

End custodial torture and deaths

How can we build a new Bangladesh using brutal old tactics?

It is deeply disheartening that, despite the change in government following a bloody mass uprising, custodial torture and deaths continue to plague the nation. Among the many crimes committed during the fallen Awami League regime, one of the most heinous was the repeated torture and killing of individuals in police and security force custody—including in secret detention centres infamously known as Aynaghars—alongside other forms of extrajudicial executions. This newspaper has consistently condemned such egregious human rights violations. With the change in government, many expected these abuses to end. However, according to Odhikar, between August 9 and December 31 last year, law enforcement and security agencies were reportedly responsible for 12 extrajudicial killings.

Of the victims, six were allegedly tortured by joint forces, and one died due to police torture. Additionally, Odhikar reports that three individuals were shot by joint forces, while another by police. The report also states that one person was beaten and pushed off a bridge by the police. Furthermore, Odhikar highlights allegations that joint forces conduct operations in plainclothes and engage in torture and extrajudicial killings, providing specific names and details of these incidents.

For instance, on September 8, 2024, Elahi Sikder died in custody after being arrested five days earlier on charges of attacking army personnel. A doctor at Gopalganj General Hospital, quoted in the report, stated that Sikder's body bore multiple injuries. Similarly, on September 10, members of the joint forces in Gaibandha arrested Mosharof Hossain Sweet, chairman of Saghata Union and president of the Awami League's Saghata unit, along with his associates Shafiqul Islam and Sohrab Hossain Apel. Shafiqul later died while receiving treatment at Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital in Bogura, while Apel passed away at Gaibandha General Hospital. Their families have alleged that both men succumbed to brutal torture while in the custody of the joint forces.

This is not what was envisioned for new Bangladesh—one that promised justice, accountability, and the protection of human rights for all. In a country committed to the rule of law, even the guilty must be punished through due legal procedures, not through extrajudicial means. We urge the interim government to address this matter with utmost seriousness. Immediate and decisive action must be taken to end custodial torture and killings once and for all. Furthermore, all cases reported by Odhikar must be thoroughly and impartially investigated, with those responsible held to account.

We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past. If we are to truly turn a new page as a nation, justice must not only be promised—it must be delivered.

Attack on freedom of publishing alarming

Ensure safety of writers and publishers at the book fair

We are alarmed by the assault on a book stall at the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela on Monday and its consequent shuttering by police to control the situation. Such an incident, at a book fair no less—which is supposed to celebrate freedom of thought and expression—is not only unfortunate but also disconcerting. It goes against the principles of tolerance and inclusivity, which are essential for the pluralistic society we hope to build following the July uprising.

According to media reports, the incident occurred when a group of individuals demanded the removal of a book by Taslima Nasreen from the Sabyasachi stall, leading to an altercation when the latter refused to comply. Police, in their attempt to control the situation, covered the stall with a tarpaulin. One person—reportedly the publisher—was also taken into custody. Meanwhile, Bangla Academy formed a seven-member committee to assess whether the stall should be reopened, with a report due within three working days. A Bangla Academy secretary stressed that the closure was a police decision, not the academy's.

The Sabyasachi stall had already been a target of online threats ahead of Monday's incident, with multiple social media posts calling for its demolition on the grounds that it was promoting atheism. Bdnews24.com quoted the publisher's wife who said that they had informed police about these threats, only to be advised to remove Taslima Nasreen's book instead of being offered protection.

While it is reassuring that the interim government has strongly condemned the incident, we hope the authorities will move beyond words and take concrete action. Time and again, we have seen this pattern where social media platforms are used to issue threats and incite violence, yet law enforcement remains mostly passive instead of taking preventive measures. One may ask: why was security at the book fair not strengthened even after the publisher's complaints? This is not the first time the fair has come under attack from groups opposed to free thought, and given this history, Bangla Academy should have ensured adequate security to create a safe space for book lovers and publishers.

However, security measures must not come at the cost of freedom of expression. The right to publish diverse thoughts, beliefs, and opinions must be protected. In a truly democratic society, it is the readers—not the police or any special interest group—who should decide the fate of a publication. Finally, we urge the police to identify and take legal action against those responsible for Monday's incident.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Chile gains independence from Spain

On this day in 1818, Chile formally declared independence from Spain, on the occasion of the first anniversary of Chile's victory at Chacabuco, although the decisive victory over the Spanish did not come until April at the Battle of Maipú.