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PRESS RELEASE

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Bangladesh: “Operation Clean Heart” results in over 3,000 arrests and the death of 10 people as a result of torture

The International Secretariat of the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), the world’s largest coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in the fight against torture, would like to express its grave concern about reports of the arrest and detention of more than 3,000 people in Bangladesh, including 10 deaths in detention, in an ongoing operation that began on October 17th, 2002, known as “Operation Clean Heart.” Some 40,000 members of the Armed Forces are reportedly involved in this operation. The authorities claim that it has been launched in order to fight rising levels of crime in the country. Our sources state that the authorities have resorted to using excessive force during the arrest of many persons. Furthermore, they have reportedly used torture during interrogation, as a result of which 10 people have allegedly died. Further details concerning these persons’ identities and circumstances of their deaths remain unknown, but OMCT and the local members of its SOS-Torture network are continuing to investigate and monitor the situation.

According to information received, the authorities have set up checkpoints on major inter-district roads, at which vehicles are stopped and searched and passengers are body-searched and questioned. In certain areas in the country’s cities, house-to-house searches are being conducted, as a result of which a large number of people have been arrested and taken for questioning. The authorities are reportedly arresting persons based on a list of names, however, there is no information about how the list has been prepared and how authentic it is.

While some of these people have been released within hours, others have been detained incommunicado (without contact with the outside world) for days, and there are therefore serious concerns that they may be being subjected to torture during this time. Human rights groups in Bangladesh have reported that many of those who have been released show signs of beatings and ill-treatment and require hospital treatment. The families of the deceased persons claim that their deaths resulted from torture, and witnesses have reported having seen marks on their bodies as they were taken to the hospital. The Government, however, denies these allegations, claiming that all 10 deaths were due to natural causes, namely heart attacks.

According to the information received from the Asian Human Rights Commission, there has been no official information and no public announcement as to the circumstances under which the government felt compelled to involve the army in this operation. Moreover, the legal framework under which the army action is taking place has not been established publicly. The Government says that the army had to be called in because the civil authorities were failing to cope with rising lawlessness, and claim that the aim of the operation is to improve law and order.

The operation has, thus far, engendered a generalised climate of fear in the country, and there have been serious allegations that the Government's main objective is the repression of opposition groups rather than the proclaimed reduction of crime.

The International Secretariat of OMCT is gravely concerned by these reports of torture, mass arbitrary arrests including the use of excessive force, and incommunicado detention. Of particular concern are the serious allegations of the widespread use of torture during interrogation, which has reportedly led to the death of 10 detainees. Given that the operation is ongoing and that many persons remain in detention, OMCT fears that the number of victims of torture and casualties will continue to rise.

OMCT therefore calls upon the Bangladeshi Government to immediately halt this operation, to release all persons being detained as a result of these events, in the absence of valid legal charges, and to guarantee the personal integrity and access to legal counsel and family visits of all detainees, in accordance with its obligations under international law. In this context, OMCT would like to recall that Bangladesh is a State party to both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

OMCT also calls upon the authorities to launch an impartial and independent investigation into these events, in order to bring to justice the perpetrators of the afore-mentioned human rights violations, notably the alleged use of torture and excessive force, and to award adequate reparation to the victims and the families of the deceased.