

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

June 8, 2023

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to express our concern about the ongoing deterioration of the human rights situation in Bangladesh as elections approach in January 2024. We urge the State Department and other U.S. agencies to continue to call for accountability for serious violations committed by law enforcement agencies, including the recently sanctioned Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a paramilitary unit of the Bangladesh Police created in 2004. Clear and repeated statements and actions by U.S. officials can help ensure that the Bangladeshi government complies with its human rights obligations. This is especially important in preparation for the upcoming elections, as there have already been mass arrests and violence against opposition parties which could tarnish the results and deepen social conflict.

We welcomed the December 2021 U.S. sanctions designations and visa restrictions implemented against the RAB and seven of its current and former high-level officers as a necessary and proportional response to well-documented reports of serious human rights abuses by that entity. Unfortunately, despite these actions, repression in Bangladesh has not ceased. In its [Annual Human Rights Report 2022](#), respected Bangladeshi human rights organization [Odhikar](#) documented 31 extrajudicial killings, 21 enforced disappearances, 68 deaths in jail, and 183 attacks on journalists committed by various law enforcement agencies including the RAB, Detective Branch, and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence. Despite these documented incidents, Bangladeshi government officials have continued to deny the occurrence of human rights violations, minimizing such findings as “[negative \[campaigns\]](#) against [the] country” and even [awarding](#) and [promoting](#) officials accused of committing grave human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

Further, the December 2021 U.S. sanctions designations empowered many in Bangladeshi society to speak out about the human rights violations they have witnessed, documented, or experienced at the hands of various law enforcement agencies. In response, the Bangladeshi government has intensified reprisals against civil society organizations, human rights defenders, victims of human rights violations, and their families. For example, the families of victims of enforced disappearances have faced harassment and have been [coerced](#) into signing blank papers or pre-written statements to the effect that their relative had simply gone missing and was not forcibly disappeared. In addition, the previously mentioned human rights organization [Odhikar](#) was [deregistered](#) by Bangladesh’s Non-Governmental Organization Affairs Bureau in June 2022 for “seriously [tarnishing] the image of the state to the world” with its human rights documentation and reporting. [Odhikar’s](#) leaders, members, and their family members have faced increased surveillance, harassment, and questioning by law enforcement officials. Despite these actions, civil society organizations, human rights defenders, victims, and their families continue to call for additional sanctions against more members of the RAB and other law enforcement agencies to hold the government of Bangladesh accountable and send a clear message that impunity will not be tolerated.

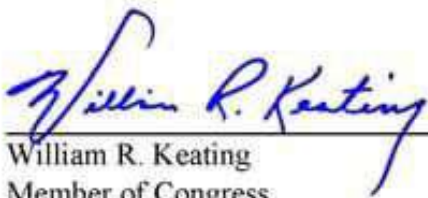
We understand that Bangladesh is an important U.S. partner and appreciate its willingness to host around 1 million Rohingya refugees. At the same time, the decision not to invite Bangladesh to the 2023 Summit of

Democracy was a clear signal that the State Department recognizes the country's democratic and human rights challenges ahead of scheduled 2024 elections. We thus respectfully request that you provide responses to the following questions at your earliest convenience:

- How does the State Department track reports of human rights violations committed by law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh, including the Rapid Action Battalion, the Detective Branch, and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence?
- What indicators are the State Department using to evaluate progress or lack thereof in Bangladesh in reducing impunity for serious human rights abuses committed by these entities? Are these the same indicators taken into account in deciding to impose or lift sanctions?
- What measures are the State Department implementing to protect civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and victims of human rights abuses from governmental reprisals since the imposition of the December 2021 sanctions?
- What efforts are the State Department making to encourage U.S. allies to coordinate on the imposition of sanctions and visa restrictions against the Rapid Action Battalion and its current and former officials?
- What steps, in addition to the [new policy to restrict visas](#) for any Bangladeshi individual believed to be involved in undermining the democratic election process, is the U.S. government taking to help ensure that the scheduled January 2024 elections will be free and fair?
- What indicators are the State Department using to evaluate whether conditions for a free and fair election are present, including freedom of expression, association, and assembly?

Thank you in advance for your attention to these requests.

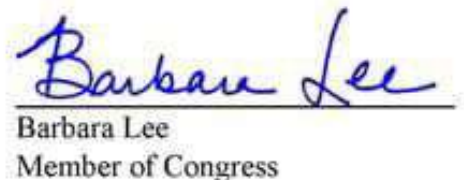
Sincerely,



William R. Keating
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



Jim Costa
Member of Congress



Dina Titus
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress