

# Human Rights Watch

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(New York) - The Bangladeshi government should investigate and prosecute the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) officers who on October 22, 2009, arrested and allegedly tortured F.M. Masum, a journalist at the *New Age* newspaper, Human Rights Watch said today.

The country's new government has promised to put an end to abuses by the unit, a paramilitary law enforcement agency long implicated in torture, including "crossfire" killings, a term regularly used in Bangladesh for thinly disguised extrajudicial executions. But the government has taken [no action](#).

"The Bangladeshi government should move from promises to action and finally hold the security forces accountable for their abuses," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "This government needs to show that it is different from its predecessors."

According to a statement Masum made to Human Rights Watch and to newspaper reports, he was arrested at his apartment in Jatrabari, Dhaka, at about 10 a.m. on October 22 by men in civilian clothes who identified themselves as members of RAB. Masum said they beat him with batons and rubbed salt in the wounds. They also beat and arrested the wife of Masum's landlord and accused her of drug trafficking.

The men took the two to RAB 10 headquarters in Dhalpur, Dhaka. There Masum, blindfolded and with his hands tied, was again beaten on various parts of his body for about an hour. He was also told that he would be killed in "crossfire."

Masum was released after about 10 hours in RAB custody, reportedly after the minister and secretary of home affairs intervened. Upon his release, *New Age* staff had to sign a document saying that Masum was handed over to them in good health. But according to Masum and other witnesses, he had bruises and wounds all over his body. He was first sent to Dhaka Medical College Hospital and two hours later transferred to another Dhaka hospital, where he was told that it would take him at least a month to recover. When interviewed by Human Rights Watch today, Masum said that he had severe pain in his head, chest, arms, and legs. He said he was unable to walk unassisted.

Masum has written several reports about the paramilitary unit for the *New Age*, including on its involvement in extrajudicial killings. He told Human Rights Watch that the officers who arrested him became particularly agitated when they realized who he was and that he worked for the newspaper.

Since its creation in 2004, the unit has killed several hundred people in what it refers to as "crossfire" killings, but in reality are extrajudicial killings. The victims' bodies have typically had wounds suggesting that they have been tortured. No officers of the unit have been convicted for any of these killings, or for the many reported acts of torture.

Since the Awami League-led government came to power in January 2009, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and several other government officials have repeatedly stated their commitment to put an end to extrajudicial executions by the security forces and have said that those responsible for such killings will be held to account. However, in recent months there has been a dramatic increase in alleged "crossfire" killings and there are no indications that the government is moving toward holding anyone to account for them.

"If this government is committed to the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental democratic principles, it has to realize that it cannot have a law enforcement agency that bases its operations on torture and extrajudicial executions," Adams said.

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