

# Bangladesh opposition leader gets life over 2004 attack

**DHAKA:** A Bangladesh court Wednesday sentenced a top opposition leader to life in prison and sentenced 19 more people to death over a 2004 grenade attack on the current prime minister.

“We thank God for the verdict,” prosecutor Mosharraf Hossain told reporters after announcing that Tarique Rahman, the self-exiled acting head of the country’s main opposition party, was jailed for life while 19 others, including two former ministers, received the death penalty.

Security was tight in Bangladesh on Wednesday with a court expected to hand down a death sentence to a top opposition leader and dozens of others over a 2004 grenade attack on the current prime minister.

Tarique Rahman, son of ex-premier Khaleda Zia and a key opposition leader, was among 49 people on trial over a 2004 grenade attack that injured Sheikh Hasina and killed 20 people.

Prosecutors have charged Rahman with criminal conspiracy and multiple counts of murder over the attack, which happened when Zia – a former ally-turned-archrival of Hasina – was prime minister.

Rahman, 50, has been tried in absentia after he fled the country for London in 2008.

He now leads the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) from exile after Zia was jailed in February for five years.

Hasina was addressing a rally in the Bangladesh capital, Dhaka, on August 21, 2004, when the grenades exploded.

She suffered severe injuries in one ear. Among the dead was the wife of a former president.

Four years later, Hasina stormed back to power after leading a secular coalition to a landslide victory in elections in December 2008.

Chief prosecutor Syed Rezaur Rahman said the prosecution has sought capital punishment for Rahman, saying his office was used to "hatch conspiracy to kill Hasina".

"We have been able to prove the charges against him beyond any doubt," he said, adding that Rahman could be sentenced to death if found guilty.

Two other ministers, former heads of the intelligence agencies and police and a key aide of Zia are also facing death sentences in the case.

Three religious extremists were also charged over the attack, but later executed in a separate case.

Death sentences are common in Bangladesh with hundreds of people on death row. All executions are by hanging, a legacy of the British colonial era.

Since 2007, at least nine top religious extremists, five leaders of the country's largest religious party and a senior opposition leader have been hanged in Bangladesh's jails.

Rahman's lawyer Sanauallah Mia said the charges against his client are politically motivated.

He questioned the timing of the verdict, saying it was aimed at keeping Rahman out of elections expected to be held in December.

"There was no evidence or witness against him. No witness could say that conspiracy was hatched at Hawa Bhaban," he told AFP, referring to a former BNP office used by Rahman.

Police spokesperson Soheli Rana said they have tightened security in courts and across the South Asian nation to avert any violence following the verdict.