

# Bangladesh approves death penalty for rape after protests

*Move comes after nationwide demonstrations sparked by series of sexual assaults.*

By Hannah Ellis-Petersen

The Guardian (12.10.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2H0T84M> – Bangladesh will introduce the death penalty for rape cases, after several high-profile sexual assaults prompted a wave of protests across the country in recent weeks.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, cabinet secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam confirmed that the cabinet had approved a bill ruling that anyone convicted of rape would be punished with death or “rigorous imprisonment” for life.

The death penalty amendment to the women and children repression prevention bill, which currently stipulates a maximum life sentence for rape cases, will come into effect on Tuesday, said the law and justice minister, Anisul Huq.

Last month, footage of a young woman being violently assaulted and gang-raped by a group of men in the south-eastern Noakhali district went viral on Facebook, after the video was released by the attackers to blackmail and shame the victim. Eight

people have been arrested in connection with the case.

It led to an eruption of protests in the capital, Dhaka, and other cities at the failures to tackle the endemic problem of sexual assault and rape in Bangladesh.

“This truly disturbing footage demonstrates the shocking violence that Bangladeshi women are routinely being subjected to. In the vast majority of these cases, the justice system fails to hold the perpetrators responsible,” said Sultan Mohammed Zakaria, south Asia researcher at Amnesty International.

Outrage had already been mounting after several members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the governing party, were arrested and charged with gang-raping a woman in the northern town of Sylhet a few weeks earlier.

Many of the protesters on Dhaka’s streets had called for stricter punishment, including the death penalty, and the crowds carried placards bearing messages such as “Hang the rapists” and “No mercy to rapists”.

However, Amnesty pointed out that the issue in Bangladesh was not the severity of punishment for rape, but a failure of the courts to bring convictions in rape cases and the victims’ fear of coming forward.

Naripokkho, a women’s rights organisation, found that in six

districts between 2011 and 2018, only five out of 4,372 cases resulted in a conviction. Overall, only 3.56% of cases filed under the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act have ended up in court, and only 0.37% have resulted in convictions.

The problem appears to be worsening. Between January and September 2020, at least 975 rape cases were reported in Bangladesh, including 208 gang rapes, according to statistics gathered by human rights organisation Ain-o-Salish Kendra. In over 40% of the cases, the women died.

The UN also released a statement last week expressing its concern at the escalating cases of sexual violence against women: “The recent case of the woman from Noakhali that was circulated through social media has yet again underlined the state of social, behavioral and structural misogyny that exist.”

The statement said urgent reform was needed to “to the criminal justice system to support and protect victims and witness, and to speed up the slow trial process”.

In January, after a student at Dhaka University was raped, the government was ordered by the courts to form a commission to address the rise in sexual assaults and put together a report by June. The commission has yet to be formed.

*Photo: Bangladeshi students and activists protest in Dhaka demanding justice for a recent gang assault on a woman. Photographer: Zabed Hasnain Chowdhury/Rex/Shutterstock.*