AP/Pavel Rahman

Riot police detain a Dhaka University student during a demonstration on March 3, 2004. Thousands of students had gathered to protest a recent knife attack on a professor.

Culture of Violence

In a country marred by political corruption, Bangladesh's journalists suffer for telling the truth.

By Abi Wright

From his hospital bed in Bangladesh's smoggy capital, Dhaka, photographer Firoz Chowdhury tries to explain why he won't file any charges against the men who beat him up the day before. "It's too dangerous. They are carrying arms. It's too risky for me."

Chowdhury, the chief photographer for the country's most popular daily, *Prothom Alo*, has 13 years' professional experience and covers the politically violent demonstrations and strikes that frequently erupt on the streets of Dhaka. On March 3, he was beaten in the chest, back, shoulders, and legs by several members of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) student wing, the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), while covering a student protest on the Dhaka University campus.

Bangladesh, as Chowdhury can attest, is a place where crime, poli-

***Abi Wright** is CPJ's Asia program coordinator. The reporting in this story is based on a mission Wright and CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper conducted to Bangladesh in March 2004 with Iqbal Athas, defense correspondent for Sri Lanka's* The Sunday Times*, and Andreas Harsono, managing editor of Indonesia's* Pantau *magazine.*

tics, and violence all cross paths, making independent journalism in this country of 146 million people a very dangerous profession. Political officials routinely punish journalists who expose corruption by ordering political activist henchmen to beat them. In addition, a highly polarized political climate divides the country—and even journalists themselves—compounding the challenges they face.

For now, those challenges are unclear for Chowdhury as he grapples with the larger implications of his attack. He is in pain, and he speaks quietly as he describes how the students' peaceful demonstration against a recent knife attack on a professor turned violent after JCD activists began forcibly breaking up the crowd. Chowdhury's last photos before the JCD members turned on him show a young woman being beaten by police and a JCD activist kicking a group of protesters.

When they saw Chowdhury photographing them, the JCD members grabbed his digital camera and smashed it before beating him. Police and JCD leaders stood by and watched, according to Chowdhury. Several other journalists covering the protests were also beaten that day by JCD members and police.

This was not the first time Chowdhury had suffered violence at the hands of political activists. He says that what happened to him was a "normal and regular occurrence" for the press, and that JCD members at Dhaka University punched him in the face just last year. "We [journalists] are always targeted. The government covers up for them, and there is no punishment. They should be punished. The police knew that the JCD was going to attack."

Altaf Hossain Choudhury, who, as home minister, was in charge of internal security at the time of the attack, has a different perspective. Choudhury, who has since been reassigned to the Commerce Ministry, believes that journalists who cover demonstrations do so at their own risk because police and other authorities cannot distinguish between the press and protesters. "The police are just doing their job," Choudhury says. Local photographers disagree and say they are well known in town as journalists. According to the photographers, their cameras and equipment make them stand out in a crowd, and the JCD targets them to keep news of the group's violent attacks out of the press.

Dhaka University is in the center of the capital, and it is on the front lines of Bangladesh's turbulent political life. It is the frequent scene of rallies and clashes, which the press widely covers. The campus played a key role in Bangladesh's liberation war from Pakistan in 1971, when radical students fought the Pakistani army, which shelled the university and massacred many students and intellectuals in response.

Student support is considered to be such a priority for Bangladesh's political factions that both main parties—the ruling BNP and the opposition Awami League (AL)—formed student wings and youth leagues dedicated to garnering student votes.

The student groups in turn utilize "street muscle" to enforce their will, both on campuses and in towns throughout the country, employing armed thugs and older political activists. According to Dr. Kamal Hossain, a leading lawyer, human rights activist, and one of the authors of Bangladesh's 1972 constitution, this practice dates back to the 1980s—and it has unfortunate consequences for the press.

"Young armed thugs, unemployed youth, were drafted for the purpose of manipulating elections, enhancing their power as they go along, serving their patrons and themselves, evolving into systematic extortion, even institutionalized extortion, because the police are getting a share, too," says Hossain. "The main targets of these groups are the journalists who expose this."

Among the targets is 25-year-old Hasan Jahid Tusher. As a master's student of journalism and the Dhaka University correspondent for the

AP/Pavel Rahman

AP/Pavel Rahman

Under the governments of both former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (left) and current Prime Minister Khaleda Zia (right), violence against journalists in Bangladesh has continued with impunity.

AP/Bappy Khan

Family members of veteran journalist Manik Saha, who was killed by a homemade bomb in January 2004, mourn in his hometown of Khulna, 85 miles (136 kilometers) outside the capital, Dhaka.

English-language *The Daily Star*, Tusher used to live on campus and covers the lively political scene there, including the violent activities of the BNP's student wing, the JCD. On May 8, 2003, Tusher wrote about a group of JCD activists who had allegedly beaten a student for refusing to obey their orders.

him outside the dormitory. Students brought Tusher to a hospital, where he was treated for injuries to his shoulders, back, and arms.

The attack caused outrage on campus, but little was done to punish those responsible. Four of his assailants were expelled from the JCD but allowed to remain on campus. Although members of the Dhaka University Journalists' Association said that, based on his earlier threats against Tusher, the head of the dormitory's JCD unit, Tanjilur Rahman, was responsible for ordering the attack, Rahman was never punished. Tusher decided to move out of his dorm after the incident. "All the time on the campus we have to be careful about our movements, especially me," says Tusher. "Sometimes I feel insecure and am afraid of the JCD and the people around them."

Criminal organizations dominate the towns of rural Bangladesh and target the journalists who try to expose them.

After the story was published, Tusher says he began receiving threats from the group's leaders in his dormitory demanding that he stop writing about their activities on campus, but he continued reporting on the JCD. On the night of July 31, 2003, a group of 20 JCD activists ransacked Tusher's dorm room and beat him severely with iron rods and sticks before dragging him down three flights of stairs and leaving

Two months after journalist Shafiul Haque Mithu was almost killed in a brutal attack, he is still in pain from the head and arm injuries inflicted on him by local BNP activists. Mithu, the local correspondent for the popular Bangla-language daily *Janakantha*, is from Pirojpur, a town 100 miles (160 kilometers) south of Dhaka in one of Bangladesh's infamous southwestern districts, which are known for violence against journalists and a lack of law and order.

One editor calls the area "the valley of death." Five journalists have been killed there in the last four years in retaliation for their reporting, including Manik Saha, a veteran journalist with 20 years' experience who was murdered in January 2004 by a homemade bomb in Khulna, a neighboring southwestern division.

Criminal organizations dominate the towns of rural Bangladesh and target the journalists who try to expose them, according to lawyer Hossain. "Local criminal networks with political bosses have institutionalized a structure of terror in the countryside," explains Hossain. "They are predatory groups, the more violent crime pays, and their patrons want more wealth."

In December 2003, Mithu reported a two-part series about a criminal gang in Pirojpur that was abusing and terrorizing the local Hindu minority community in an effort to take over their valuable lands. In the articles, Mithu detailed how the criminals, allegedly under the protection of local BNP officials, looted valuable fishponds and forcibly took over 85 acres of land from the Hindu community. When the local residents tried to resist, the criminals beat them severely.

After the first article ran on December 17, a group of BNP activists began following Mithu and threatening him. Local BNP members

of Parliament and political leaders denied the story and publicly denounced the journalist. They even formed a commission to prove that his reporting was false, says Mithu, but were unable to refute the evidence in his story.

When the second part of the series ran two weeks later, on December 28, the BNP activists made good on their threats. Mithu was attacked on his way home from the Pirojpur Press Club by a group of thugs, including local BNP activists, who trailed him and then ambushed him. The three assailants then tried to kill Mithu, beating him in the head repeatedly with pipes, knocking him unconscious, and breaking his right arm in several places. Fortunately, when local passersby heard his cries and came upon the scene, they saved Mithu. His assailants tried to flee, but one of them, a local thug known simply as Russell, was captured. Mithu has identified two other assailants in the group as BNP activists Chowra Kamal and Akram Ali Molla.

"There is a culture of protection and patronage for people who indulge in violence," explains Hossain. "Police are prevented from taking action against them because they enjoy protection. Courageous journalists are among the leading targets, particularly journalists working outside the capital."

Authorities arrested Russell and charged him with attempted murder in March 2004. Kamal and Molla were officially charged with attempted murder later that month, according to *The Daily Star*. But they remain at large and have not been arrested even though they have been publicly sighted in the Pirojpur area at political meetings.

Mithu doubts that police will apprehend those responsible for the attack because local political leaders from the JCD, BNP, and the Islamic fundamentalist party Jammat-i-Islami oversee the local police station and use the police as their "muscle," according to Mithu.

After the attack, locals brought Mithu to a hospital for treatment, but he still suffers from severe headaches and pain in his right arm, which has not yet been properly set. He is scheduled to travel to India for treatment on his arm in the coming months. Currently, he lives in Dhaka with relatives because he says it is too risky back home in Pirojpur.

Seven journalists received threatening notes, along with pieces of white cloth cut from a funeral shroud.

Even before he was attacked, Mithu says he was constantly under threat from BNP activists and Jammat members because of his reporting. In July 2003, he was one of seven journalists in Pirojpur to receive anonymous death threats by mail. Pieces of white cloth cut from what appeared to be a funeral shroud were sent to the journalists with notes threatening them to stop reporting on criminal acts.

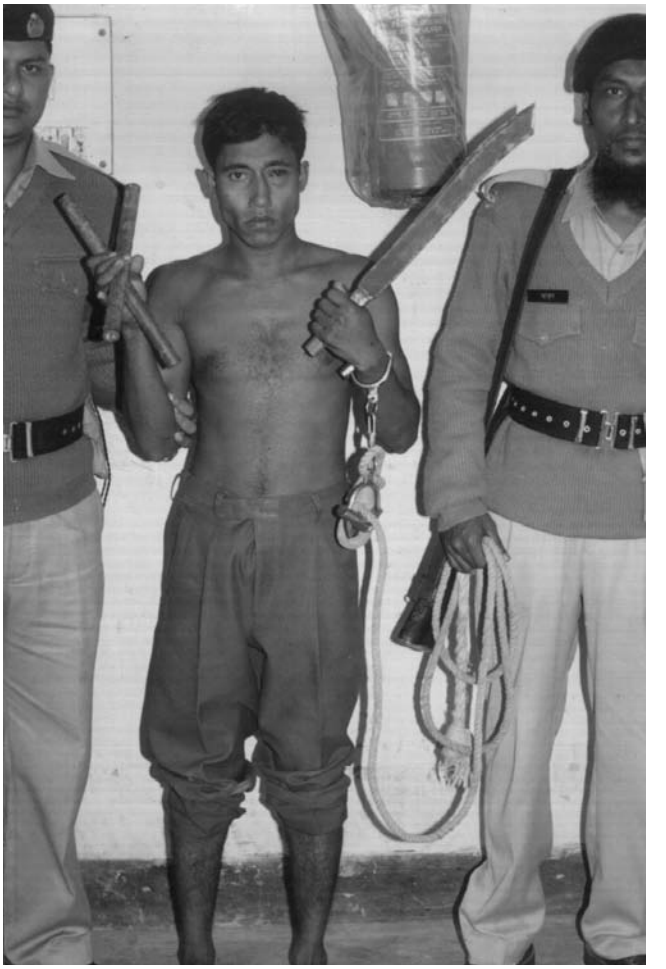

Photo courtesy Zahirul Haque Mithu

A local thug known simply as Russell poses for a mug shot after being captured and identified as one of the assailants who brutally beat journalist Shafiul Haque Mithu in December 2003.

The current climate of violence for the Bangladeshi press does not reflect its history, journalists say. According to *The Daily Star*'s editor and publisher, Mahfuz Anam, during the colonial era, Bangladesh had one of the most outspoken, anticolonial presses in the region. Under the subsequent rule of Pakistan, from 1947 to 1971, the local Bangladeshi media carried strong anti-Pakistan coverage. The turning point for the press came in 1991, when the country held its first democratic elections after enduring a series of mili-

tary dictatorships and bloody coups from 1975 to 1990.

The BNP's slim victory in the 1991 election caused deep resentment among the AL leadership and engendered pronounced political divisions across the country. These tensions are responsible for much of the political violence against the media today, according to Anam. "The restoration of democracy was a springtime for the press." But since then, "there has been a failure of governance, and a blaming of the press for these shortcomings."

During the rule of AL leader Sheikh Hasina from 1996 to 2001, journalists in Bangladesh also suffered dozens of violent threats and physical attacks. In 1999, the *Janakantha* office in Dhaka had to be evacuated after an anti-tank mine was left in the lobby of the building. Although the mine was removed before it detonated, it could have flattened a city block if it had exploded, says Mohammed Masud, the paper's publisher. And in January 2001, wire service reporter Tipu Sultan was brutally beaten on the orders of AL parliamentarian Joynal Hazari. (See sidebar on this page.)

Although many popular Bangladeshi dailies in the capital, such as *The Daily Star*, *Prothom Alo*, and *Janakantha*, run critical articles and even political cartoons about the ruling BNP government on their front pages without direct or violent reprisal, independent dailies still feel pressure from the government, says Masud. In retaliation for critical reporting, *Janakantha* reporters have been denied access to government officials, the current government has withdrawn advertising money from the newspaper, and an angry mob attacked and tore down a wall outside Masud's home last summer.

In addition, the bitter rivalry between the two majority parties and their leaders, ruling BNP Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and opposition AL leader Sheikh Hasina, has con-

Justice Delayed

The case of Tipu Sultan

By Abi Wright

When journalist Tipu Sultan was brutally beaten and left for dead on the side of a road in January 2001, it quickly became clear who was responsible for the attack. According to Sultan, one of the assailants told him that Joynal Hazari, a Parliament member from the Awami League (AL), which controlled Parliament at that time, had ordered the beating in retaliation for Sultan's reporting on Hazari's many abuses of power.

But little was done to bring Hazari to justice. Despite the mounting evidence, then Prime Minister and AL leader Sheikh Hasina doubts the facts. "I am not 100 percent certain [that he is guilty]," she said in a recent interview. "Even in the Parliament, Hazari denied it."

In October 2001, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) unseated the AL. Before the vote, BNP leader Khaleda Zia promised to prosecute Sultan's attackers if elected. But more than three years later, both of the country's political factions have failed to resolve Sultan's case. And in the absence of any resolution, Sultan remains at risk, regularly receiving threats from

Bangladeshi journalist Tipu Sultan in Dhaka in June 2003, two-and-a-half years after he was brutally attacked

AP/Pavel Rahman

Hazari. It seems that in Bangladesh, it doesn't matter who is in power—violence against journalists remains acceptable.

Sultan's troubles began on the night of January 25, 2001, when a group of armed men kidnapped the journalist in Feni, in southeastern Bangladesh. The gang savagely beat him with iron rods and hockey sticks, breaking bones in his hands, arms, and legs. The assailants specifically maimed Sultan's right hand—his writing hand—and the beating left a gaping wound in his right arm. (See *Dangerous Assignments*, Summer 2001.)

According to Sultan, because the local police chief was known as "Hazari's man," police did not allow Sultan to file charges against Hazari immediately following the attack. Hazari's supporters, however, did file a false case charging rival political activists with orchestrating the assault. In September 2001, after Awami League leader Hasina had stepped down before national elections, Sultan was finally able to file a local police report against Hazari. But by then, Hazari had gone into hiding, reportedly in India.

After a 28-month investigation, Hazari and 12 associates were charged with attempted murder in absentia in April 2003. Hazari was formally indicted in October 2003, and the trial began in a local district court in Feni on November 5, 2003. Sultan testified against Hazari in December, but the legal proceedings were soon derailed when two of the accused men filed separate petitions in the High Court to quash Sultan's case. The court agreed to review their petitions on January 26, 2004, postponing the trial for six months.

Sultan appealed to Law Minister Moudud Ahmed for help in February, and in an interview with CPJ in March, Ahmed said the attorney general had already been instructed to submit an application for an expeditious hearing in Sultan's case.

Although Sultan is back at work as a reporter for *Prothom Alo*, the country's the largest Bangla-language daily, he is continually reminded of that horrible day three years ago. Hazari may be out of the country, but he is not far enough away to stop threatening the journalist and those associated with his case. Hazari called Sultan in August 2003 saying he would kill the journalist and his family unless he withdrew the case, according to Sultan. One of Sultan's key eyewitnesses, Bakhtiar Islam Munnah, the local correspondent for the daily *Ittefaq*, has also received threats from Hazari and was attacked twice last year. These attacks have made other witnesses "feel insecure," says Sultan.

And the lack of action from Bangladesh's current and previous administrations hasn't made things any better. Today, the case remains bogged down in legal delays, and only one of the 13 men accused in the attack is currently behind bars; six remain at large, including Hazari, and six of them were freed on bail. "We are doing everything we can for Tipu," says government minister Altaf Choudhury. But as long as Hazari remains free and Sultan's trial is postponed, Bangladeshi journalists remain at risk. ■

tributed to the growth of a culture of violence in Bangladesh. "We have seen an increasing dependence on criminal forces to thwart opponents and get votes. Known criminals are nominated for Parliament," says Anam, and that adversely affects the press's development. "Independent journalism was growing, while politics became more criminal."

Even the journalists themselves are divided in Bangladesh. All of the country's journalists' unions, from the national level to the local level, are split in two along party lines; there is a BNP-affiliated Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), and an AL-affiliated BFUJ.

After the BNP retook power in 2001, a group of 27 journalists from the state-run news agency Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) were summarily fired because they were considered to be affiliated with the AL. BSS soon hired 40 new people for the jobs and refused to rehire the 27 journalists even after a court ruled that they had been illegally fired and ordered their reinstatement. Many of the 27 journalists remain angry at the BNP. "This was an illegal termination, and a violation of normal procedure," says Haroon Habib, one of the dismissed journalists.

Although journalists in Bangladesh remain vulnerable because threats and attacks go unpunished, few in the government are willing to take responsibility. Prime Minister Zia told Parliament on March 17 that Bangladeshi journalists "enjoy full press freedom," and that when journalists are attacked, it is "for other local-level reasons, and not for journalism."

None of this comforts photographer Chowdhury. From his hospital bed in a cramped room, he sounds resigned to his fate as a journalist in Bangladesh. "In this climate, the political situation will get worse again," he sighs, "and I'll go out and cover what's happening again, and be at risk again." ■

Real Courage

by Ann Cooper

When we visited her headquarters in Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, in early March, Sheikh Hasina, leader of the country's opposition Awami League (AL), handed our CPJ delegation a long list of press freedom abuses. On top was the gruesome photo of journalist Manik Chandra Saha's decapitated corpse, taken shortly after someone tossed a homemade bomb at him in January.

A day after our talks with the Awami League, we met with Bangladesh's information minister, where another list awaited us. This one gave the government's version of the press freedom story, a litany of abuses committed from 1996 to 2001, the period of AL rule until its election defeat by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Taken together, the AL and BNP lists are testimony to the dangers encountered by Bangladeshi journalists, who are just doing their jobs. The lists also support one of the conclusions stated by CPJ's delegation at the end of its visit: "It takes real courage to be a journalist in Bangladesh."

But the two lists also reveal another hard reality in this deeply politicized country. The BNP points to press freedom abuses committed during the AL's tenure in office, but not a single incident since the BNP took power in 2001. Meanwhile, the AL's document would have the public believe that threats and violence against journalists began only in 2001, under BNP rule.

State media play the same political game. After sitting through a sometimes contentious meeting between CPJ and officials from the Bangladeshi Information Ministry, a reporter for the government's mouthpiece news agency wrote about the information minister's claim that, "We do highly respect the right of expression and free flow of information." Missing from the report was any mention of CPJ's detailed research presented to the minister documenting that killings, beatings, threats, and harassment of the media are commonplace in Bangladesh, regardless of which party is in power.

State media also ignored CPJ's protests against the government's heavy surveillance of our delegation's movements, including tailing us to nearly every meeting and eavesdropping on conversations with journalists who met us at our hotel. A reporter from a privately owned newspaper who phoned to confirm details of the government's surveillance of CPJ revealed that, "They've done that to me, too." His paper and others reported at length on CPJ's findings and our call for vigorous investigations and prosecutions of all those who murder, assault, or threaten journalists in Bangladesh.

But despite these few feisty, independent media outlets, deep and bitter divisions between Bangladesh's two main political parties permeate institutions throughout the country. These include the courts and even the media and the unions that represent journalists.

In 2002, in a decision widely viewed as orchestrated by the BNP government, a Bangladeshi court ordered the private Ekushey Television (ETV) off the air for technical violations in its license application. ETV provided viewers with popular and professional news and public affairs programming, but the government refused to approve its application to renew broadcasting. ETV employees say it looks unlikely that they will go back on the air as long as the BNP remains in power.

Some journalists in Bangladesh have protested the blatantly political silencing of ETV. But not Gias Kamal Chowdhury, president of the Dhaka Union of Journalists.

Chowdhury was a co-sponsor of the complaint that led to the court-ordered shutdown. When our delegation met with him, we asked why a journalist—particularly the head of a professional union—would want to see the closing of an independent media outlet admired for its professionalism. Chowdhury says that while he is a journalist, he is also a citizen of Bangladesh and cannot countenance a TV station operating with a flawed application.

The politics that keep ETV off the air also thwart justice in the dozens of cases of assaults on Bangladeshi journalists. The government's failure to prosecute these crimes only encourages more, and bolder, attacks.

Particularly shocking was last January's assassination of Manik Saha, whose tough reporting helped his readers understand the sinister web of corrupt politics and organized crime in southwestern Bangladesh. That region is notorious for its crime, and young journalists at provincial newspapers there are among the very few brave enough to investigate the mafia-like operations.

"We know the names of all the godfathers because of them," says lawyer Kamal Hussein, referring to the small band of provincial journalists willing to publicly name those criminals. Hussein has defended some of Bangladesh's courageous journalists, and he tells CPJ that what is needed most to protect them are credible, independent investigations of crimes against the press.

Manik Saha's assassination "is clearly a message, because he was kind of the dean of all these courageous journalists," says Hussein. Without justice in the case of Saha and others, predicts Hussein, investigative journalism in Bangladesh could become endangered, or even disappear. ■