

Beat: Politics

UN rights chief says Bangladesh mutiny trials were unfair

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USPA News - A mass trial with 847 defendants over a mutiny by Bangladeshi border guards, resulting in death sentences for 152 people, fell "far short of international human rights standards," United Nations (UN) human rights chief Navi Pillay said on Wednesday. The officers of the Bangladesh Rifles Border Guards were convicted of crimes including murder and sexual assault after a nearly 3-year trial over the February 2009 mutiny in Dhaka, when 74 people, including senior army officers, were brutally killed.

Their bodies were dumped in ditches while some wives of army officers were sexually assaulted. Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, on Wednesday expressed "serious alarm" at the sentencing the previous day, which resulted in 152 people being sentenced to death, 161 to life imprisonment, 277 were acquitted of their charges, and the remainder was sentenced to jail terms ranging between 3 and 10 years. "The crimes committed during the mutiny were utterly reprehensible and heinous, and my sympathies are with the grieving families, but justice will not be achieved by conducting mass trials of hundreds of individuals, torturing suspects in custody and sentencing them to death after trials that failed to meet the most fundamental standards of due process," Pillay said. The UN rights chief recalled reports which indicate a number of people arrested over the mutiny died while in custody. They followed allegations that many detainees were abused and tortured while in custody, and that "evidence" obtained as a result of the torture was admitted in court. "The perpetrators of the crimes must be held accountable in compliance with the laws of Bangladesh and the country's international obligations, including those pertaining to fair trial standards, as laid down in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Bangladesh ratified in 2000," Pillay added. "The trial of these 847 suspects has been rife with procedural irregularities, including the lack of adequate and timely access to lawyers." Pillay further called for an independent and thorough investigation into the allegations of human rights abuses, particularly custodial torture and deaths that took place after the mutiny. "The results of the investigation should be made public and those responsible must be held accountable," she said, adding that Bangladesh has an obligation to do so as it ratified the UN Convention against Torture. The 2-day mutiny began when border guards, angry over their low salary and conditions, stole thousands of weapons before breaking into an annual meeting of top border defense officers. Public sentiment was initially sympathetic towards the mutineers and briefly threatened to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, but the public turned against them once the mass killings came to light.

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