

## People's Republic of Bangladesh

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: In 2018, Bangladesh continued to face significant challenges in the area of human rights. Shrinking democratic space, rule of law and law enforcement, civil and political rights, labour rights, freedom of expression and women's rights remained areas of serious concern.

The December 2018 parliamentary elections marked an important mobilisation of voters and for the first time in 10 years, the participation of the opposition. However, violence has marred Election Day, and significant obstacles to a level playing field remained in place throughout the process, tainting the electoral campaign and the vote, with large scale arrests of opposition leaders and candidates and intimidation of the media.

Bangladesh has made progress in the area of workers' safety under the EU-led Sustainability Compact which also brings together Bangladesh, the ILO, the US and Canada. Still, there are important labour rights violations, especially as regards the freedom of association, and concerns over child labour in the informal sector. The country still needs to make significant improvements to address ILO's recommendations and ensure compliance with fundamental ILO Conventions.

Extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances remain a very serious concern in Bangladesh. Human rights NGOs reported 400 cases of extrajudicial killings in 2018. This number is significantly higher than in previous years since 2010, mainly due to the government's new campaign against narcotics, in which more than 200 alleged drug dealers have been killed by security forces in "shootouts". Human rights NGOs also reported 80 cases of enforced disappearances in 2018.

In 2018 Bangladesh ranked 146<sup>th</sup> on the World Press Freedom Index. The media and civil society operate under a legal framework that is not in line with international standards of freedom of expression. The adoption of the Digital Security Act was highly criticised for bringing new restrictions on unprecise grounds, to the freedom of expression and the right to access to information.

Despite the generous role and actions of Bangladesh in hosting 730,000 Rohingya people fleeing violence in Myanmar, the situation of the Rohingya refugees remained challenging.

While living conditions in the refugee camps have gradually improved, refugees remain vulnerable and in an extremely precarious situation. Continued investments into food security, water, sanitation, hygiene, and health are very important. Refugees live in congested sites with space constraints resulting in continued protection issues and poor living conditions due to extremely high density, in locations at risk of landslide and flood. Congestion heightens the risk of fire, disease outbreak, security breaches, and poses protection and mental health risks. Addressing mental health and psychosocial needs of refugees, as well as continuing to address sexual and gender-based violence case management, counter-trafficking programming and psychosocial support for children and adults remain critical.

Approximately 50% of pre-primary and primary children learners and 97% of youth and adolescents still lack access to relevant quality education. The Rohingya refugee children need better access and quality education opportunities.

It is crucial for stability, economic growth and development that Bangladesh promotes and protects the human rights of all, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious or political affiliation, disability or socio-economic background. The World Economic Forum's "Gender Gap Index of 2018" ranked Bangladesh as 48th on the global ranking. The EU continues to work in this sector with projects notably in the area of women workers' rights and protecting women from gender-based violence.

2. EU action - key focus areas: EU actions and activities in Bangladesh in 2018 focused on the respect for the rule of law and access to justice in line with international principles of governance, promoting freedom of expression, upholding fundamental economic and social rights, gender equality, women's human rights and preventing gender-based violence, enhancing **the protection of minorities (religious, ethnic, work and descent-based)** and refugees and abolishing the death penalty.

As indicated in the 2018 GSP Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, the EU has enhanced its engagement with Bangladesh under the Everything But Arms arrangement of the Generalised System of Preferences.

Through enhanced engagement, the EU intensified the dialogue with Bangladesh to press for concrete actions on and sustainable solutions to serious shortcomings in respecting fundamental human and labour rights. In Bangladesh, the Commission has raised concerns regarding labour rights, in particular freedom of association and the implementation of the joint initiative known as the "Compact for Continuous Improvements in Labour Rights and Factory Safety in the Ready-Made Garment and Knitwear Industry in Bangladesh". The EU has in particular raised the alignment of the Bangladesh Labour Act and the Export Processing Zone Act with the ILO labour rights conventions as one of the priority actions.

The process has helped to build pressure on government in order to address issues of concern, and is seeing some positive developments. In parallel, the issues were raised in a coherent and coordinated manner through all relevant channels (such as trade committees, political or human rights dialogues).

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The biennial EU-Bangladesh Subgroup on Human Rights and Good Governance met in April 2018 in Dhaka. The meeting highlighted the need for further progress in several areas, notably the rule of law and the law enforcement, elections, labour rights, freedom of expression, freedom of association, press freedom, and the situation of women, children and minorities. The third EU-Bangladesh Diplomatic Consultations on 19 July in Dhaka also engaged actively on these issues.

Throughout the year, the EU Delegation continued monitoring developments in labour rights in the framework of the Sustainability Compact, stressing the urgent need for aligning labour legislation with International Labour Organisation's standards and fully allowing for the freedom of association.

On the occasion of Human Rights Day on 10 December 2018, the EU Delegation organised two events, focusing on combating violence against women and on the rights of persons with disabilities.

The EU Delegation, together with the EU Heads of Mission, issued 5 local statements related to human rights in 2018. The statements called attention to the high level of casualties and the use of excessive force in the drive against narcotics; the restriction of freedom of expression by the new Digital Security Act; the unlawful and disproportionate violence against student protesters and the urgent need to improve road safety; the need to respect the rule of law, citizens' rights to universal suffrage, freedom of expression and right to peaceful assembly as regards the 2018 Parliamentary elections. On the occasion of the World Day against the Death Penalty on 10 October, the EU Heads of Mission issued a statement reiterating their commitment to the worldwide abolition of death penalty.

4. EU financial engagement: In 2018, EU development cooperation supported a number of initiatives implemented by different organisations nationwide and focussing on access to justice, migrant and refugee rights, economic and social rights, women's rights, child rights, indigenous and minority rights and support to civil society organisations. These projects were funded under the envelope for Bangladesh of the Development Cooperation Instrument, but also through the thematic instruments EIDHR (European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights) and CSO-LA (in support to Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities).

These initiatives brought some successful stories from the ground in 2018:

Under the EIDHR project "Strengthened Civil Society Protects and Promotes Women's Rights", 32 student forums have been formed this year in 32 secondary schools for a total of 960 students. Training has been provided to the student forums focusing on women rights, gender issues, child marriage to build confidence among students so that they can identify incidents of gender based violence, child marriage and can take joint actions to prevent the child marriage and gender based violence.

In the framework of the project "Supporting Human Rights Defenders Working for Women's and Girls' Rights in Bangladesh", 20 potential young women Rural Media Professionals received a fellowship award to improve their career in defending rural women's and girls' rights.

Under the project "Promoting enhanced participation and empowerment of Dalit communities in Bangladesh with an evidence base for realisation of Dalit Human Rights and Entitlements", Dalit Human Rights Defenders received support.

5. Multilateral context: The EU and its Member states played an active role in the third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Bangladesh in May 2018, putting forward a high number of recommendations on various human rights issues.