

The prison system is in urgent need of reform

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*"The degree of civilisation in a society can be
judged by entering its prisons."*

If this is true, then what does our prison system say about Bangladesh? Thousands are punished without conviction and stripped of their dignity in our prisons, compelling the question: who will reform the prison system?

Bangladesh's prisons continue to operate under the Prison Act of 1894, the Prisoners Act of 1900 and the Bengal Jail Code. These legal instruments, inherited from the British colonial regime, were designed for control and punishment, often dehumanising and serving no rehabilitative purpose. They are grossly inconsistent with the constitutional guarantees and human rights standards enshrined in international law.

The country operates 68 correctional facilities, including 55 district prisons and 13 central prisons, with a combined capacity of 42,887. Yet, the system remains overcrowded. Improvements are partial and unsustainable without deeper reforms. In late 2024, after the interim government was formed, calls grew to repeal colonial era prison laws and modernise regulations.

Under international law, Bangladesh is bound by several conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). Article 10(l) of the ICCPR stipulates: "All persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person." Similarly, the CAT obliges states to prevent torture in all circumstances. Yet in practice, such rights are regularly violated inside Bangladeshi penal institutions.

During the long, unjust detention of one of the authors (Khadijatul Kubra) under a Digital Security Act (DSA) case during the Awami League regime, the author witnessed first-hand the inner workings of Bangladesh's prison system, especially how disciplinary measures are implemented against female

inmates. One striking example is the "case table" disciplinary culture. Inmates were routinely handcuffed to a fixed stand attached to a table, approximately 5.3 to 5.4 feet high. For minor infractions, women were forced to remain in that position for four to five hours a day, often without food, rest, or explanation. This continued for days, even weeks, and always without the opportunity to be heard by officials. It was a system devoid of basic fairness and humanity. This was not

a condemned cell without charge, without hearing, or any explanation, at the order of the then senior jail superintendent, Obaidur Rahman. This practice is not isolated. For example, 16-year-old Poritosh Sarkar was reportedly kept in solitary confinement for eight months, barred from contact with others and denied sunlight or communication. This violates Section 29 of the Prisons Act, which states that no cell shall be used for solitary confinement unless

Impunity of prison officials

Impunity for jail officials is a profound problem. When instances of abuse surface, the response is not disciplinary action but bureaucratic relocation. Human rights monitors note that, despite Bangladesh's 2013 Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, virtually no custodial abusers are ever held accountable. By mid-2025, only one conviction has been secured under that act.

In 2023, Runa Laila, an apprentice lawyer,

Farhana Akhter ordered more beatings.

Victims and their families see no justice in mere transfers or brief salary demotions. In most cases, officials face no consequences at all. Notably, in all the cases mentioned, the same individuals—Obaidur Rahman and Farhana Akhter—were involved. They remain in their positions under powerful patronage, making a complete mockery of justice.

This failure of the prison system not only violates international legal obligations but also seriously undermines public confidence in the justice process. Justice must be absolute; it must flow beyond the courtroom. To this end, urgent and widespread legislative reform is required.

The archaic Prisons Acts and Jail Code should be repealed and replaced with a modern prison law that creates a bill of rights for prisoners in line with international standards, establishes independent oversight bodies, enforces a binding code of conduct for prison officials, ensures transparent and appealable disciplinary procedures within correctional facilities, and removes as well as prosecutes past offenders.

A promising step was taken on July 10, 2025, when the Council of Advisers approved Bangladesh's accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT). This lays the groundwork for establishing an independent National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) to monitor places of detention. The OPCAT also allows international oversight through visits by the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT), enhancing transparency and accountability. It is equally imperative to revive and rigorously implement the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013.

The prison system is the missing pillar in Bangladesh's reform project. While there was an expectation that the interim government would initiate prison reforms and hold perpetrators accountable, no such steps have been taken yet. We had hope that victims would see culprits being brought to justice, but that hope is fading. Recent events intensify this failure. The consecutive deaths of Bawm prisoners following the regime change have laid bare the stark absence of progress.

No reform can be considered complete while our prisons continue to operate as sites of arbitrary power, systemic abuse, and legal vacuum. A just society is not only measured by how it treats the free, but also by how it treats those locked behind bars. The question is no longer "Who will reform our prisons?", it is "Will we allow this injustice to continue?"



ILLUSTRATION: STAR

an isolated anomaly but part of a pattern of punishment without process, especially for women.

This method is psychologically debilitating and blatantly cruel, in direct contravention of Article 7 of the ICCPR, Articles 1 and 16 of the CAT, as well as Article 35(5) of our constitution.

Arbitrary use of condemned cells

Even more concerning is the arbitrary use of condemned cells, designated for death row inmates, as punishment for under trial detainees. Khadijatul Kubra was confined to

the prisoner can talk to a prison officer at any time, and anyone kept there longer than 24 hours must be visited daily by a medical officer or subordinate.

Such acts also contravene the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), which enshrine proportionality and due process in prison discipline. Rules 36 to 46 state that solitary confinement or other very high-security measures should not be employed as a first choice, particularly in cases of persons not yet convicted.

was reportedly beaten by another inmate, political leader Papia of the Jubo Mohila League, while in custody. A stick was inserted through Laila's anus and vagina. She was then bound and gagged to a tree inside the jail premises, and sugar was poured over her body to attract ants to bite her. All of these (as seen by author Khadijatul Kubra) were orchestrated by Papia, with the assistance of the then Jailer Farhana Akhter under the authority of Obaidur Rahman. Rather than protecting the victim, Obaidur Rahman imposed punitive handcuffing on her. Later,

Ambulance syndicates are holding patients hostage

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Syndicates are nothing new in Bangladesh. But can their unbearable excessiveness drive a family towards a cruel and tragic fate? Recently, our country witnessed one such brutal incident.

This time, the victim was a newborn, who had just arrived in this world, carrying a wave of joy for the family and promise of a future. But that journey was cut short by the ambulance syndicate of Shariatpur. A baby was born in a local clinic with severe breathing complications. The family was advised to rush the child to Dhaka, and in desperation, they hired an ambulance.

Not long into the journey, their ambulance was intercepted by a member of Shariatpur's ambulance syndicate. Despite desperate arguments and pleas, the ambulance was not released for a while. And in that cruel delay, the newborn, who had barely set foot on earth, was sacrificed at the altar of a syndicate's greed.

Ambulances of this syndicate routinely charge far more than the standard fare for trips such as Shariatpur to Dhaka. But does money carry more value than life? As citizens of this state, how devoid of conscience have we become to let a newborn's life be lost due to abuse of power? Whose responsibility is that?

The father who lost his child has worked for 18 years repairing electric lines in Dhaka's Mirpur. He refused to file a case, knowing he neither had the financial ability nor the willpower left to endure a legal battle. Perhaps the shock was too unbearable for him. The neatly folded baby clothes, prepared with care and hope, will now never be worn. The Rapid Action Battalion arrested one man named Sabuj Dewan in this connection.

In hindsight, there might be nothing wrong with forming an association to protect one's interests. But when such organisations or unions are turned into tools of extortion, pressuring ordinary people in their moments of helplessness, they must be dismantled

simply because I had not purchased all the listed items from his store. Given the urgent need of the medical supplies and their limited availability, the shopkeeper deliberately withheld from selling them. This is the reality of the syndicates that exist in our healthcare system: *profits first, lives come second*.

The health sector in Bangladesh is already sinking into a darkness of corruption and mismanagement. On top of that, when emergency services like ambulances are turned into rackets of extortion, it is like the final nail on the coffin. Ordinary people have been the victims of this ruthless business for years. The commissions from this exploitation reach everyone—from hospital staff to ward boys. There is no standardised ambulance fare, nor any regulatory policy. Owners and drivers collude to extort helpless patients as they please.

And whenever reforms are attempted, the predictable response is road blockades or strikes—pressuring the government into submission. And once again, it is ordinary people who pay the ultimate price.

If we truly care about life and dignity, the syndicates entrenched around ambulances, hospitals, clinics, and even hospital beds must be uprooted. Because this is not just about services, this is about our very survival. Reform begins with the government fixing clear, transparent ambulance fares based on distance, and enforcing them with zero tolerance. Anyone who violates the rule should lose their licence for life, and owners who exploit patients should be permanently barred from running transport businesses.

Additionally, a 24/7 national hotline must be introduced so families can report such abuse in real time. The state itself must expand affordable ambulance services by buying more vehicles, ensuring coverage across all areas and at all hours. Finally, hospitals must come under independent monitoring so that no syndicate can hold lives hostage again. Because unless these steps are taken now, another family will bury their child, another newborn will be denied the right to live, and another life will be stolen by greed.

This is about survival, not convenience. Every delay, every inflated fare, every denial of service is a question of life and death. And until these syndicates are crushed, ordinary people will continue to be held hostage in their most vulnerable moments.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Narrows down

7 Miles off

11 Slanted type

12 Lion's pride

13 One of the Gorgons

14 Daring

15 National park in Alaska

17 Casual eatery

20 Ship of 1492

23 "Not - dare!"

24 Illusory sights

26 Stir fry pan

27 Commotion

28 Solid wood

29 Newspaper issue

31 Purpose

32 Kidney-related

33 Meaty dish

34 Sleeve insert

37 Steel ingredient

39 Twin of Artemis

43 Clumsy oaf

44 Detected

45 "Why don't we!"

46 Like ranked

players

DOWN

1 Director Burton

2 Had something

3 Knee protector

4 Steer clear of

5 Ascend

6 Checkout act

7 Aviator Earhart

8 Slowly disappearing

9 With 41-Down, "Life of Pi" director

10 Spanish king

16 Kitchen wear

17 Shrink in fear

18 Battery end

19 Successfully

misleading

21 Make sport of

22 Crooked

24 Posts

25 Groom's answer

30 Heckles

33 Go piece

35 Lip

36 Dueling weapon

37 Suffering

38 Sturgeon eggs

40 Hallucinatory drug

41 See 9-Down

42 Bizarre

SATURDAY'S ANSWERS



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