

The Daily Star

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Horror details of July massacre

UN report gives damning proof of Hasina's fascist role

We welcome the long-awaited release of the fact-finding report of the United Nations Human Rights Office about the crimes and abuses committed by the Awami League government during the July-August uprising. And as expected, it provides conclusive proof of the systematic brutalities inflicted upon protesters as well as Sheikh Hasina's role in orchestrating them. This should put to rest any lingering attempts—domestic or international—to distort, downplay, or whitewash the atrocities the regime carried out in a desperate bid to retain power. The facts are now indisputable, so the path to justice should be clearer than ever before.

In its 114-page report, the UN, based on testimonies from senior security officials, confirms that Hasina herself ordered security forces to kill protesters. On July 19, she explicitly instructed them to "arrest the ringleaders of the protests, the troublemakers, kill them and hide their bodies." Her trusted lieutenant, then-home minister Asaduzzaman Khan, reinforced this directive in meetings with top security officials, ordering the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) to use lethal force. These instructions and consequent measures paved the path for the killing of as many as 1,400 people—including many children—in what the UN describes as "crimes against humanity." Other findings of the report are equally chilling.

It states that protesters were shot at point-blank range and killed. It identifies the integrated role of at least seven security forces, including the Army, BGB, and RAB, as well as ruling party activists, who coordinated to arbitrarily harass, arrest, torture, and even execute protesters. The details provided by the report about these developments, and the roles played by both security and intelligence agencies, are shocking. The report also sheds light on the sexual violence committed against women protesters as part of a broader strategy to suppress dissent. It reveals that officers also obstructed medical care for injured protesters, intimidating doctors and pressuring them to falsify medical reports or deny treatment to victims. Forensic pathologists were forced to misclassify causes of death, erasing proof of extrajudicial killings. There were also frequent internet blackouts to disrupt protesters' ability to organise.

Following the unveiling of the report, the UN rights chief has rightly called for additional criminal investigations to determine the full extent of these violations. For now, it is only appropriate that the ongoing trials of former regime figures and officials incorporate these findings as evidence, which the chief prosecutor of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) said they would. The UN, however, said it would not share evidence from its investigation with Bangladesh unless the trials meet international standards. There are certain issues that may stand in the way of a UN approval of the justice process, but we hope for the sake of the victims that those will be resolved soon. It is also vital that past crimes by the Awami regime, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions, are tried and those responsible held to account. The UN has made a number of recommendations in its report, which too must be seriously considered and acted on.

Justice for Aynaghar victims

The horrors of torture cells must not be allowed to happen again

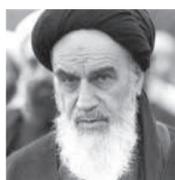
We are appalled to have finally witnessed the insides of secret detention centres known as Aynaghar, where individuals were imprisoned—some for eight to nine years—by security forces of the Sheikh Hasina regime. During a visit to these locations in Dhaka by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus and others, chilling details about these torture cells once again came to light. Some of the survivors who accompanied the chief adviser identified the cells where they had been held, recounting the horrific experiences they had endured there. As their photos were published, other survivors also recognised some of the places. These cells stand as a stark reminder of the ousted regime's fascist rule which should never be repeated.

After the political changeover on August 5, many victims of enforced disappearances were released from secret detention centres. We came to know about their experience from interviews and statements. Later, the interim government formed a commission to investigate these cases, and according to its interim report, a total of 1,676 complaints were filed against various government agencies, including RAB, DGFI, DB, CTTC, CID, and the police. Of these, 758 complaints have been verified, revealing that 73 percent of the victims have returned while the remaining 27 percent (comprising at least 204 individuals) are still missing.

The level of brutality inflicted upon these people is beyond belief. Photos and videos released by the chief adviser's press wing show that the detention centres contain tiny cells where almost no light or air can reach. One cell was found to be only three feet by one foot, with a toilet occupying two handspans of space, leaving just two feet for someone to sit with their knees folded. There are cells even smaller than a chicken coop. It has been observed that several modifications were made to the cells, and the walls were repainted to destroy evidence.

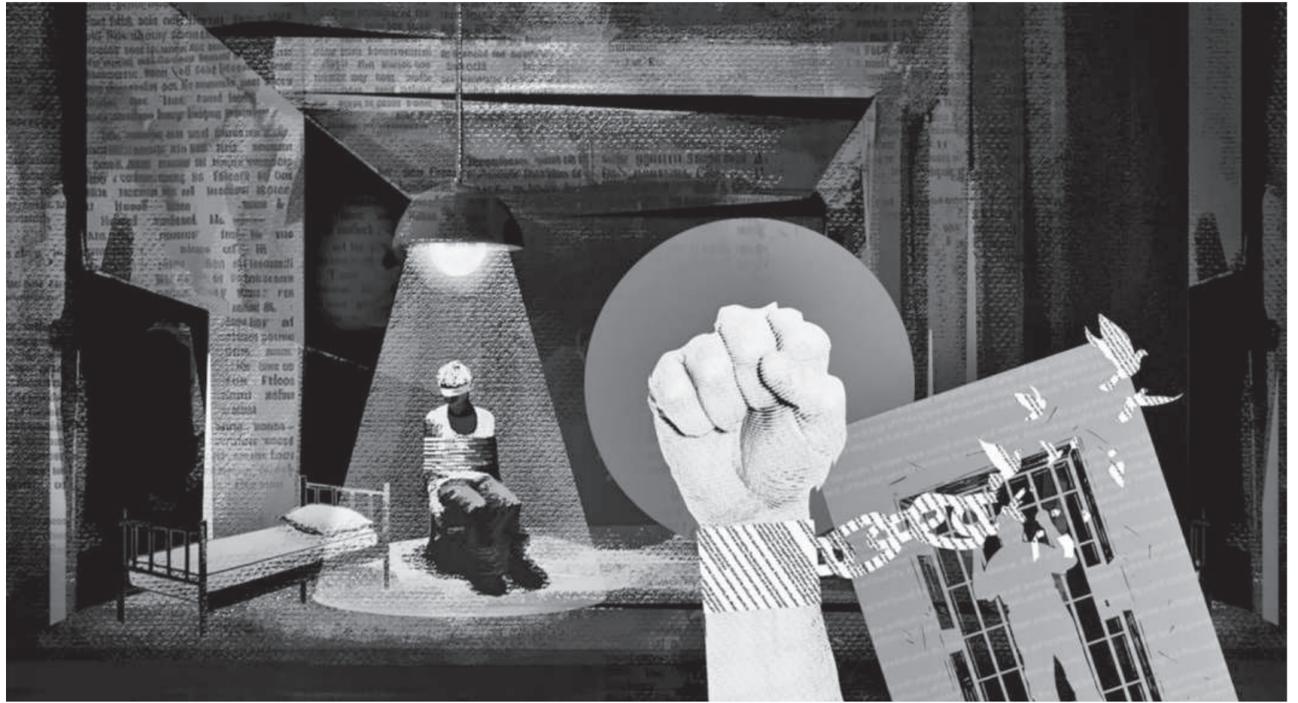
Reportedly, the commission identified more than eight secret detention centres. However, the actual number is believed to be around 700-800, spread across the country. We urge the government to identify all such centres and initiate legal proceedings against those involved in their operations as well as the crimes committed there. It is crucial that the horrors of Aynaghar are not allowed to recur under any circumstances in the future.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Khomeini issues fatwa against Salman Rushdie

On this day in 1989, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa and offered a bounty for the assassination of author Salman Rushdie, whose novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) Khomeini denounced as blasphemous.



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

How the ex-PM used and abused intelligence agencies

We need legal frameworks to prevent their future misuse



THE THIRD VIEW

Mahfuz Anam is the editor and publisher of *The Daily Star*.

MAHFUZ ANAM

Two remarkable things happened last Wednesday—the chief advisor visited "Aynaghar" (House of Mirrors), the secret torture cells set up by security and intelligence agencies to confine, interrogate, psychologically break, demoralise, and physically torture a select group of opponents and dissenters whom the political governments of day wanted either eliminated or at least tortured and intimidated into submission.

On the same date, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued its long-awaited report on the Sheikh Hasina government's handling of the July uprising and the killings that took place. The UN fact-finding mission, citing senior security officials, stated: "The prime minister herself told the security force officials to kill protesters to quell the protests and specifically demanded 'arrest the ringleaders of the protests, the troublemakers, kill them and hide their bodies.'" The report quoted testimonials from a meeting held on July 19, 2024. This, seen in conjunction with party secretary general, Obaidul Quader's statement to the press on the same day that security forces had been given orders to "shoot on sight," reveals the diabolical mindset that appears to have dominated the thinking of the former prime minister. The previous day, July 18, the home minister, chairing a meeting of the "core committee," told the BGB commander "to order the use of lethal force more readily."

Nothing could have revealed the atrocious levels to which our intelligence agencies had descended more than the chief advisor's visit to the "Aynaghar." We owe it to the Sweden-based Netra News for breaking the news in 2022 about the secret torture centres set up by the DGFI to torture political opponents. We carried the news one week later. Those of us who operated inside the country were highly constrained and took courage in seeing some Bangladeshi fellow journalists doing the unthinkable.

As we fret over, write about, and condemn what happened, the real challenge is to take effective steps to prevent it all from happening again. The OHCHR has made some vital recommendations that we must now implement—ones that were prevented from being put into practice in the past. We hope that the spirit of the July uprising will ensure nothing similar happens now.

A crucial recommendation is to reform the colonial-era Police Act of 1861. It is quite incredible that we have lived with it even after over 53 years of independence. We have been demanding police reforms for years, especially training them to become a force for the people instead of being an instrument of violence against them.

They need to be trained in modern tactics for handling protests and controlling crowds. Given our history of spirited and immensely politically relevant student movements, our police should have received special training for peaceful crowd control. Instead, they retained the colonial-era habits of violently attacking demonstrators, beating them, and resorting to lethal weapons. Then, of course, there is torture in custody, which has resulted in many deaths.

We have protested for decades the use of lethal weapons to disperse crowds. None of our elected governments made any attempt to reform the police, though both of our main political parties—the Awami League and BNP—were victims of police atrocities while in opposition. In this regard, the suggestion to set up an independent commission to investigate police violations of the law, modernise investigation techniques, reduce mass criminal charges and arrests, and minimise reliance on coerced confessions needs urgent implementation. The establishment of a National Police Commission for fair, transparent, and merit-based recruitment also deserves swift action.

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Regarding institutionalised impunity and a politically pliant justice sector, the recommendation to establish a genuinely independent judiciary reflects a long-expressed desire of our people. The suggestion to create an independent mechanism for the recruitment of judges, protection against intimidation, and guaranteed tenure must also be implemented urgently.

The setting up of an independent public prosecution service and a witness protection programme would greatly contribute to dispensing justice.

A most serious issue highlighted in the UN report is the use and abuse of intelligence agencies, especially the DGFI and NSI, by the political masters of the day. The "Aynaghar" detention and torture centres would not have been set up unless the DGFI and others complied. The relevant question is: did they have the option not to?

The DGFI is mostly manned by members of the armed forces but does

not report to the army hierarchy. It reports to the Prime Minister's Office and, as such, must obey the orders of the political masters of the day. So, the crucial question is: what can that institution do if ordered to undertake illegal activities, as most dramatically exemplified by the establishment of "Aynaghars." Its complicity in forced disappearances, human rights violations, arbitrary confinements, and many other abuses is well known. It is a fact that all governments—both military and civilian—used the DGFI for their own political goals. However, under Sheikh Hasina, it reached its most coercive height. Not only was it used to intimidate, torture, and punish political opponents, but it was also used to fulfil the agendas of notorious private companies—such as capturing banks and securing lucrative contracts. This led to massive corruption. Such misuse of this vital intelligence agency, closely linked to our national security, not only greatly damaged its image and reputation but also compromised its integrity, independence, and ability to serve the nation.

It is our considered view that all our intelligence agencies, especially the DGFI and NSI, must be prevented from being misused by future elected governments. And this is the moment to do it. No past governments did it. And future ones are unlikely to do so, as these agencies are the most convenient tools for oppressing the opposition and implementing highly partisan goals.

Political powers also used the DGFI to intimidate the free and independent media. Private companies were

Most importantly, an institutional governance structure—with clear channels of communication, supervision, and accountability—must be set up to provide all intelligence agencies with clear mandates so that each institution and those working in them know what they are expected to do, and what falls outside their mandate. This will give each institution and their chiefs the right and the legal cover to refuse performing any tasks which fall outside their mandates. The vagueness of current mandates allows political leadership to misuse them. In today's world, the term "security" is used to justify actions that create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. It must also be mentioned that some overenthusiastic individuals within these institutions allowed such abuses because it gave

In its obsession with remaining in power, Sheikh Hasina's government distorted and misused all institutions, including the judiciary, bureaucracy, police, and intelligence agencies. This facilitated the creation of the fascist ruling structure from which we have now been freed by the student-led people's uprising.

them a chance to take advantage of the situation for personal aggrandisement. After all, a sense of unlimited power triggers many unwarranted things within a person.

We must establish an independent and democratic oversight institution that will help govern them better and also prevent their political, partisan, and sometimes even personal misuse. There must also be fiduciary transparency in regard to budget and their utilisation. Examples abound all over the world where powerful intelligence agencies are monitored by parliamentary or other independent oversight bodies. All intelligence agencies—DGFI, NSI, SB, DB—would benefit from such oversight, which will help them operate independently to serve national interest instead of partisan ones.

With the gradual collapse of the law-based world order, the necessity and rising relevance of intelligence agencies, particularly those linked to defence establishments, are greater than ever. We acknowledge this need. However, we must also ensure that these institutions are trained, equipped, and elevated to global standards. For that to happen, we must eliminate political and partisan influence over these critical institutions.

Just as we value these institutions and need them to serve us better in handling our security issues, we also need the legal and governance related infrastructure to prevent the kind of abuse and misuse that we have witnessed and suffered from in recent years.