

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE VICTIMS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

How could we have descended to such depravity?

Extrajudicial killings and disappearances should never reappear



THE THIRD VIEW
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MAHFUZ ANAM

We congratulate Prof Yunus's government for joining the UN treaty on enforced disappearances. We also welcome the formation, last Tuesday, of an inquiry commission to investigate extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances and to report within 45 days. Headed by a retired high court judge, the commission will investigate the activities of the police, Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Special Branch (SB), National Security Intelligence (NSI) and the military's Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI). Instead of working for the protection of the state, government, or society, these intelligence agencies became extensions of the government's policy of quelling dissent, obliterating the opposition and controlling the independent media.

This is one of the most urgent, important and pro-people initiative that the interim government could

not reoccur. It is the latter task that engages us more. The practice of using security agencies to extend ruling party domination and especially to destroy the opposition is, sadly, not something that was started by Awami League. Although it can be said to have reached its zenith with the widespread practice of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killing under Sheikh Hasina's rule, it began with the entry of the armed forces into direct politics when Bangabandhu was assassinated. We know for a fact that when BNP was being organised in the late seventies, several security agencies were used to cajole, convince and compel politicians and civil society members to join it. This was followed by Gen Ershad's nearly decade-long rule, during which he also used them to form his party and control the opposition. We all expected that this notorious practice would cease with the restoration of democracy and

on August 21, 2004, in which security agencies were clearly and elaborately involved. A total of 23 people, including the head of AL's women wing, were killed.

Thus, over the last three decades—since 1991, when we expected transparent, people-centred politics to replace behind-the-scenes manipulation—the involvement

homes and streets and then making them disappear for months or years without the slightest need to inform anyone—including their families—about their fate. Sometimes, their dead bodies would appear in the most unlikely places. Sometimes, they would return home but remain silent for fear of further repercussions. But most often, they would just disappear

provided in Bangladesh under Sheikh Hasina's regime, especially since 2010. According to Odhikar, a human rights organisation that maintained a well verified record of disappearances—despite facing significant challenges, including jailing of its chief, who is now an adviser in Prof Yunus's cabinet—there were a total of 708 victims of

fears. One said, "They attached two crocodile clips to my two ear lobes and when switched on, sent electric shock damaging my eardrums during interrogation." Another said his hands were cuffed behind his back throughout his detention, which varied from two months to two and a half years. According to the detainees, the cells were 2.5 feet wide, 4 feet long and 5 feet high—too small to lie down or stand up. It was always half-sitting or half-lying. Such cruelty resembles medieval torture. Despite being underground, dark and without windows, the detainees were blindfolded throughout their captivity, even for basic needs and showers.

The stories of "Aynaghar" (House of Mirrors) represent another level of torture and cruelty that we have recently been exposed to. These constitute gross violations of human rights and reveal the existence of secret prisons that are completely unmonitored and devoid of legal oversight. They were run totally arbitrarily and at the whims of their officers. A retired army officer and a Supreme Court lawyer were kept in such secret prisons for eight years and would likely have remained there if not for the fall of the regime. Mikel Changma, a leader from the Chattogram Hill Tracts area, did not see sunlight for five years (2019-2024) of his confinement.

While the inquiry commission on disappearances is expected to reveal its report within 45 days, immediate steps should be taken to allow families and rights activists to visit all 23 prisons that the DGFI has committed to opening to the public. All those who have been cruelly and illegally detained must be returned to their families immediately.

We must never fall into such depths of cruelty and inhumanity again. Enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings are a shame on our dreams from the Liberations War and must be eradicated forever. Too much power and arbitrariness have been allowed to security agencies in the name of fighting extremism. We hope the commission will lay down a clear legal framework so that nobody is made to suffer as we saw in the last 15 years.



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKROBORTY

Many factors contributed to Sheikh Hasina's downfall, but perhaps the most heart-wrenching was, especially after 2010, the practice of picking people up from their homes and streets and then making them disappear for months or years without the slightest need to inform anyone—including their families—about their fate. Sometimes, their dead bodies would appear in the most unlikely places. Sometimes, they would return home but remain silent for fear of further repercussions. But most often, they would just disappear for weeks, months, or years, never to return.

have taken, and we congratulate the relevant adviser or advisors for this initiative. We, from the media and this particular newspaper, wish the commission resounding success. We need not only to do justice to the victims but also ensure that it does

representative government in 1991. Regrettably, this practice continued under the elected governments of both BNP and AL, reaching its most ignominious apex in the attempted assassination of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

of security agencies increased in proportion to the political leadership of the day losing public trust. Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule stands as a lesson in how a political party of AL's legacy, reach and organisation became increasingly dependent on security agencies. This dependency included allowing them into the inner workings of party operations, such as vetting candidates for nearly all tiers of the party, to the extent that aspiring leaders at the union and district levels sought the blessings of security agencies to achieve their ambitions.

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Just imagine the agony of their loved ones. Death, however cruel, draws the curtain on a tragedy. But disappearances represent a continuous suffering mixed with hope that one day the family will open the door and find their loved one—father, husband, son, friend—miraculously returned. Each knock on the door became both a flicker of hope and a sense of deep disappointment. Imagine this going on for years.

One of the fundamental responsibilities of a modern state is to ensure the safety of life and property—we are leaving aside the question of liberty for the moment. This assurance was not

enforced disappearances between 2009 and June 2024. Of these 708 victims, 57 percent returned alive, 13 percent were found dead and nothing has been known about the remaining 30 percent. The practice of "picking up" victims from homes or streets was carried as follows: 31 percent by Rab, 30 percent by the Detective Branch (DB), 22 percent by DGFI (mostly accompanied by Rab) and 14 percent by the police.

According to a report by Zyma Islam, published on August 30, 2022, at least 522 individuals became victims of enforced disappearances between 2009 and 2018. Most survivors who returned home never spoke about their experiences for fear of reliving their hellish ordeals. However, a few who did speak confirmed our worst

'We want you to die. We won't have to kill you then.'



M Maroof Zaman
is a former Bangladesh
ambassador to Vietnam.

M MAROOF ZAMAN

On December 4, 2017, around 6:45pm, I left my home and took my car to go to the airport to receive my younger daughter. As I started driving, I saw two motorcycles following me. I was aware that I was being monitored for the past year. I used to write a lot in the international media about the unequal agreements signed between India and Bangladesh, about the failures of the government and the injustices done by them.

I also wrote against enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings but never did I imagine that I would be a victim one day.

From the time and turns the microbus took to reach my place of confinement, I could guess that I was taken to some place in the cantonment. First, they took me to a torture cell, beat me up severely, and hurled abuses at me. I told them to stop but they didn't. Then someone asked me, "Are you Maroof Zaman?" I replied, "Yes." He then asked, "Are you 'Banglar Bir'?" I said, "Yes, that's the name I use in the websites." They then beat me up again and took me to another small room.

I was kept there for four and a half months. Every three to four days, they used to come and torture me. They used to bring printouts of my writings and abuse me for what I wrote. They even called me a traitor. I protested by saying, "No, I am not a traitor. I wrote nothing against the state, I wrote

to protect the interests of the country, I wrote against the injustices done by the government."

There were different levels of torture, namely grade one, grade two, and grade three. I was subjected to grade two level torture. Grade three torture means severe physical torture. While some young people may survive it, it is difficult for someone my age to survive such tortures. They told me that since I would not survive third-degree torture, they would instead give me injections, which would have severe impacts. They also used a high-powered light bulb and harsh noises to prevent me from sleeping.

On January 29, 2018, I heard a bullet shot and then someone was brought to my next room. Later, I heard someone saying: "He is no more." Another person was tortured through waterboarding. I didn't know what happened to him later.

Sometimes, I heard people saying, "Guard Shabdhan." This is a phrase used in the army by the guards to salute an officer. One day, I asked them to change my water bottles, as they were extremely dirty. A young man came with two water bottles, with the word "Shena" written on them. Also, on the first day of my abduction, when they handcuffed me, I could see that it was made of stainless steel, which is used by the security forces. I became certain that I was confined within the cantonment.

They hit me so much on my face that my teeth were broken. There was puss and blood coming out from my swollen gums. I asked them to take me to a doctor and get an X-ray done, but they rejected my appeal. I still have no sense in my gums and the nerves in one of my arms are severely damaged from the excessive beatings. I told them, "I will die if you don't give me treatment." They replied, "Die, we want you to die. We won't have to kill you then. You will die from your illness."

'Let my blood bring peace to the sacred soil of Bengal.'



Mikel Changma is leader,
CHT-based United People's Democratic Front (UPDF).

MIKEL CHANGMA

I knew I was abducted on the basis of a politically motivated case. Those who abducted me knew my name and were in plainclothes. I was told that I was against the treaty (Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, 1997). They claimed it was a crime to oppose it. They said, "It means you are against the state. The government runs the state, and the government is the state."

I said they could kill me if they considered asking for workers' rights and the rights of my people a crime. I said, "Amar rokte Banglar pobitro mati snigdho hok" (Let my blood bring peace to the sacred soil of Bengal). I even said if they killed me, my ideals would live on. When I said these, they hit me in the stomach with an object, and eventually took me to a facility.

The facilities are constructed so that a sliver of light enters through an angle only in a few rooms so you can see nothing. No sound from outside can be heard. Towards the end, I fell very ill. In the beginning, I lost a significant amount of weight as I was unable to eat. I was handcuffed, blindfolded tightly, and not allowed to sleep during my time there. I suffered in this manner for a year. Medical

I was handcuffed, blindfolded tightly, and not allowed to sleep during my time there. I suffered in this manner for a year. Medical examinations had to be conducted on me because I had fallen severely ill. My sodium level and blood pressure had dropped drastically.

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One day, I was fastened onto a chair that was capable of rotating at a high speed. I was asked, "Where are your weapons?"

In this way, five years passed there. No information reached me during that time, and speaking to others was not allowed. I did hear the sound of other people talking and felt the presence of other inmates, but I never

got to know what happened to them.

On the day of my release, I was asked if I had any personal belongings. At that point, I did not know I was going to be freed. I thought I was going to be killed. I was being taken somewhere in a car while another car was following us and I saw weapons.

I was in the car for several hours, when suddenly a left turn was taken. The man to my right told me not to scream or make a fuss. He asked if I knew my family's number. Then he said, "We're going to release you. Wherever we drop you, you will stay there, for 30 minutes. If you get up before that time, we'll shoot you. Once 30 minutes pass, you will untie yourself, and you will run."

I said nothing. When I opened my blindfold, I saw the light of the world for the first time in years. I saw in a newspaper that the nation was awaiting a new government; I learnt that Sheikh Hasina's government had fallen.

My family was in immense pain. They believed I had passed away, and my funeral was held. I learnt my father who was alive at the time of my capture, was no more.

If it had not been for the student's uprising, the heaviness of the pain for many in a similar situation would not have been relieved. Sheikh Hasina and her accomplices committed heinous acts to create an atmosphere of immense fear. She along with every person who assisted her should be tried. I want them to be punished lawfully so that such heinous acts and such horrifying breaches of human rights, never occur.