



A Chronology of the Investigation of the Murder of Labor Activist Aminul Islam

Lack of Progress Spurs Concerns of Impunity and Cover-Up to Protect Security Forces as Workers and Labor Leaders Fear for their Safety

August 1, 2012

Summary

Aminul Islam, 40, president of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers' Federation (BGIWF)'s local committee in the Savar and Ashulia areas of Dhaka and a senior organizer with a well-known labor rights group, the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), was tortured and murdered in early April 2012.¹ To date, nobody has been held responsible for this crime.

Over the past two years, Mr. Islam had been a target of harassment by Bangladeshi police and security forces. He was detained and beaten by National Security Intelligence (NSI) on June 16, 2010. NSI officers demanded he provide a written statement, falsely implicating his colleagues at BCWS in criminal activities associated with garment worker unrest.² Along with many other labor leaders and workers, Mr. Islam was facing trial in several cases connected to garment worker demonstrations for a decent wage in July and August 2010, and was charged with a number of spurious and unsubstantiated criminal offenses despite his verifiable alibis.³ Just before he died Mr. Islam had been helping workers employed by Shanta Group, a garment manufacturer based in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone, to resolve ongoing disputes and strikes.

Mr. Islam's family, former colleagues, and labor rights groups believe intelligence forces are involved in the murder of Mr. Islam and have long asked for the investigation to be transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of the Bangladesh National Police, which has greater resources than the local police department presently heading the investigation.⁴ To date, the investigation has made no progress, raising fears that the crime will go unpunished and the perpetrators will be protected. A climate of apparent impunity is increasing the level of fear among former colleagues of Mr. Islam and other worker rights defenders in Bangladesh.

International buyers are also increasingly worrying that their brands and reputation will suffer from association with Bangladesh in large part because of the murder of Mr. Islam.

The Disappearance, Torture and Killing of Aminul Islam

April 4, 2012: On leaving the BCWS office in Baipail, near the capital Dhaka, to pray at a Mosque around 6:30pm, Mr. Islam sees a police van parked outside and becomes worried about surveillance. He calls a colleague and suggests they close the center. Later that evening Mr. Islam receives a phone call from Mostafizur Rahman, a former garment worker (now believed to work as an informant for security agencies) requesting his assistance in marrying a woman who had fled from her home. According to a BCWS colleague, Mr. Islam reluctantly agrees to meet Mr. Rahman. At 7pm Mr. Islam and Mr. Rahman depart by separate rickshaws for the Zirani Bazar marriage register's office. At approximately 8:30pm Mr. Rahman calls Mr. Islam's colleague to say Mr. Islam never reached the Zirani Bazar and is not answering his phone. At 9:30pm Mr. Islam's colleague receives a call from his wife who is worried her husband has not yet come home and is not reachable by cell phone.⁵

April 5, 2012: Local police in Ghatail discovers Mr. Islam's body dumped by a roadside, near the Tangail-Mymensingh highway, almost 100 kilometers north of Baipal where he was last seen. Unable to identify the body, the police photographs and buries it. The postmortem report shows evidence of severe torture. There is a hole made with a sharp object below his right knee; his toes are smashed; and he died of excessive bleeding.⁶

April 7, 2012: Mr. Islam's wife sees a picture of her husband in a local newspaper and goes to the police station in Ghatail to identify the body.⁷

Progress of the Investigation

Bangladeshi trade unions and industry associations, international business organizations, ambassadors of nine European countries, U.S. Ambassador Dan Mozena, U.S. members of Congress, and international unions and non-governmental labor organizations swiftly condemn the murder of Mr. Islam and call for an independent investigation.⁸ The U.S. Congressional Bangladesh Caucus, led by Representative Crowley, urges Prime Minister Hasina to ensure "no stone [is] left unturned in the search for justice." Family and former colleagues of Mr. Islam, including the Solidarity Center and BGIWF, form the Committee for Justice for Aminul Islam to ensure the perpetrators are held accountable.

April 16, 2012: The case is transferred to Tangail Detective Branch after being filed in the Ghatail Police Station, the district where Mr. Islam's body was found.

April 18, 2012: Eleven international industry associations, including the American Apparel and Footwear Association and the United States Association of Importers of Apparel and Textiles, write to Prime Minister Hasina to request her government to conduct a "comprehensive,

impartial, and swift investigation into the murder of Mr. Islam...[and] hold accountable any person or persons found guilty.”

April 25, 2012: The government forms a high level committee to investigate the murder of Mr. Islam. The committee includes the Additional Home Secretary, the joint Secretary of the Home Ministry, the Superintendent of Police in Tangail, and a Director of the Industrial Police

May 6, 2012: During a visit to Bangladesh, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton publicly condemns the killing of Mr. Islam and calls for an independent investigation to bring the perpetrators to justice. She tells a large Bangladeshi youth audience that she told Prime Minister Hasina: “that there needed to be an independent investigation into the murder of Mr. Islam, because certainly his family and his colleagues deserve answers about what happened to him.”⁹

May 15, 2012: The high level investigative committee announces it has failed to identify the persons responsible for Mr. Islam’s murder, terming the incident “mysterious.” The Committee recommends the investigation be handed over to the Criminal Investigation Department of the Bangladesh National Police.¹⁰

May 20, 2012: The investigation is handed over to Mr. Humayuin Kabir, a senior officer of the Detective Bureau in the district of Tangail. Mr. Kabir focuses his investigation on Mustafiz Rahman, the last known contact of Mr. Islam. Cell phone records indicate that Mr. Rahman communicated with intelligence agencies prior to and just after Mr. Islam’s disappearance. Mr. Rhaman’s present whereabouts, however, appear to be unknown.¹¹

July 7, 2012: An investigative report in New Age Extra quotes multiple sources alleging that Mustafiz Rahman was the paid source of National Security Intelligence and the Industrial Police.¹²

Involvement of Security Forces

Circumstances strongly suggest security forces murdered Mr. Islam in retaliation for his labor rights work. This is not just the judgment of former colleagues of Mr. Islam and his family. In the letter to Prime Minister Hasina, the eleven industry associations from Europe and North America express concern that “the apparent circumstances leading up to and surrounding Mr. Islam’s death could be perceived to be part of a deliberate campaign to repress efforts to raise and address issues related to unsatisfactory working conditions in the RMG sector.”

Background

June 2010: BCWS becomes the target of intimidation by the Bangladeshi security forces, police, and factory owners. Over the following months, its leaders are detained, beaten and subjected to fabricated criminal charges. The organization’s legal registration is revoked and its bank account frozen.

June 16, 2010: Mr. Islam is detained and beaten by members of National Security Intelligence (NSI) who demand he sign letters falsely stating that two colleagues at BCWS and BGIWF, Ms. Kalpona Akter and Mr. Babul Akhter, had instigated worker unrest and violent activities. He is told that he will be killed in a staged crossfire incident, his wife murdered, and their children orphaned if he refuses to sign. Mr. Islam manages to flee his captors while being transported.¹³

August 22, 2010: Mr. Islam is detained and charged with inciting riots in connection with large garment worker protests for a decent wage. These are baseless accusations that have never been substantiated. He is imprisoned along with Kalpona Akter of BCWS, Babul Akhter of BGIWF, and others. They are released on September 10, 2010, following international pressure including letters from members of U.S. Congress to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. Mr. Islam, Ms. Akter, and Mr. Akhter face eleven criminal cases following their release.¹⁴ They are required to report to court an average of 7 to 10 days a month in order to remain out of jail and have done so until the present time.

March 2012: Mr. Islam registers complaints of workers at Shanta Group, a garment factory that supplies Nike, Ralph Lauren, and other brands. Workers tell Mr. Islam managers were beating them and sexually harassing female workers.¹⁵

March 9, 2012: Mr. Islam is detained by the Industrial Police in anticipation of an anti-government march planned for March 12 by opposition parties. NSI had told the Industrial Police that Mr. Islam would mobilize 25,000-30,000 workers to the march.¹⁶

March 21, 2012: BCWS is featured in an ABC News investigation into labor violations and fire risks in the Bangladeshi garment industry. Mr. Islam had helped ABC News expose the dangerous working conditions.

July 21, 2012: Bangladeshi newspapers announces that “locals, family and colleagues” believe Mr. Islam may be the “Victim of Shanta Group’s Wrath,” and report that Mr. Aminul had had talks with workers at the Shanta Group on April 4, the day he disappeared.¹⁷

Climate of Fear and Impunity

The killing of Mr. Islam is not an isolated incident. In the absence of progress in the investigation, fears grow that the killing of Mr. Islam is part of an escalating attack on worker rights defenders in Bangladesh. The Congressional Bangladesh Caucus, in their letter to Prime Minister Hasina, observes that the murder of Mr. Islam “has created a climate of fear amongst those organizing for improved working conditions, an unacceptable condition in the 21st century.”

July 16, 2012: Two bidi workers are killed as police open fire against 3,000 workers demonstrate for higher wages. In a letter to Prime Minister Hasina, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) deplores the lack of progress in the murder investigation of Mr. Islam, and says “these killings take place within a context where the nation’s labour laws are ignored with near total impunity.”¹⁸

July 22, 2012: Bangladeshi television media reports Prime Minister Hasina speaking out in defense of security forces, and criticizing those who associate the security forces, who are fighters of terrorism, with the murder of Mr. Islam. The Prime Minister says, “It is unfair to blame the agencies which traced the body of Aminul.” She also emphasizes that Mr. Islam was not a worker, but a NGO worker, leaving his former colleagues and worker rights defenders to wonder why she believes this distinction is relevant.¹⁹ “We are really afraid now,” a former colleague of Mr. Islam tells ILRF. “The Prime Minister’s remarks give us the sense that they are cooking something up to take the Aminul murder investigation in a different direction, and that they would make a new issue to harass us.”

Threat to the Industry

A series of high profile and unprecedented comments by U.S. political and apparel industry leaders, critical of the failed murder investigation and poor working conditions in the garment industry, have raised the possibility that the murder of Mr. Islam becomes more than a human rights issue. Observers both in Bangladesh and elsewhere worry that murder of Mr. Islam may become the tipping point of the mountain of labor rights failures in the Bangladeshi garment industry. Should it topple the very foundation of Bangladesh’s success in the garment industry—low wages, loose labor standards, and low prices—may also become its undoing.

May 6, 2012: Secretary Hillary Clinton raises the prospect of diminished international investment in Bangladesh should the country fail to improve the labor rights climate. “The labour problems in the garment industries have to be solved because you do not want to earn a reputation as a place where labour leaders and activists are murdered,” she says at a question-and-answer session with students and youth leaders at the International School Dhaka.²⁰

June 7, 2012: At a meeting with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) U.S. Ambassador Dan Mozena warns his audience of factory owners that the Bangladesh “brand” may be at risk because of increasing international attention to poor working conditions, low wages, and repression of labor right activities. He says he fears a “perfect storm” of labor-related challenges for the industry, in the center of which is the murder of labor rights activist Aminul Islam, which has attracted the attention of the CEOs of some of Bangladesh’s biggest apparel buyers.²¹

July 18, 2012: The Daily Star and other Bangladeshi media report on an “unprecedented meeting” at Walmart’s Gulshan office in Dhaka where the world’s top buyers of Bangladeshi

garments gathered in the morning to share their concerns over persistent labor unrest in the industry and to “finalize an SOS message to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.” The Daily Star obtained an advance copy of the letter and provides this quote: “Unrest among the workers in this sector is seen as risk among our companies and could cause damage to the reputation of Bangladesh as a reliable sourcing market.” A source close to the buyers, the newspaper says, “confided that American buyers are particularly concerned about the disappearance of Aminul.”²²

End Notes

¹ See, for example, Manik, Julfikar Ali and Vikas Bajaj, “Killing of Bangladeshi Labor Organizer Signals an Escalation in Violence,” *New York Times* (April 9, 2012); <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/10/world/asia/bangladeshi-labor-organizer-is-found-killed.html>.

² See: SweatFree Communities, *Enemies of the Nation or Human Rights Defenders? Fighting Poverty Wages in Bangladesh* (November 2010): <http://www.sweatfree.org/docs/enemiesofthenation.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See, for example, “Labour leader, Aminul Islam, was allegedly killed after being abducted by the law enforces,” Odhikar fact-finding report, <http://www.odhikar.org>.

⁵ Baes, Saarte , Asia Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM ASIA), “Individual Complaint to the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders,” (May 18, 2012), on file with ILRF.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Among many others, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, Human Right Watch, the International Trade Union Confederation, the International Labor Rights Forum, the Worker Rights Consortium, the Clean Clothes Campaign, condemn the killing and call for an independent investigation.

⁹ The murder of Mr. Islam became a centerpiece of Secretary Clinton’s remarks in Bangladesh. Two mainstream English newspapers, the *Daily Star* and *The Financial Express* reported that Secretary Clinton “cited the recent murder of a labour union activist, Aminul Islam,” saying “killing and oppression of labour leaders constitute a threat to the rights of workers.” According to the press, Clinton demanded, “Islam’s killing has to be investigated into, and the perpetrators must be brought to book.” See, for example, “Hillary for peaceful solution to political crisis,” (May 6, 2012): <http://www.thedailystar.net>.

¹⁰ “Home ministry probe fails to identify killers,” *New Age* (May 16, 2012): <http://newagebd.com>.

¹¹ “Who is Mustafiz?” *New Age Extra* (July 7, 2012): <http://newagebd.com>. According to State Minister for Labor Monnoian Sufivan, Mustafiz Rahman and other suspects have gone abroad. See “Killers of garment workers’ leader identified,” *The Financial Express* (June 21, 2012): <http://thefinancialexpress-bd.com/>.

¹² “Who is Mustafiz?” *New Age Extra* (July 7, 2012): <http://newagebd.com>.

¹³ SweatFree Communities, ibid.

¹⁴ A summary of these charges is on file with the International Labor Rights Forum.

¹⁵ Baes, ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Siraj Serajul Islam and Mahbub Hassan Mehedi, “Labour leader Aminul Islam: Victim of Shanta Group’s Wrath!” *Bangla New 24.com* (July 21, 2012): <http://banglanews24.com>.

¹⁸ Sultana, Munima, “ITUC condemns killing of two bidi workers,” *The Financial Express* (July 22, 2012): <http://thefinancialexpress-bd.com/>.

¹⁹ Reported on Desh TV and ETV news at 7pm and 9pm on July 22, 2012. See also “PM questions Western concern over Aminul’s death,” *The Independent* (July 23, 2012): <http://theindependentbd.com>.

²⁰ Clinton, Hillary Rodham, “Interview With Ms. Mooni Saha, and Mr. Ejaj Ahmed At a Townterview with Bangladeshi Youth,” (May 6, 2012): <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/05/189370.htm>

²¹ Ambassador Mozena’s remarks have been widely quoted in Bangladeshi media. See, for example, “Mozena fears ‘perfect storm in’ in garment sector,” *The Daily Star* (June 7, 2012): <http://thedailystar.net>.

²² Haque, Syed Ashfaqul, “Top RMG Buyers Worried at Unrest,” *The Daily Star* (July 19, 2012): <http://thedailystar.net>.