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30 Are Killed in Bangladesh as Villagers Stalk Bandits

By AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

DHAKA, Bangladesh, Dec. 10 (Agence France-Presse) — The death toll from revenge attacks in the southern region of Noakhali reached 30 on Wednesday as villagers continued to hunt down gangs of bandits after years of suffering under their campaign of terror, a local official said.

The bodies of three people were found on Wednesday, the official said. The 27 others died after being beaten to death by residents in the region, about 75 miles southeast of the capital, Dhaka, in attacks that started Sunday. Tensions remained high, with the police and the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles trying to track down remaining members of the gangs.

The villagers caught the gangs as they were emerging from their hideouts in deep jungle after a 500-strong police and coast guard team searched several islands on Saturday in the Bay of Bengal, off the coast of the Noakhali region.

Armed with sticks, the villagers struck back against the gangs, which have been blamed for crimes including rape, cattle rustling and extortion.

A mass grave was found in one forest and villagers suspect the bodies were of those who were murdered for refusing to pay a ransom, television reports said.

Channel I television network showed film of a human skull that had been recovered from the grave. "A skull and other parts of decomposed human bodies were found," the official BSS news agency quoted a local official as saying.

A Bangladeshi rights group, Ain O Salish Kendra, said Wednesday that it was "deeply concerned" by the violent incidents in Noakhali.

It said in a statement that the government should take immediate steps to stop the killings and warned that innocent people might become victims.

On a tour of the area on Tuesday, Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury called on villagers to cooperate with security forces to arrest the bandits.

"Please, do not take the law in your own hands as the law will take its own course," he said.

So far 90 people, mostly accomplices of the bandits and pirates, have been arrested, officials said.

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