executions, electric shocks and forced nudity.⁸¹



Bangladesh police (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

The "War on Drugs"

In May 2018, the Awami League government launched a major crackdown on the illicit drug industry in response to an increase in the use, possession and sale of Yaba – a highly addictive synthetic mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine. The RAB was instructed to take a "zero tolerance" approach to anti-drug operations, which has resulted in the "crossfire killing" of approximately 300 individuals and the arbitrary detention of approximately 25,000.⁸² The Awami League government has asserted that the victims died while resisting arrest or when caught in crossfire, although relatives of the deceased claim they were executed by law enforcement officials.

Civil society groups and the BNP opposition allege that the war on drugs is being used as a smokescreen for political intimidation and to clamp down on BNP activists with no connection to the illicit narcotics trade.⁸³ The BNP claims that

⁷⁷ Foreign Policy, [Bangladesh is Vanishing the Opposition](#), 16/12/16

⁷⁸ US Department of State, 2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh, 13/03/19

⁷⁹ ILO, Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013, 24/10/13

⁸⁰ FIDH, [Vanished Without A Trace: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh](#), 01/04/19

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² BBC, Yaba: The cheap synthetic drug convulsing a nation, 25/04/19

⁸³ FIDH, [Vanished Without A Trace: The enforced disappearance of opposition and dissent in Bangladesh](#), 01/04/19

the government has exploited the situation to repress its key figures.⁸⁴ The European Union and Human Rights Watch have called for the war on drugs to be suspended and all allegations of extrajudicial killings to be independently investigated.⁸⁵

Political Repression

In 2012, opposition BNP leader Ilias Ali was allegedly abducted by government security forces, and as of October 2018 there was still no information as to his fate. He is one of the reportedly hundreds of BNP members, supporters, journalists, civil society members and student activists that the party alleges have been “disappeared” by the government.⁸⁶ In the same year, the government also banned three NGOs from the country, claiming they were providing aid to “illegal” Rohingya refugees coming from Myanmar.

BNP leader and former Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, has herself been incarcerated on corruption charges since February 2018. There was a major escalation in repression in the run-up to the December 2018 election, with over 430,000 criminal charges brought against BNP members between September and November.⁸⁷ Political affiliation appeared to be a major factor in claims of arbitrary arrest, harassment, intimidation and prosecution under spurious charges.⁸⁸

Freedom of Speech

Prior to the December election, the government violated international standards of freedom of speech by repressing media and civil society organisations, with pro-opposition electronic and print media including Channel 1, Diganta TV, Islamic TV and Amar Desh, temporarily or permanently shut down. Bangladesh currently ranks 146 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom barometer.⁸⁹ Opposition candidates, activists and supporters reported experiencing violence and repression throughout the campaign period. In July 2018, a former editor of an opposition publication was beaten and nearly lynched by more than 100 members of the Awami League’s youth branch.⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch report that the “security forces engaged in violence, torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings”.⁹¹ Around 4,500 BNP activists were arrested on false charges in September alone.⁹²



Man reads newspaper on wall in Dhaka (Source: Flickr)

84 The Economist, Bangladesh’s slide towards authoritarianism is accelerating, 04/10/18

85 Dhaka Tribune, [War on drugs: EU envoys for probing deaths of alleged criminal suspects](#), 04/06/18 and Human Rights Watch, Bangladesh: Suspend Deadly ‘War on Drugs’, 06/06/18

86 Human Rights Watch, [Bangladesh: Events of 2018](#)

87 Freedom House, Bangladesh: Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2018, 04/02/19

88 US Department of State, 2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh, 13/03/19

89 Reporters Without Borders, [Press Freedom Index](#), 2019

90 Reporters Without Borders, [Bangladeshi opposition journalist nearly lynched by ruling party activists](#), 24/07/18

91 Human Rights Watch, [Bangladesh: Violent Repression of Opposition](#), 17/01/19

92 Financial Times, [Bangladesh poll seen as choice between freedom and prosperity](#), 24/12/18

61% of opposition candidates faced criminal charges described as “politically motivated”⁹³ and there were several violent attacks on BNP candidates.⁹⁴

Human rights groups such as Odhikar have reported that the police are used to halt political gatherings. A survey conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh at over 6,000 Bangladesh police precincts found bribes had to be paid in order to receive services from police nearly 80% of the time.

The Digital Security Act 2018

Previously, the principal law used to govern online communication was the Information and Communications Technology Act (ICT) 2006, widely criticised for restricting freedom of expression.⁹⁵ Between 2012 and 2017, the police filed more than 1,000 cases relating to cybercrime, of which 179 were dropped.⁹⁶ In March 2017, the Awami League government attempted to make Facebook demand additional identification from Bangladeshis attempting to sign up. Although Facebook rejected the proposal, it provided the government with data relating to criminal cases since 2015. The Bangladesh judiciary can prosecute individuals for social media posts considered fake, obscene or defamatory, or if the comment “tends to deprave and corrupt” its audience.⁹⁷

In October 2018, the Bangladeshi Parliament passed the Digital Security Act, which has been described as “*retain[ing] the most problematic provisions of [the ICT Act] and add[ing] more provisions criminalising peaceful speech*”.⁹⁸ It was formulated in ambiguous terms that can be interpreted broadly.⁹⁹ Breaching the Act is punishable by 14 years’ imprisonment or a fine of 10 million Bangladeshi taka (\$120,000). Section 21 criminalises dispersing “propaganda and campaign against liberation war of Bangladesh or spirit of the liberation war or Father of the Nation”. Section 25 makes publishing “aggressive or frightening” information punishable by a three-year prison sentence, and section 28 authorises sentences of up to five years’ imprisonment for speech that “injures religious values or sentiments”.¹⁰⁰ The independent body that monitors compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a party, has described the law as incompatible with freedom of expression.¹⁰¹

Case Study: Shahidul Alam

On 5 August 2018, photographer and social activist Shahidul Alam was arrested for breaching section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act after stating in an interview to Al-Jazeera that the Bangladeshi police had stood by while gangs attacked protesting students. Bangladeshi authorities claimed that he had made “false” and “provocative” statements.¹⁰² Alam claims that he was beaten in detention, and according to the US State Department, “When Alam was brought to court on August 6, he appeared unable to walk unassisted and showed visible injuries. During his testimony in front of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, Alam alleged on the first night of detention, he was blindfolded, a weight was placed on his head, and he was hit on the face”.¹⁰³ Alam was released following an

93 Reuters, [Ahead of Bangladesh vote, opposition says it faces ‘a reign of terror’](#), 28/12/18

94 Human Rights Watch, [Creating Panic](#), 22/12/18

95 Human Rights Watch, [No place for criticism](#), 09/05/18

96 Access Now, Journalists, activists in Bangladesh arrested under ICT Act for posting on social media, 18/08/18

97 Dhaka Tribune, Police ask Facebook to demand extra ID for new accounts, 14/03/17

98 Human Rights Watch, [Bangladesh: New Law Will Silence Critics](#), 24/09/18

99 Amnesty International, [Bangladesh: New Digital Security Act imposes dangerous restrictions on freedom of expression](#), 20/09/18

100 Bangladesh Parliament, [Digital Security Act](#), 08/10/18

101 UN Human Rights Committee, General comment no. 34, Article 19, Freedoms of opinion and expression, 12/11/11

102 Human Rights Watch, Bangladesh: Annual report on the human rights situation in 2018, 17/01/19

103 US Department of State, [2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh](#), 13/03/19

international campaign of support, but many remain in detention thanks to Bangladesh's draconian communication laws.



Shahidul Alam (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Quota System

The civil service quota system was introduced in September 1972, whereby the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs reserves 30% of posts for Liberation War freedom fighters and their descendants, 10% for war-affected women, 40% for different districts and 20% for merit-based allocation. Several reform attempts have increased the merit-based allocations to 44%, but in 2010 the government decided to keep posts reserved for freedom fighters vacant unless they could be filled by the freedom fighters' descendants, despite soaring unemployment levels.

This "structural discrimination of merit" has enabled subsequent governments to exploit and preserve the quota system for political gain. The list of freedom fighters has been changed six times, raising questions about the transparency of the process, while several investigations have identified a number of high government officials with false certificates. Students protested against the lack of transparency in early 2018, demanding an allocation of 90% government posts based on merit, with a 10% quota for minority communities. The government capitulated by repealing the system but did not reserve quotas.

Disabled People's Rights

In 2013, the Bangladeshi Parliament passed the Disabilities' Rights and Protection (DRP) Act, giving persons with disabilities the right to complain and seek compensation if subjected to discrimination, but did not grant new formal constitutional rights.¹⁰⁴ A 2015 report by several non-profit groups found concerns still remain about the Act's implementation. The groups emphasise that it is unclear whether the Act prevails over other laws that affect disabled people and that the legal remedy or committees empowered under the Act are not yet in force or established.¹⁰⁵ The report found that in areas including healthcare and the criminal justice system, disabled people faced discrimination and abuse. For example, 81% of respondents claimed that the rate of child marriages was higher for girls with disabilities, 49% that they could not find paid employment because of their disability and 70% that they are paid less than non-disabled workers.¹⁰⁶

104 WDDF, [Persons with Disabilities' Rights and the Protection Act 2013](#), 2013

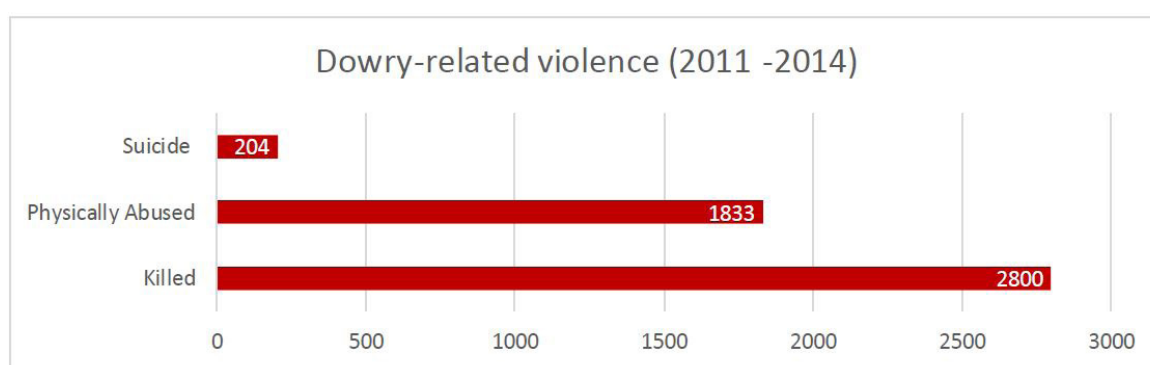
105 NGDO/NCDW/BLAST, [Current status of Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh: Legal and Grassroots Perspectives](#), 01/08/15

106 Ibid

Women's Rights

The Bangladesh constitution guarantees equal voting rights and includes provisions for equal opportunities in “all spheres of national life”, including parliamentary seat reservations.¹⁰⁷ Legislation has been passed acknowledging the need for punishment for offences relating to forced marriage and causing injury or death to women because of dowry and in April 2018 the High Court of Bangladesh banned the “two-finger test” conducted on rape victims. However, concerns about the way these safeguards have been implemented abound.

Odhikar found that despite the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980, between 2011 and 2014 at least 2,800 women were killed, 1,833 women physically abused and 204 committed suicide due to dowry-related issues.¹⁰⁸ Additionally, illiterate and unemployed brides are more likely to engage in dowry-related transactions. Academics have pointed out that, although annual development plans have sought to address areas such as literacy, health and nutrition, they have failed to address women's access to land, or the allocation of land for landless women.¹⁰⁹



LGBTQ+ Rights

LGBTQ+ rights are heavily restricted in Bangladesh. Consensual same-sex sexual activity is illegal and punishable by up to 10 years in prison, and LGBTQ+ people are not able to serve openly in the military or adopt children. It is an unsafe environment for sexual and gender minorities, who “fear for their safety, amid a climate of impunity for attacks on minorities by religious extremists.”¹¹⁰ Members of LGBTQ+ communities are often victim to “threatening messages via telephone, text, and social media” and are rarely supported by the police.¹¹¹

LGBTQ+ activists are threatened by possibility of arrest, death threats or having to flee to safe houses. In April 2016, Xulhaz Mannan, a prominent member of Bangladesh's LGBT community, and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy, a theatre artist and LGBT activist, were both murdered by jihadists as a result of their activism.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Asia Dialogue, [The fight for women's rights in Bangladesh](#), 19/09/18

¹⁰⁸ Odhikar, [Are you a silent observer of dowry and related violence?](#), 22/08/14

¹⁰⁹ Raisul Islam Sourav, [Unjust Land Right of Women in Bangladesh](#), 01/04/15

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, [Bangladesh: Events of 2018](#)

¹¹¹ US Department of State, [2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Bangladesh](#), 13/03/19

¹¹² The New York Times, [No County for Bangladesh's Gay Men](#), 30/07/17

The Rohingya Crisis

Background

The Rohingya crisis is the result of a longstanding divide between dominant ethnic Buddhist groups and ethnic Muslim minorities in Rakhine State (in Western Myanmar), which has been exacerbated by ethnic, religious and linguistic differences and economic underdevelopment.¹¹³ The Rohingya have long been subject to discriminatory policies from the Myanmar government, and violence from the military, security forces and Buddhist nationalist groups, but these practices intensified in 2012 following an upsurge of sectarian violence within Rakhine State.¹¹⁴ In June and October 2012, the rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman and murder of 10 Muslim pilgrims led to two waves of violent confrontation between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists in 12 townships.

In August 2017, the militant group Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army claimed responsibility for co-ordinated attacks on 30 police posts and an army base. In response, the government designated ARSA as a terrorist organisation. The Burmese security forces began a military offensive with “genocidal intent” across Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships in Rakhine State, committing extensive violations of human rights and international humanitarian law during a campaign of ethnic cleansing, mass arson, enslavement and sexual violence, including gang rape, sexual slavery and mutilation.¹¹⁵ The military maintains that its operations target only Rohingya militants and insurgents, and that it aims to re-establish stability in Western Myanmar. However, the International State Crime Initiative estimates that between 22,000 and 25,000 Rohingya civilians have been killed, 75% of Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine State have been torched or bulldozed, and the mass rape of women and children has been used as a weapon of war.¹¹⁶



Rohingya refugees in refugee camp in Bangladesh, 2017 (Source: Wikipedia)

The killings sparked an exodus of approximately 740,000 Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh. The UNHCR estimated that in April 2019 there were 910,357 Rohingya refugees residing in makeshift settlements in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh.¹¹⁷ Although most of the refugees arrived between August and December 2017 – during the military offensive – there have been approximately 15,000 arrivals since January 2018,¹¹⁸ and the UN fact-finding mission on Myanmar claims that the killing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar is continuing.¹¹⁹

113 Council on Foreign Relations, [The Rohingya Crisis](#), 05/12/19

114 BBC News, [Why is there communal violence in Myanmar?](#), 03/07/14

115 UNHCR, [Report of the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar](#), 12/09/18

116 International State Crime Initiative, [Genocide Achieved, Genocide Continues: Myanmar's Annihilation of the Rohingya](#), April 2018

117 UNHCR, [Bangladesh: Operational Update](#), 30/04/19

118 World Food Programme, [WFP Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugee Response](#), 20/04/19

119 Guardian, [Rohingya genocide is still going on, says top UN investigator](#), 24/10/18

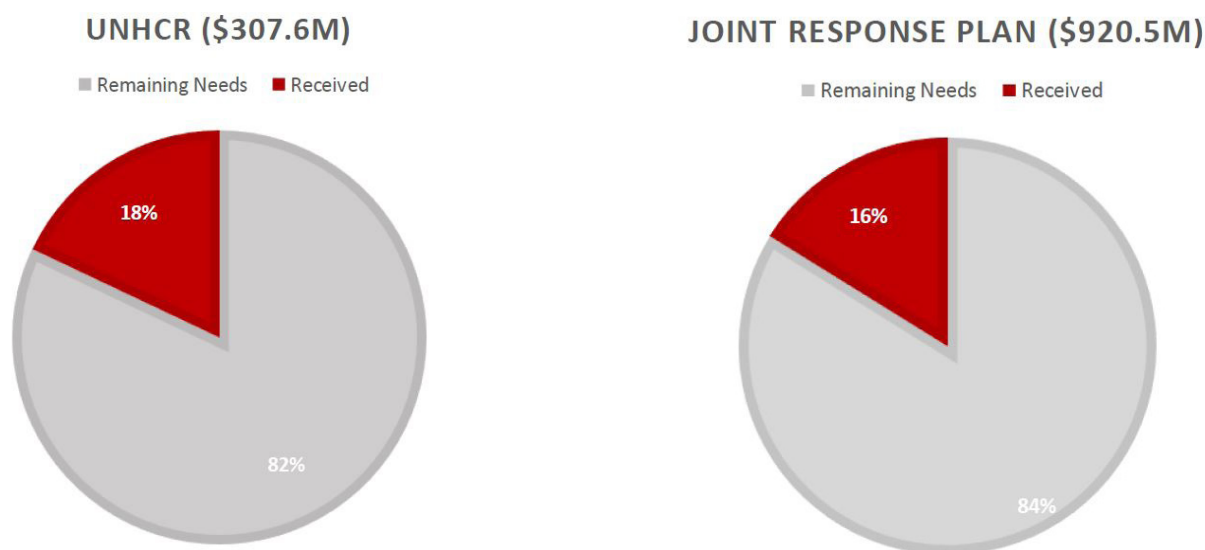
Most refugees reside in 34 crowded camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas, where they outnumber the local population by three to one. The largest camp, Kutupalong, houses approximately 13,900. However, the number living in makeshift settlements outside the camp has increased, and the Kutupalong-Balukhali Expansion Site, or mega-camp, now houses 604,000 refugees.¹²⁰ Approximately 781,000 refugees reside in nine camps and settlements, and 117,000 in host communities.¹²¹

The government of Bangladesh has treated the Rohingya influx as a temporary crisis. Its core objectives are managed containment and prompt repatriation, with limited long-term planning and investment. It has not granted the Rohingya formal status as refugees, and has restricted their access to education and employment and their freedom of movement.¹²² It has long insisted that it is unable to cope with the dramatic influx of refugees, and in March 2019 Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque stated that no more refugees would be accommodated in Cox's Bazar.¹²³

Humanitarian Challenges

The April 2019 Rohingya Influx Overview report states that for 32% of the refugee population there are high or very high gaps in meeting their needs.¹²⁴

In February 2019, a new Joint Response Plan covering the January-December timeframe was agreed by the International Organisation for Migration, UNHCR and the UN Resident Coordinator for Bangladesh requesting \$920.5 million to support Rohingya refugees and local host communities through food, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), education and medical care provision.¹²⁵ As of 31 March 2019, the Joint Response Plan has received 16.1% (\$148.4 million) of its funding requirements and UNHCR 18.0% (\$55.3 million) of its funding requirements.¹²⁶



¹²⁰ Bark, G. et al., [When there is no healthcare: the consequences of the chronic denial of healthcare for a large displaced population in a mega-camp](#), 01/10/18

¹²¹ BBC News, [Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis](#), 24/04/18

¹²² Bowden, M., [The current context to the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh](#), 01/10/18

¹²³ Guardian, [Rohingya crisis: Bangladesh says it will not accept any more Myanmar refugees](#), 01/03/19

¹²⁴ ACAPS NPM Analysis Hub, [Rohingya Influx Overview](#), 01/04/19

¹²⁵ UNHCR, [United Nations seeks US\\$920 million for Rohingya humanitarian crisis in 2019](#), 15/02/19

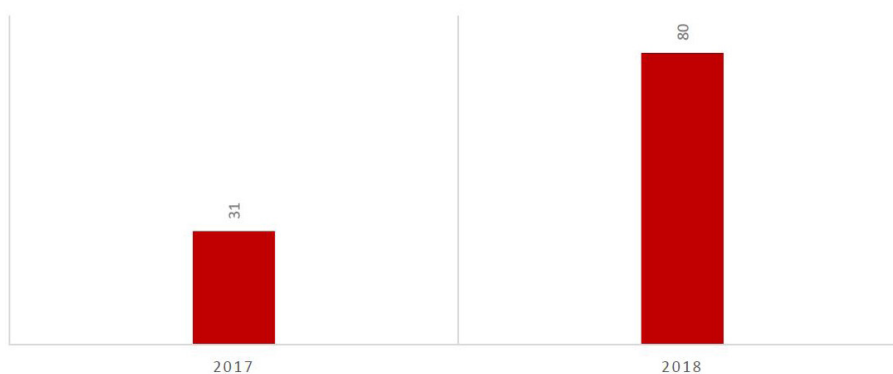
¹²⁶ UNHCR, [Bangladesh: Operational Update](#), 30/03/19

Although funding for basic infrastructure and WASH needs is extensive, there are abundant issues relating to accessibility, quality and practice. REACH found that 23% of refugee households are reducing their water intake due to a lack of readily available water (particularly in southern Teknaf, where the usage of unprotected water sources is common) and only 16% employ water treatment techniques, despite high levels of contamination in drinking water, increasing the risk of spread of communicable disease including acute watery diarrhoea, cholera and other water-borne diseases.¹²⁷ Sanitation management challenges are particularly acute at the Kutupalong-Balukhali site due to its high population density.¹²⁸ Open defecation by children under five is widespread, and the absence of adequate lighting and gender-segregated latrines and bathing facilities exacerbates gender-based violence risks for women and children – many households rely on self-made latrine and bathing facilities.¹²⁹

Secondary healthcare provision, including high-quality surgical capacity and 24-hour health service provision, remains inadequate.¹³⁰ The congested living conditions in the camps and insufficient vaccination coverage are highly conducive to epidemic and endemic infectious diseases including diphtheria, acute watery diarrhoea, measles and tetanus.¹³¹ Food security is problematic, given the long waiting times for distribution, distant distribution points and absence of gender-segregated distribution units.¹³² Food insecurity among host communities has worsened, with access to natural resources restricted by refugee activities and employment competition diminishing local households' purchasing power due to the undercutting of labour rates and increasing food prices, fuelling anti-refugee sentiment. The percentage of households with poor or borderline food consumption increased from 31% in 2017 to 80% in August-September 2018.¹³³

Education is provided by international and local NGOs and community-based organisations, though the quality varies. Operational challenges include overcrowded classrooms, poor-quality infrastructure and limited teaching resources.¹³⁴ The enrolment and attendance of Rohingya youth (particularly those aged 15 to 17 and female cohorts) within “temporary learning centres” (formal education programmes are banned within camps) remains low. Human Rights Watch reports that since January 2019 the government of Bangladesh has expelled scores of pre-August 2017 Bangladeshi-born Rohingya youth from public secondary schools.¹³⁵

POOR OR BORDERLINE FOOD CONSUMPTION %



¹²⁷ REACH, [Water, Sanitation and Hygiene baseline assessment](#), 01/04/18

¹²⁸ UNHCR, [Factsheet - Water, Sanitation & Hygiene: Cox's Bazar, Rohingya refugee response](#), 01/12/18

¹²⁹ UNHCR, [Bangladesh: Operational Update](#), 30/04/19

¹³⁰ Medecins sans Frontieres, [Crisis update - May 2019](#), 14/05/19

¹³¹ World Health Organization, [Rohingya Refugee Crisis: Public Health Situation Analysis](#), 07/05/18

¹³² ACAPS NPM Analysis Hub, [Rohingya Influx Overview](#), 01/04/19

¹³³ Food Security Information Network, [Global Report on Food Crises: Joint Analysis for Better Decisions](#), 01/04/19

¹³⁴ Burmese Rohingya Organisation, [The Right to Education Denied for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh](#), 01/12/18

¹³⁵ Human Rights Watch, [Bangladesh: Rohingya Refugee Students Expelled](#), 01/04/19

The camps are particularly vulnerable to natural hazards during the April-May cyclone and June-September monsoon seasons. CARE estimates that 150,000 refugees are at risk from flooding.¹³⁶ Other aggravating factors include durable material restrictions, which prevent the construction of protective shelters; deforestation, which has increased mud and landslide susceptibility; and devastation of temporary sanitation mitigating arrangements and WASH facilities, which exacerbate the proliferation of communicable diseases.¹³⁷ The Rohingya are officially stateless, and are restricted from participated in income-generating activities. This has contributed to increased human trafficking and forced labour, particularly among young Rohingya females. Bangladesh's International Organisation for Migration has identified 204 cases of trafficking, although NGOs maintain that the actual figure is much larger.¹³⁸

Relocation

In November 2017, the government of Bangladesh approved a proposal to construct a resettlement complex to house approximately 100,000 refugees on the uninhabited, remote and flood-prone island of Bhasan Char Island, which emerged from accumulated sediment within the Bay of Bengal in 2006.¹³⁹ In January 2019, the UN special rapporteur on Myanmar stated that she was uncertain that the island was "truly habitable". The UN has repeatedly called for full technical and protection assessments of the island to be conducted, although in March 2019 it was reported that the World Food Programme had drafted detailed plans to "facilitate the identification, staging, forward movement, reception, and sustainment of refugees" to Bhasan Char.¹⁴⁰

Although the government of Bangladesh has repeatedly emphasised its commitment to "voluntariness", in April 2019 the Disaster Management Secretary stated that the relocation process would commence in June¹⁴¹ despite widespread opposition from human rights organisations, NGOs and the refugee population. Xchange reports that 98.4% of refugees "categorically refuse" to go to Bhasan Char, with many identifying safety concerns and distance from Myanmar as key issues.¹⁴²

Repatriation

In November 2018, Bangladesh and Myanmar agreed to begin a process of repatriation, though the plan has been postponed indefinitely following widespread international pressure amid accusations of refolement and the unwillingness of refugees to return to Rakhine State.¹⁴³ Rohingya spokespeople, the UNHCR and the UK government have repeatedly stated that conditions for repatriation have not been satisfied, as their citizenship status has not been addressed, and their safety has not been guaranteed by an international body.¹⁴⁴

In May 2019, it was reported that the UNHCR had registered and given identity cards to approximately 270,348 refugees.¹⁴⁵ The UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme and Myanmar's Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population have committed to creating amiable and conducive conditions for repatriation.¹⁴⁶ However, reports that the killing of Rohingya in Rakhine State is ongoing suggest that the repatriation efforts will remain a protracted process.

UK Aid

When the first wave of nearly 700,000 Rohingya refugees entered Bangladesh in 2017, the government received considerable international and domestic support for taking them in, but there were domestic concerns about

136 CNN, [Hundreds of thousands of Bangladesh-based Rohingya refugees 'at risk'](#), 03/05/19

137 International Development Committee, [Bangladesh and Burma: the Rohingya crisis - monsoon preparedness in Cox's Bazar](#), 14/03/18

138 Reuters, [Trafficking in Rohingya camps feared rising as crisis rolls on](#), 05/02/19

139 Dhaka Tribune, [What do Rohingyas think about Bhashan Char?](#), 29/01/19

140 Telegraph, [Human rights groups slam draft UN plans to send Rohingya to barren island](#), 25/03/19

141 Times, [Bangladesh to start relocating Rohingya to island in June](#), 04/04/19

142 Xchange, [The Rohingya Survey 2019](#), 30/04/19

143 The Guardian, [Bangladesh admits no Rohingya willing to take repatriation offer](#), 15/11/18

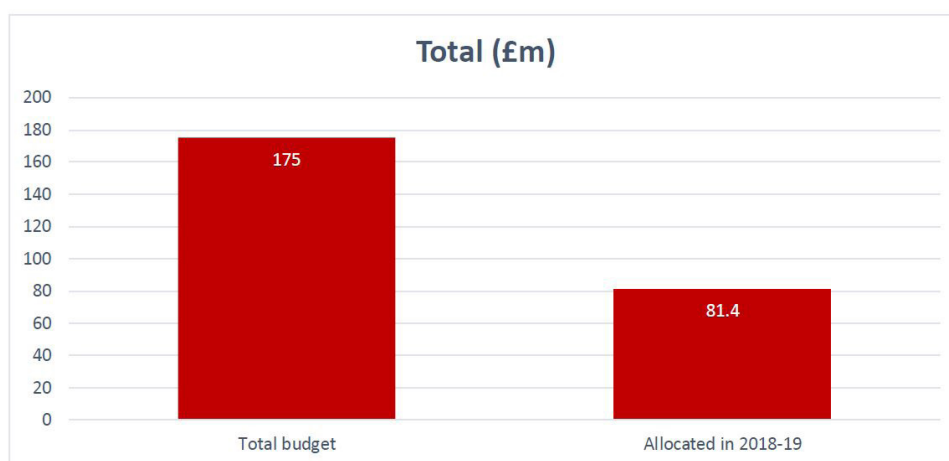
144 Lunn, J., [Bangladesh: November 2018 update](#), 29/11/18

145 UNHCR, [Over 250,000 Rohingya refugees get identity documents, for many a first](#), 17/05/19

146 Daily Star, [Rohingya repatriation: UNHCR, UNDP signs extension of MoU with Myanmar](#), 28/05/19

Bangladesh hosting the Rohingya indefinitely. The UK has provided £139 million in aid, including £47 million at the initial funding conference in October 2017. It has raised £30 million through the Disasters Emergency Committee Appeal (including £5 million matched by the government).¹⁴⁷ DfID's Strengthening Humanitarian Preparedness and Response programme provides funding for disaster preparedness (contingency funding for responding to emergencies included) and support for refugees and host communities in Cox's Bazar for the 2016-2021 period was approved in July 2016. Its budget currently stands at £175 million ¹⁴⁸ of which £81.4 million will be allocated in 2018-19.¹⁴⁹

UK aid has helped deliver materials to strengthen shelters; food assistance, including nutritional interventions for pregnant and new mothers; WASH facilities and healthcare services including midwifery care.¹⁵⁰ DfID supported World Food Programme activities including an innovative e-voucher food provision programme and engineering, telecommunications and logistics cluster activities to enable preserve humanitarian access during the cyclone and monsoon seasons.¹⁵¹ It has also supported WHO activities including an early warning system detecting latent disease occurrences and prompting targeted and tailored responses by health workers across 168 health centres in Cox's Bazaar¹⁵² and deployed an Emergency Medical Team of 67 medical professionals following a diphtheria outbreak in December 2018.¹⁵³



Its humanitarian reform policy recognises the need for a “new approach” to protracted crises and forced displacement including through reducing short-term humanitarian assistance and prioritising development finance, job-creation and social protection.¹⁵⁴ The UK government has repeatedly asserted that the international community must provide long-term support for the Rohingya and host communities.¹⁵⁵ However, the UK approach has hitherto not sufficiently focused on medium and longer-term planning and beyond-aid solutions. The UK has deployed a protracted crisis specialist adviser and supported the UN-led Joint Response Plan(s)¹⁵⁶. However, it should adopt a development-oriented approach, supporting localised development among host communities in Cox's Bazaar and broader regional and national development strategies covering trade and investment-led growth, labour mobility, private sector investment and climate finance.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁷ International Development Committee, [Bangladesh and Burma: the Rohingya crisis: Second Report of Session 2017-19](#), 09/01/18

¹⁴⁸ DfID, [Development Tracker: Strengthening humanitarian preparedness and response in Bangladesh](#), 09/04/19

¹⁴⁹ DfID, [DfID Bangladesh](#), 01/07/18

¹⁵⁰ International Development Committee, [Bangladesh and Burma: the Rohingya crisis: Fourth Report of Session 2017-19](#), 09/01/18

¹⁵¹ World Food Programme, [UK announces broad support for Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh](#), 08/10/19

¹⁵² DfID, [Rohingya refugees shielded from disease by UK aid](#), 05/02/19

¹⁵³ DfID, [UK aid will be “even quicker and smarter” in 2019](#), 31/12/18

¹⁵⁴ DfID, [Saving lives, building resilience, reforming the system: the UK Government's Humanitarian Reform Policy](#), 01/09/17

¹⁵⁵ DfID, [UK calls on the international community to prioritise long-term support for the Rohingya people on the anniversary of the crisis](#), 24/08/18

¹⁵⁶ International Development Committee, [Bangladesh and Burma: the Rohingya crisis: Fourth Report of Session 2017-19](#), 09/01/18

¹⁵⁷ Center for Global Development, [Toward Medium-Term Solutions for Rohingya Refugees and Hosts in Bangladesh: Mapping Potential Responsibility-Sharing Contributions](#), 01/02/19

Climate Change is a Human Rights Issue

“Climate change is a human rights issue,” says Bangladeshi scientist Dr Saleemul Huq, a former lead author of the IPCC, in an interview for this report. *“It is caused by humans and impacts on humans. Some humans are polluting the atmosphere and some humans are reaping the impacts of that pollution. It is entirely a human rights issue.”*

He continues: *“It is sometimes hard to prove that what is happening now is a direct result of climate change. However, what is absolutely unequivocal is the prediction that millions of people in Bangladesh will be displaced because of climate change in the future. This is undeniably a human rights violation. They are being left to fend for themselves and the whole world needs to take responsibility for it. In particular, the United Kingdom, being one of the biggest polluters, has a huge responsibility.”*

The Climate Emergency in Bangladesh

According to UNICEF, climate change threatens the lives and futures of more than 19 million children in Bangladesh.¹⁵⁸ As a result, basic human rights are no longer guaranteed, including the right to adequate living standards, the right to water, the right to food, the right to education, and – of course – the right to life.

Bangladesh is one of the countries most at risk of climate change. Two thirds of the country is less than five metres above sea level. Floods, droughts, storms and heatwaves are common, and regularly cause loss of property and life. Hundreds of thousands of people have already been displaced in Bangladesh, and thousands have been killed by natural disasters and extreme weather events.¹⁵⁹ Such events will only get more frequent in the years to come.

Historically, Bangladesh has done little to contribute to the climate emergency. In fact, it is one of the lowest-emitting countries in the world. It ranks 152 out of 188 countries for greenhouse gas emissions; it contributes less than 0.36% of global emissions.¹⁶⁰ In contrast, the United Kingdom is the 8th largest emitter per capita.¹⁶¹

Bangladesh nevertheless has to bear a disproportionate burden from climate change. Due to its unique geographic location and various socioeconomic factors such as its high population density, high levels of poverty and an overwhelming dependence on nature, the extreme effects of climate breakdown have become an existential threat to human rights.

158 UNICEF, [A Gathering Storm](#), 01/03/19

159 Ibid

160 [World Resources Institute](#), 2017

161 Statista, [The Global Disparity in Carbon Emissions](#), 03/12/18

Interview with Dr Rumana Hashem

"Climate change is just a word for human rights violations that have already happened, are happening, and are going to happen."

In 2006, six people were shot and killed during a protest in Phulbari. Paramilitary forces fired into a crowd of over 30,000 people, who had gathered to protest the opening of a new open-cast coal mine. If built, the mine would displace up to 50,000 Indigenous Peoples from 23 farming communities, and up to 220,000 people from the wider areas. In 2012, human rights experts also called for an end to the project.¹

Dr Rumana Hashem is the founder of the Phulbari Solidarity Group and was at the protests in 2006. She spoke to this report and this is her story:

"From the beginning, it was clear that people were against the mine. In Phulbari alone, there are twenty five different indigenous communities and these people know it is their last hope to survive. The project would have driven them to extinction. Many people like myself, who would not normally be political, got involved because we realised we needed to do something.

"Before the protest began, we were told there was a chance we would be arrested, and I had already volunteered myself for arrest. We were there to show our solidarity and did not want to be intimidated. We are, after all, the people of Bangladesh and we have a right to show our solidarity.

"We only planned to read a statement outside of the office. But we never finished reading the statement. Suddenly, we heard gunfire. I didn't know what had happened. Then I heard three more shots and that's when people started to run. I was not mentally prepared for this situation. I was surrounded by thousands of people and they were all panicking. I was at the front of the crowd and I could not escape. There was so much blood.

"That night, the police broke into the house I was hiding in. They raided many homes looking for activists. I was lucky that I looked young."

When we asked Dr Hashem what she thought could be done about this violation of human rights today, she said that there are two things the UK government can immediately do:

- 1) to ensure that British companies or businessmen do not go to any other country without consent from the citizens of that country.
- 2) to make the Financial Conduct Authority accountable to the UK Government, meaning that companies complicit in the violation of human rights should be immediately delisted and made responsible.

"Of course," she said, "we also have to think about longer term solutions".

"Your companies are displacing people now. And more and more people will be displaced as this crisis gets worse. Will the government in the UK be able to offer a home to them? If not, then in my opinion that is also a violation of human rights as well."

1 UN News, [Open-pit coal mine project in Bangladesh threatens human rights UN experts](#), 28/02/12

Human Rights Implications

The climate emergency threatens the rights to food and clean water. Sea level rises cause an increase in salinity, which prevents food from growing. Efforts to mitigate it often end up further entrenching the problem.¹⁶² In addition to the obvious health implications, a decline in access to food and water threatens the lives of millions of people, given that agriculture contributes 14% of Bangladesh's GDP and provides livelihoods to over 60% of the population.¹⁶³

As a result, mass migration is increasing within Bangladesh. In fact, it is estimated that 13.3 million people may be displaced by 2050, making climate change the country's principal driver of internal migration.¹⁶⁴ By 2100, 50 million people could be forced to leave their homes.¹⁶⁵ Most internally displaced people flee to rural slums, as climate refugees from Bangladesh – a predominantly Muslim country – are not welcome in neighbouring India and Myanmar for religious reasons.

Many of the refugees therefore end up in Dhaka, which is seen as a city of opportunity. However, public officials have said that, while the city has plans to build more affordable housing, it prefers to leave slum residents reliant on aid. Tariq bin Yousuf, a senior official, said: "If we invest money directly in slum areas, or give them an electricity supply, they will start to think, 'O.K., we have these facilities, so we have ownership of this land'".¹⁶⁶

Exacerbating Human Rights Abuses

Climate change not only violates basic human rights, but also exacerbates pre-existing violations. Women are feeling the effects of climate change now and the land struggle for female emancipation is being slowly undone. They are often reliant on labour markets that put men first, and are beholden to a patriarchal conception of the family that sees women working twice as hard to protect their family and their home from the effects of an ever-warming world. The right to education is also under threat, with many children forced to work instead of attend school.

The right to free assembly is also a good case study. In Bangladesh, the right to protest is being undermined, by both the government of Bangladesh and by companies operating with impunity in the region. In an effort to protect extractive industry, governments all across the world are denying ordinary people the right to assemble and protest in peace. In 2006, three people were shot dead and more than 200 were injured protesting the construction of a new coal mine in Phulbari, a border crossing in West Bengal. The company behind the mine, GCM Resources plc, is headquartered in London. If the mine had been built, it likely that it would have displaced over 100,000 people, including many indigenous Bangladeshis.

However, when the protesters arrived, a paramilitary force hired by GCM Resources openly fired at the crowds, murdering and maiming innocent civilians. Rather than punish the perpetrators, the Bangladesh government took action against the protesters, banning any further protests at the mine site. Dr Rumana Hashem, in an interview for this report, said: "GCM should be de-listed from the London Stock Exchange...This is a tangible thing that can be done now".

Approaches Based on Human Rights

In 2019, government minister Anisul Huq asked all countries to adopt a human rights-based approach to climate change. "As policies and programs are formulated, the main objective should be to recognize human rights," he said, "principles and standards derived from international human rights law – especially the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the core universal human rights treaties, should guide all policies and programs".¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² World Bank, [Implications of Climate Change for Fresh Groundwater Resources in Coastal Aquifers in Bangladesh](#), 01/02/10

¹⁶³ UNICEF, [A Gathering Storm](#), 01/03/19

¹⁶⁴ World Bank, [Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration](#), 19/03/18

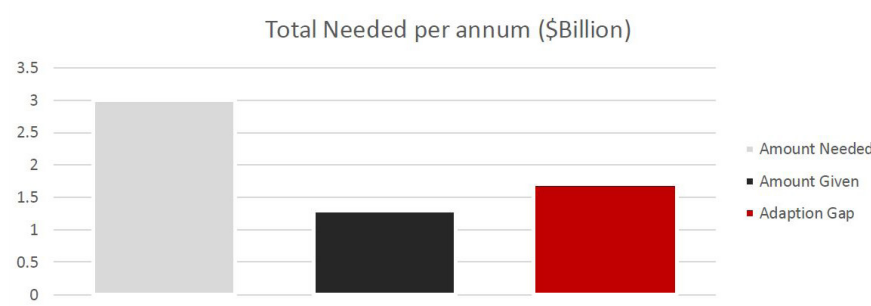
¹⁶⁵ Scientific American, [The Unfolding Tragedy of Climate Change in Bangladesh](#), 21/04/17

¹⁶⁶ Centre for International Governance Innovation, [Climate Migrants Face a Gap in International Law](#), 12/02/19

¹⁶⁷ Dhaka Tribune, [Dhaka seminar urges human rights-based approach in climate change](#), 27/06/19

This is not the first time that climate vulnerable countries have talked about the importance of human rights in conversations around climate change. In 2016, Bangladesh, Vietnam and the Philippines tabled a motion entitled “human rights and climate change”, which noted climate change has “adverse effects on the full enjoyment of human rights” and called for all states to assist developing countries in adapting to climate change.¹⁶⁸ A year earlier, 18 countries announced a voluntary pledge which formally encouraged all countries to address the human rights implications of climate change.¹⁶⁹ The United Kingdom signed up to this pledge.

Similarly, the Preamble to the Paris Agreement on climate change makes it clear that all countries “should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights”.¹⁷⁰ The United Kingdom and most of the international community now agrees that climate change is an existential threat to human rights. Vulnerable countries such as Bangladesh have repeatedly called for assistance and aid to mitigate the worst effects of climate breakdown and address the historic injustice of carbon emissions.



However, action has proven harder than words. A 2018 report from the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies calculates the country needs \$3 billion a year to adapt to climate change until 2030.¹⁷¹ Combined domestic and international spend in this area is \$1.3 billion per annum, leaving an annual financial “adaptation gap” of \$1.7 billion.

Although countries like the United Kingdom have said that they will contribute to these costs, the amount that they have raised is considerably less than what is needed.



Dr. Saleemul Huq (Source: Flickr)

¹⁶⁸ HRC, 2016

¹⁶⁹ [The Geneva Pledge on Human Rights in Climate Action](#), 2015

¹⁷⁰ Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015

¹⁷¹ Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, 2018

Dr Saleemul Huq welcomes the work that the United Kingdom and Bangladesh are doing together, and praises the United Kingdom for being “one of the biggest providers of climate change assistance”. However, he warns that *“unless emissions are reduced, there is a limit to how much we can adapt. The United Kingdom still has to raise the level of ambition for themselves and for everybody”*.

Dr Huq says that the United Kingdom must start regarding Bangladesh as “an equal partner in tackling the climate change problem” if it is to ensure a human rights-based approach to climate policy. He says that “the recent declaration of climate emergency should mean that we match that with action”.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The UK should ensure workers' rights as a priority in its trade arrangements with Bangladesh. It must support unions, NGOs and grassroots organisations in Bangladesh that are seeking to improve conditions to ensure that another Rana Plaza disaster cannot happen. It should put pressure on global corporations to perform due diligence checks across their supply chains. It should call on Bangladesh's government to ensure workers can effectively unionise.
2. The UK should take steps to educate Britain's consumers about the culture of fast fashion to encourage a fashion economy where people are willing to pay more for fewer items. It should provide clear economic incentives for retailers to move away from the cycle of reducing costs and maximising profits, and create a trading standard to signal that human rights have been respected in an item's production process.
3. The UK should hold Bangladesh's government to account for using criminal complaints and mass dismissals to suppress workers' calls for change. It should acknowledge that exploitation in Bangladesh's labour industry disproportionately affects women negatively and call for an end to sexual discrimination and harassment in the workplace.
4. The UK should use its diplomatic and economic influence to push for the rights of women, disabled people and LGBTQ+ people in Bangladesh, and should work with grassroots organisations working in this area.
5. The UK should review its spending on microfinance initiatives and ensure that aid is channelled to programmes that can be shown to work through a solid evidence base. At best, there is no evidence of the effectiveness of microfinance initiatives, and therefore the government's support of these programmes should be carefully scrutinised. At worst, microfinance initiatives can be damaging to international development aims. The UK and ? should investigate the efficacy of programmes such as universal basic income in meeting its development goals.
6. The UK should ensure that its 0.7% GDP commitment to overseas development aid is spent only on development programmes, not on military or security measures. The Conflict, Security and Stability Fund budget should be removed from the 0.7% calculation.
7. The UK should adopt a more rigorous and transparent system of arms export licensing that takes human rights into account.
8. The UK should investigate the effects of its training relationship with the Bangladeshi military and security forces, and cease any activity that is linked to human rights abuses. Any continuing involvement with the RAB should be ended.
9. The UK should support international monitoring processes to ensure that Bangladesh adheres to its obligations under the UN convention against torture and the international covenant on civil and political rights. It should push for Bangladesh's war on drugs to be suspended and all allegations of extrajudicial killings to be independently investigated. It should push for the ending of practices such as arbitrary arrest, torture and disappearances.
10. The UK should demand that Bangladesh immediately disclose the whereabouts and detention status of abductees such as Ilias Ali and Ahmad Bin Quasem.
11. The UK should push for a thorough investigation into allegations of violence against the Rohingya in Myanmar, and work with the international community to ensure the safety of the Rohingya on repatriation.
12. The UK should commit to ensuring global temperatures do not rise higher than 1.5°, and should conduct a review into the human rights implications of global temperature rises.



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