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**BANGLADESH: INVESTIGATE DEADLY ARSON ATTACK IN KURMITOLA  
BIHARI CAMP AND PROSECUTE THOSE INVOLVED**

Bangladesh's government must do much more to protect the minority Bihari community from attacks and ensure that those responsible for the continuing acts of murder, arson, assault and other human rights abuses are brought to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty, Amnesty International said today.

On 14 June 2014 the Bihari community living in the Kurmitola refugee camp in Dhaka was attacked, leaving nine members of one Bihari family dead and another with serious burn injuries. At least ten homes were destroyed or seriously damaged.

Despite government statements that an investigation into the attack is underway, there are concerns that the police are not undertaking impartial investigations, while some in the Bihari community allege police complicity in the attack.

The police have failed to keep the victims of the attack informed of the progress of any investigations. While there is strong evidence that those responsible for committing the human rights abuses against the Biharis are Bengalis living in an adjacent community, the police have arrested only Biharis. And although police have said they filed a case against 1,754 unnamed people on suspicion of murder, no one is known to have been identified and investigated as a suspect for the killings.

Among several other reported irregularities in the investigation, at least two Bihari victims have alleged that their written complaints to the police – which identified the attackers as Bengalis – were edited without their knowledge to include the names of six Bihari men as culprits. Those Bihari men were then arrested, charged with robbery and looting, and later released on bail.

Unless the authorities take action to breathe new impetus into this investigation, the outcome is likely to be yet another page in the long chapter of government inaction when it comes to the protection of minorities against violent attacks in Bangladesh.

Amnesty International calls on the Bangladeshi authorities to:

- Carry out an impartial and independent investigation into the arson attack, including the deaths of at least 10 people;
- Bring to justice in fair trials without recourse to the death penalty anyone found responsible for the attack on the Bihari camp, regardless of their political affiliation, and any police officers found to have used excessive force against camp dwellers; and
- Take immediate measures in consultation with the Bihari community to ensure their full and effective protection.

## **Background**

The Bihari are an Urdu-speaking group with communities residing in camps across Bangladesh, the majority in Mirpur. According to reports, anti-Bihari sentiment is high in the country as many Biharis supported Pakistan during Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971. Biharis, who were initially stateless as they considered themselves to belong to Pakistan after Bangladesh became independent, are now able to apply for Bangladeshi citizenship. The process, however, is cumbersome.

Since Bangladesh's independence, minority groups such as the Biharis have been discriminated against and attacked. In the past decade, arsonists allegedly from the majority Bengali community have set fire to the homes and shops of Hindus, Buddhists, and the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In 2014, the Biharis have borne the brunt of such attacks. No one is known to have been brought to justice for any of these attacks.

According to eyewitnesses, the attack on the Kurmitola Bihari refugee camp on 14 June 2014 followed days of flaring tensions and clashes between the camp's inhabitants and Bengalis from the neighbouring Raju slum.

The Kurmitola camp, which is home to some 412 families, lies between Dhaka Cantonment, Pallabi and Kalshi in Mirpur and benefits from free water and electricity provided by the Bangladeshi government.

Members of the Bihari community there have said that a local politician had been putting pressure on them to allow electricity from the camp transformer to continue to serve some 1,700 shanti homes in the Raju slum. They say that Biharis had in the past agreed to share with those living in the slum the electricity supplies from a 300 KW transformer installed in the camp. But recently, camp leaders had decided to cut the supply to the slums as their own electricity supplies had been disrupted.

Camp residents told Amnesty International that when they did not accept the politician's demands, he allegedly warned them of "dire consequences within

two to three days” if the electricity supply was not re-connected to the slum.

Newspaper reports and eyewitnesses indicate that in the early hours of 14 June, some 200 youths from the Raju slum attacked the camp. Angered camp residents tried to chase them away, but police then allegedly joined the slum youths in their attack on the camp and fired rubber bullets and teargas shells at the residents. The slum youths then apparently proceeded to loot camp dwellings and shops in the presence of police, before pouring kerosene and lighting ten houses on fire in Block 1 of the camp.

One of the houses set alight by the youths belonged to a Bihari camp resident, Mr Yasin, who was not in the house at the time of the incident but whose family of ten was sleeping there. The attackers reportedly locked the house before setting fire to it using a burning tyre.

According to eyewitnesses and media reports, a man named Mr Azad who attempted to rescue Mr Yasin’s family from the flames died from rubber bullet injuries fired by the police.

Nine of Mr Yasin’s family members, including two children, died in the fire. His daughter, Farzana, was the only survivor and remains in hospital with severe burns.