Reviewer’s report

**Title:** Household Exposure to Violence and Human Rights Violations in western Bangladesh (I): Prevalence, Risk Factors and Consequences

**Version:** 2  **Date:** 20 May 2009

**Reviewer:** Neil J Mitchell

Reviewer’s report:

Review of Household Exposure to Violence and Human Rights Violations in Western Bangladesh (1).

This is a well done piece of research. It presents new data that shows the seriousness of the problem of political violence and human rights violations and an interesting analysis of risk factors.

Data on human rights violations are extremely challenging to collect. Governments generally do their best to hide violence done by their agents. Most of the research by social scientists is cross-national comparative in design and relies on country-wide ordinal rankings of human rights conditions – drawing on sources such as Amnesty International. This study is within-country and the data are much richer. I have a few suggestions and comments but think it clearly merits publication.

**Theory and hypotheses (DISCRETIONARY REVISION)**

The hypotheses are not as theoretically grounded as they might be. For political violence and human rights violations there is a focus on the instrumental use of violence to deal with threats from political opponents (see Mitchell, Agents of Atrocity 2004) – this may help to interpret finding of higher levels of violence at borders and for those involved in party politics/demonstrations. One would expect even higher levels of violence for those involved in the armed militias associated with party politics in Bangladesh – but this information may be too sensitive to be available. Also the interesting finding about Hindus not being at higher risk would fit with this theory about opposition threat.

But there are also the private motives of the individual agents within the security forces (‘principal-agent problem’– particularly important in understanding incidence of torture and sexual violence – see for example Butler, Gluch and Mitchell ‘Security Forces and Sexual Violence’ Journal of Peace Research (November 2007). The study mentions the relationship to police corruption – p.20. This principal-agent argument has been used to link the use of torture and sexual violence to corruption (Policy Studies Journal Feb 2008 for torture-corruption). The authors might note a similar pattern in India as well (see Rothman and Neier 1991).
Data

The levels of political violence are high. I was concerned that the voucher might be an incentive for respondents to inflate violence levels. But the researchers appear to have addressed that issue (p. 22).

COMPULSORY: Was it possible that word of incentives spread from those who had taken the survey to those about to take it?

DISCRETIONARY

1. To provide corroboration and to show the findings are not out of line with other assessments of human rights in Bangladesh it might be worth putting the findings in context of other assessments of human rights violations in Bangladesh (maybe done in a footnote). Country-wide ordinal rankings are available over time for Bangladesh.

For this data see:

CIRI
http://ciri.binghamton.edu/

Political Terror Scale
http://www.politicalterrorscale.org/

2. Is it possible to say anything more about the types of violence and in particular the incidence of sexual violence – this was in the survey and women were the respondents but relatively low incidence is reported. Perhaps this finding should be discussed in the ‘limitations’ section and whether there is an under-reporting problem here.

3. It might be worth providing a brief description of the political system and assessment of degree of democracy in Bangladesh. See..

Polity democracy scores for all countries in world – gives an idea of Bangladesh’s comparative standing
http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm

Minor points:

I didn’t find much discussion of figure 1 in the text nor much on the source for these data.

p. 5 use ‘members’ instead of ‘cadres’

p. 4 clarify Operation Clean Heart and Spider Web – government operations? (which party controlled government?)

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.