

INSIDE THE AYNAGHAR



MIKEL CHANGMA
UPDF leader

Detention: Apr 9, 2019 to Aug 7, 2024



M MAROOF ZAMAN
Former diplomat

Detention: Dec 4, 2017 to Mar 16, 2019



FIROZ MAHMUD HASAN
Labour leader

Detention: Jun 30, 2022 to Jul 6, 2022

'It felt like living in a grave'

MD ABBAS

Mikel Changma, a political organiser of the United Peoples' Democratic Front (UPDF), could not see daylight for five years after being picked up by some plainclothes men on April 9, 2019.

"During my captivity, the only sunlight I glimpsed was through the gap under the door or the ventilator. I finally saw the outside world again early on August 7 this year when they [abductors] released me," he said.

Following his detention from the capital's Shyamoli, he had been held in four to five secret prisons, widely known as "Aynaghar".

When Mikel was dropped off on a road in Chattogram, he was unaware of the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government two days ago.

Over the last five years, his family has endured severe pain and mental anguish.

Believing that Mikel was dead, the family even performed his funeral rites. His father passed away "mourning the loss of his son".

In an interview with The Daily Star, the leader of the Chittagong Hill Tracts-based UPDF on Monday remembered his ordeal in the secret prisons.

"On the night of August 6, I was blindfolded and forced into a car. I thought they would take me somewhere and kill me...."

"After picking me up, the abductors interrogated me on putting logs on a road in Khagrachhari in support of a blockade during a rally of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina. They enquired about a case in which I was accused of a murder. I told them that I was not involved in those incidents," Mikel said.

Even though he was not physically tortured, his time in solitary confinement was so harsh that he described it as severe psychological torture.

"I was held in such inhumane conditions that felt like living in a grave. The room had no windows and no fresh air, just four enclosed walls."

Mikel, aged about 45, had a run-in with a prison supervisor. After that

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'Captors kept watch on my family'

SAJJAD HOSSAIN

On the evening of December 4, 2017, around 6:45pm, M Maroof Zaman, former Bangladesh ambassador to Vietnam, was on his way from his Dhanmondi home to receive his daughter at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

While driving, he noticed a microbus tailgating and attempting to ram his car.

Near the airport, his car was intercepted, and two men in plain clothes got off the microbus, assaulted him and dragged him out of his car.

They forcibly placed Maroof into the microbus, where several other individuals blindfolded him, tied his hands, and covered his face with a cloth.

Under duress, he had to call a family member to instruct him to hand over his laptops to a "technician" who would visit his home.

"They wanted my laptops. I initially resisted, but after the assault I had no choice but to cooperate. They eventually took my laptops from my home," he told The Daily Star.

After driving for about 20 minutes, the microbus stopped, but he could not see where they were as he was blindfolded.

Maroof, also a retired captain of Bangladesh Army, said he was confined to a small, filthy room furnished with a wooden bed, a CCTV camera, and four fans. The space was barely livable.

"Many people were detained in this room at different times, and some had written their names, addresses and dates on the walls. These writings were painted over every three months."

During his captivity, the former diplomat, 67, faced interrogations more than nine times.

"They [abductors] questioned me about certain people I didn't know. They enquired about some agreements between India and Bangladesh. They also wanted to know how I became aware of an Indian intelligence agency training members

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'They didn't even let me drop off the milk for my child'

MUNTAKIM SAAD

After years-long legal battles, all 110 cases against Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus and his organisation Grameen Telecom over alleged labour law violations were dropped by union workers and employees on May 23, 2022, following a settlement regarding payment claims.

Around a month later, on June 30, Grameen Telecom Workers' Union General Secretary Firoz Mahmud Hasan, 44, was picked up by plainclothes men.

He was then taken to the infamous "Aynaghar", a secret detention facility, where he was subjected to torture in an attempt to force him to make a statement against Prof Yunus and Grameen Telecom authorities.

This is the story of his abduction, his experience in "Aynaghar", and his eventual release.

HOW HE WAS PICKED UP

It was around 10:30pm on June 30, 2022. Firoz, along with his wife and

"I couldn't tell day from night. I didn't even hear the call to prayer. I could only tell it was morning when they brought me breakfast."

FIROZ MAHMUD HASAN.

children, had just sat down for dinner when they realised they were out of milk for their one and a half-year-old child. So, Firoz left his dinner and went to buy some at a shop close to his home in Mirpur's ECB Chottor.

On his way home, 10-15 masked men stopped him and asked for his identity. They took his mobile phones and forced him to go with them.

They didn't even let him drop off the milk for his child. He was quickly blindfolded and taken away on a microbus.

Hours later, Firoz found himself in a detention centre, which he was unaware at the time was the infamous "Aynaghar."

There, he was tortured, both physically and mentally, and threatened with the same treatment for his family if he did not comply with their request.

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Piecing together the details of their narratives, it is now clear that many of these facilities were run by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), which operates under the defence ministry. DGFI heads are reportedly directly to the prime minister and prime minister's security adviser.

These facilities are notorious for their complete isolation, with detainees unable to see any light from the outside world.

The Daily Star spoke to four such victims who endured mental and physical torture inside these secret prisons for days, months and even years during the Awami League regime.

CHT-based United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) leader Mikel Changma is one of them. After five years of captivity since April 2019, he was freed just two days after Hasina fled the country in the face of a popular uprising.

"For the first time in five years, I saw daylight in the early hours of August 7 when they released me," Mikel told The Daily Star, adding that he was unaware of the August 5 political changeover.

Former Bangladesh ambassador to Vietnam Maroof Zaman had gone missing on December 4, 2017, and returned home after nearly 16 months (467 days) in March 2019. Talking to this newspaper yesterday, he narrated how

and some often willingly disappear with the intention of embarrassing the government," the government wrote to the UN on May 12, 2022.

But this version started falling apart after the release of former army brigadier general Abdullahil Amaan Azmi and Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem on August 6, the day after Sheikh Hasina's fall. Azmi, son of late Jamaat leader Ghulam Azam, and Ahmad, son of executed Jamaat leader Mir Quasem, were held in secret prisons for eight years.

"I was kept in darkness, not allowed to see the light of day. Even the ventilator in the room was sealed off," Azmi said in

"Upon investigation of the alleged enforced disappearance cases, the findings reveal that people often disappear voluntarily to avoid legal action for cases lodged against them."

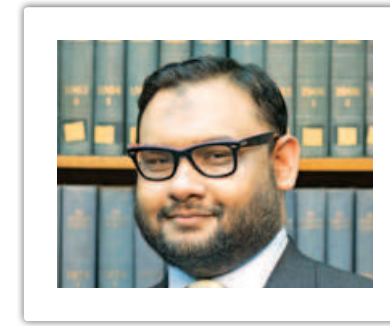
BANGLADESH WROTE TO UN
ON MAY 12, 2022.



ABDULLAHIL AMAN AZMI

Former army officer

Detention: Aug 23, 2016 to Aug 6, 2024



MIR AHMAD BIN QUASEM

SC lawyer

Detention: Aug 9, 2016 to Aug 6, 2024



KAMRUZZAMAN

Labour leader

Detention: Jul 1, 2022 to Jul 6, 2022

his captors tried to establish him as an anti-government element.

His accounts also clearly indicate that his captors were linked with the army, as he saw words like "Sena" (army) in the water bottles; Defence Medicine, trading prohibited, on the medicine leaf; and Station Headquarters Library and Senabahini Library in the Quran he was provided during his captivity.

The two other victims are Kamruzzaman, president of Grameen Telecom Workers Union, and his General Secretary Firoz Mahmud Hasan. Their 2022 captivity in the so-called Aynaghar was short – only seven days – but their secret imprisonment appears to be directly linked to Sheikh Hasina's reported dislike of Prof Muhammad Yunus.

Both said they were forced to give confessional statements against Yunus. They were also forced to claim that they coerced workers into withdrawing the cases against the Nobel laureate after secretly agreeing with the Grameen Telecom authorities in exchange for money.

FALSEHOOD FALLS APART

The AL government has persistently denied the existence of the secret prisons run by security forces, and maintained that the term "enforced disappearance" was used to malign the government and its achievements.

"Upon investigation of the alleged enforced disappearance cases, the findings reveal that people often disappear voluntarily to avoid legal action for cases lodged against them. Sometimes they choose to disappear due to family feud or to avoid business liability,

a video posted on social media after his release.

In a recent interview with AFP, Barrister Ahmad, a defence lawyer fighting the war crimes case against his father when he simply vanished, shared his ordeal inside Aynaghar and how he got fresh air for the first time in eight years.

"Slowly, slowly, I could realise that I am not alone," he said. "I could hear people crying, I could hear people being tortured, I could hear people screaming."

The story of Aynaghar first came to light on August 14, 2022, when Netra News, a Sweden-based news portal, revealed in a report the location of a secret prison in which the victims of enforced disappearances were kept.

For over a decade, hundreds of families in Bangladesh have lived with the unbearable pain of not knowing the fate of their loved ones. These individuals – mostly critics of the government and members of the opposition parties – disappeared during its 16-year rule, allegedly abducted by state agencies.

In its 2021 report, Human Rights Watch said that security forces have committed over 600 enforced disappearances since Hasina came to power in 2009.

While some people were later released, produced in court, or said to have died during gunfire exchanges with security forces, nearly 100 people were still missing, HRW said.

Rights activists have noted an increase in enforced disappearances before and after elections, as well as during political movements.

According to rights organisation

commission to arrange visits for rights activists to 23 other facilities across the country to see if the victims of enforced disappearance are there."

Home Adviser Lt Gen (ret'd) Jahangir Alam Choudhury and Law Adviser Asif Nazrul did not respond to our calls and text messages seeking their comments. Inter Services Public Relations Directorate (ISPR) also declined to comment, saying it does not deal with matters related to DGFI.

At a meeting with members of Mayer Daak on August 13, Prof Yunus expressed deep concerns after hearing the distressing accounts of families whose loved ones have gone missing over the years.

On Sunday, the platform sent a list of 158 missing people to DGFI.

Afroza Islam Akhi, cofounder of Mayer Daak, told The Daily Star that the interim government has assured them that it will address their concerns.

"We saw that Lt Gen Ziaul Ahsan was arrested and placed on remand. This was one of our demands to investigate his role. We have also demanded the formation of an enquiry commission, which they agreed to," she said, adding that they also want information about the numerous secret detention cells across the country.

Nur Khan Liton, a noted rights activist who has long been voicing concerns about enforced disappearance, said many people still remain unaccounted for after being taken away by alleged state agencies.

"It is time to demand their release or for the state to provide information on their whereabouts," he said.

Govt transfers 25 DCs in one go

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The situation in local administration has created a crisis, especially since the government's priority is to maintain law and order."

The DC from a southern district who was transferred yesterday, told this newspaper that he was so relieved that he would celebrate by distributing sweetmeat worth several thousands.

"I could not take the pressure anymore," he said.

The Ministry of Public Administration last night issued a notification stating that the DCs of Dhaka, Sylhet, Habiganj, Mymensingh, Magura, Rangpur, Gaibandha, Naogaon, Natore, Cox's Bazar, Chattogram, Noakhali, Gazipur, Cumilla, Moulvibazar, Khulna, Gopalganj, Faridpur, Sherpur, Kushtia, Jhenaidah, Pabna, Bogura, Joypurhat and Chandpur had been transferred.

As of last night, no DCs were appointed to these districts.

Several experts on civil administration said they have never seen so many DCs getting transferred in one go.

INSECURE AND AFRAID

On Sunday, activists of several student organisations entered the DC office in Jhenaidah and openly accused DC

SM Rafiqul Islam of acting like an Awami League supporter and taking bribes.

Rafiqul then sought a three-day leave while the students surrounded him.

After the fall of the AL government, the residence of Mymensingh DC was ransacked. Offices of upazila nirbahi officers and assistant commissioners were vandalised in Cumilla, Bhola, Sunamganj, Narsingdi and Chuadanga, officials said.

Several top officials said that information regarding many DC's previous involvement in Chhatra League were spreading.

"This is putting more pressure on them. We heard that in some cases, certain colleagues of the DCs are giving the information to local students," said a top official of the public administration ministry.

Many former bureaucrats say the previous government's appointed DCs are perceived to be close to the ruling party.

A top public administration ministry officer said, "Political considerations used to be a decisive factor in government appointments. Very few officers were appointed solely because of their professionalism, merit, and qualifications."

In July 2023, less than six months before the last general election, the

government appointed 30 DCs. Seven of them worked as personal secretaries to different ministers.

As of yesterday morning, at least 17 DCs had previously worked as PS to different ministers of AL governments.

Under the AL government, officers of the 25th batch of BCS faced the most discrimination because they were recruited during the BNP-led government. Now they are lobbying for the post of DCs.

An officer of the 25th batch said, "Many good officers of our batch did not even try to be DCs under the previous government. Now, we are interested."

"If corrupt officers who behave like party cadres are placed across the country, the government will be harmed. This is a different kind of government. We need efficient and honest officers who are not partisan."

Former cabinet secretary Mosharraf Hossain Bhuiyan said, "DCs must be honest and efficient. Appointment to the posts should be made on special considerations, especially due to the volatile situation."

Neither the cabinet secretary nor the public administration senior secretary could be reached for comment.

20yrs on, justice not served yet

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The then BNP-led alliance government had the case investigated, but the probe was farcical as senior CID officials cooked up a story involving one Joj Mia.

They detained the man from Noakhali, along with 20 petty criminals, and forced Joj Mia and two others to make confessional statements.

During the caretaker government rule after the January 11, 2007, changeover, the CID submitted two charge sheets in two cases accusing 22 people, including Huji chief Mufti Hannan and BNP leader and former deputy minister for education Abdus Salam Pintu.

One of the cases was filed under the Explosive Substances Act while the other was for murder.

The trial began after charges were framed against them in October 2007 and the court recorded testimonies of 61 prosecution witnesses.

After the AL assumed power in January 2009, the prosecution appealed for further probe and the court in August that year issued the order for it and a new investigation officer was assigned.

The CID in July 2011 submitted a supplementary charge sheet, accusing 30 more people, including BNP acting chairperson Tarique Rahman and Lutfozzaman Babar, state minister for home 2001-2006.

A Dhaka court on October 10, 2018, sentenced 19 people, including

Babar to death, in the two cases.

Nineteen others, including Tarique, were given life imprisonments and 11 people were handed different terms in prison.

The convicts included former top officials of police, DGFI, NSI, CID, and top militants of Huji.

While delivering the verdicts in the two cases, the court observed that it was a well-orchestrated attack executed abusing state power.

Eighteen convicts are absconding and 31 are in jail.

The death references of the cases reached the HC on November 27, 2018, for examination of the trial court's verdict.

On January 13, 2019, the HC accepted the appeals filed by the convicts for hearing.

The HC bench of Justice Shahidul Karim and Justice Md Mostafizur Rahman has so far held hearings on death references and appeals for around 100 working days since December 5, 2022.

A lawyer, who was involved in the cases, recently told The Daily Star that the HC could have concluded the hearings on the appeals and death references this month if it could have heard those continuously.

The last hearing on the cases was held on August 1, the lawyer said.

Contacted on Monday, Attorney General Md Asaduzzaman, who was appointed on August 8, told The Daily Star that the HC bench led by

Justice Shahidul Karim on August 18 dropped the cases from its hearing list as its junior judge was assigned to another bench.

"When the court reopens [after its annual vacation], I will examine the relevant papers and documents and decide on the cases," the AG said.

He, however, said, "The cases will be in the hearing list after the annual vacation."

The Appellate and High Court divisions of the Supreme Court are scheduled to go into its annual vacation on September 6 and reopen on October 20.

HC sources said for 61 days, the prosecution read out from books case details, trial proceedings, statements, evidence, verdicts, and other documents before the HC bench.

The defence lawyers for 24 out of the 49 convicted placed their arguments for 30 days until June 12 this year.

After concluding the hearings, the HC bench will deliver a verdict on the death references and the appeals. When the HC releases the full text of its verdict, the state and defence would have the opportunity to appeal before the Appellate Division.

A few years may be required after that for the Appellate Division to dispose of the appeals. Both parties will then have the option to move review petitions challenging the apex court judgement.