

The Daily Star

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Water-stressed Barind, a cautionary tale for the world

Financing must for climate-resilient water management

The decline of groundwater in the Barind rice-growing region and its impact on marginal farmers, as reported in this daily, is a lesson in how the environment, the economy, and human desperation are inextricably linked. The report comes as world leaders fly into the Brazilian city of Belém for the COP30 climate summit, to discuss and agree on a global path on carbon reduction, climate adaptation, and finance. Against this backdrop, the plight of farmers in the Barind region is a microcosm of the convergent crises of climate change and resource management.

The Rajshahi region, once known as a comparatively barren area, was transformed into the "rice bowl" of Bangladesh by a technological miracle: the deep tubewell. Since the 1990s, the authorities have enabled farmers to tap groundwater, cultivating three crops a year and banishing the spectre of famine. But this region is now water-stressed, its groundwater table in freefall. What appears at first glance to be a lush landscape of crops and fruit orchards is an illusion sustained "at the cost of groundwater." The very solution of the past has sown the seeds of the present crisis.

This crisis is twofold. The first element is a changing climate. A study by the Bangladesh Meteorological Department reveals that rainfall in Rajshahi is declining by 54mm per decade, while temperatures are rising at the country's steepest rate: 0.5 degrees Celsius per decade. The monsoon, the lifeblood of traditional agriculture, is becoming less reliable, replaced by torrential downpours that the hard clay of the Barind region cannot absorb. This disrupts not only groundwater recharge but also the delicate balance of agriculture. The second element is the overexploitation of a finite resource. As farmers are forced to dig ever deeper—from 30 feet a decade ago to 80 feet today—they are just mining precious water, an unsustainable practice.

The story of Rajshahi is a cautionary tale for Bangladesh and, indeed, the rest of the world. It demonstrates that development models built on the intensive use of a single resource are perilously fragile in the face of climate change. Although the government is preparing guidelines to limit the use of water in the area, such reactionary measures will not do much to address the crisis in the long run. Therefore, the lesson for the delegates in Belém is that the agenda cannot be neatly divided into silos of "carbon reduction," "adaptation," and "finance." Rajshahi shows they are one and the same. Financing must be directed not just at clean energy, but at climate-resilient water management and agriculture. The silent killer of climate change does not announce itself with a cataclysm, but with a creeping drought, a falling water table, and the quiet despair of a farmer staring at his sterile field.

Uphold street children's rights

Govt must ensure their education, safety and well-being

In Bangladesh, around 34 lakh children live on the streets without parental care. However, their suffering is often overlooked by the state and policymakers. These children face deprivation and abuse, lack access to education and healthcare, and are even excluded from social protection systems due to state apathy. Against this backdrop, it is encouraging to hear from a group of former street children who were rescued and rehabilitated by the non-government organisation LEEDO. Fifteen of them recently joined a discussion, asking important questions about their safety, dignity, and future.

As members of LEEDO's "Young Journalist Changemaker" group, the children asked questions that exposed the deep, systemic neglect shaping the lives of those on the streets. One asked whether there is any legal remedy if a street child is harassed by police, another questioned the use of children in political programmes, and others raised concerns about the lack of rescue services and the poor enforcement of child protection laws. The responses they received from policymakers, lawyers, and rights activists were equally revealing. While a child helpline (1098) exists in the country, it is limited to divisional cities; child protection laws and agencies are in place, but implementation is inconsistent. The same goes for legal aid: despite its availability, most children cannot access it.

Although street children belong to the most vulnerable section of society, the state has never made their education and well-being a priority, which is most unfortunate. A recent survey by Caritas Bangladesh found that nearly 94 percent of street children remain excluded from government safety-net schemes. Most of them lack the identification documents needed to access education or healthcare. Another report by this daily revealed that sexual abuse is a daily reality for many of these children, particularly girls. Several other studies also paint a horrific picture of their vulnerability.

We, therefore, urge the government to act urgently to extend the child helpline to every upazila, register street children, integrate them into education and social services, and strictly prohibit their exploitation in politics or labour. A comprehensive, well-funded child protection system with adequate rehabilitation facilities is essential to bring all street children under state care. Society, too, bears a responsibility to stand by these children, as organisations like LEEDO have done. If non-government organisations can reshape the lives of street children, the government, with far more resources and reach, should be able to ensure every child in the country grows up in a safe and caring environment. By ensuring the constitutional rights and dignity of street children, we can transform them into capable, empowered individuals who will contribute meaningfully to the country's social and economic progress.

What the enforced disappearance commission report failed to address



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The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, in its report, substantiated prima facie evidence of torture in 253 cases of enforced disappearances (Eds) and established compelling evidence of gross human rights violations committed by law enforcement agencies (LEAs). However, the commission appeared to have trapped itself in the pursuit of punishing individual perpetrators rather than holding the state accountable or recommending effective remedies for the sufferings of the victims in these cases.

The report, the first of its kind, reveals that out of 1,676 complaints received, 253 cases met the definitional threshold of Eds under international law, with supporting evidence such as general diaries, criminal complaints, and media reports. The commission confirmed that the victims named in these complaints had been in state custody, that LEAs had filed false criminal cases against them when some of them reappeared, and that these individuals are now alive, with many having testified about their detention and mistreatment.

Despite acknowledging the existence of such evidence, the commission remained focused on the absence of domestic legal provisions criminalising Eds. It recommended enacting a new penal statute, which primarily looks to punish individual perpetrators and does little to ensure accountability of the state and its agencies for gross human rights violations. The commission further advocates for the utilisation of the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973, and the Army Act, 1952, as available legal frameworks, even though sufficient constitutional and statutory mechanisms for redress already exist under the Constitution of Bangladesh and the National Human Rights Commission Act (NHRC), 2009.

By narrowing its scope to criminalisation, the commission fails to acknowledge the broader principle of state accountability, overlooking reparations, public apologies, and guarantees of non-repetition to which victims are entitled under international human rights law, our constitution, and the NHRC law. This limited approach risks reducing the commission's crucial work to a purely procedural exercise, detached from the lived realities of victims and from the interim and immediate remedies they require. Although the commission discusses at length the constitutional protection of the right to life, it remains conspicuously

silent on possible constitutional recommendations for remedial and preventive frameworks, areas that are not contingent upon statutory criminal measures.

Developing international and domestic human rights jurisprudence indicates that criminal accountability, although necessary, should not be the sole avenue of justice, particularly in systems where prosecutions may take

independent of any statutory provision.

The commission's own findings, based on documentary evidence and victims' testimonies confirming their detention in state custody, meet the civil standard of proof, namely the balance of probabilities, which is sufficient to establish state responsibility for gross human rights violations. Yet, the commission made no recommendations urging the government or relevant ministries to provide compensation or guarantees of non-recurrence.

Besides, it failed to recognise that the absence of enabling legislation may itself constitute a human rights violation, thereby warranting judicial and quasi-judicial intervention. Moreover, the commission appears to have overlooked several articles of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance,

by BSF in Jammu & Kashmir (2010). Across these decisions and interventions, both the Supreme Court and the Indian NHRC have consistently held that victims of gross human rights violations must, in appropriate cases, receive compensation and other remedial protections from the state, irrespective of, and in addition to, any criminal proceedings. They have also emphasised the need to establish mechanisms that prevent the recurrence of similar violations in the future.

In contrast, Bangladesh's enforced disappearance commission's recommendations reflect an inadequate institutional understanding of how human rights protection can operate through existing constitutional and quasi-judicial mechanisms. It neither addressed the evidentiary value of its



The commission's report mostly focused on the punishment of perpetrators, not ensuring remedies, prevention, and guarantees of non-repetition of the crime.

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years, if not decades. The state, as both violator and protector of rights, bears an immediate duty to provide remedies and preventive safeguards that operate independently of criminal proceedings.

The commission could have referred the 253 substantiated complaints to the NHRC, which possesses quasi-judicial authority to issue show-cause notices to the government and to recommend appropriate remedies. Alternatively, it might have submitted its findings to the High Court Division seeking the issuance of a rule nisi against the state, or facilitated the NHRC or civil society organisations in representing the victims on the basis of its prima facie evidence. Such measures would be consistent with precedents, such as *Nurul Amin and Others v Government* (2015), in which the Appellate Division affirmed citizens' constitutional right to compensation for loss of life and liberty resulting from a breach of public duty,

which require state parties to ensure remedies, prevention, and guarantees of non-repetition, obligations that extend well beyond the confines of criminal law.

Comparative experience from India shows how both the judiciary and its NHRC have adopted complementary approaches to address disappearances and torture. The Indian Supreme Court, in *Extra Judicial Execution Victim Families Association v Union of India* (2017) and *Union of India v Luthukla (SMT) and Others* (1999), recognised state accountability and ordered compensation for victims' families with prima facie evidence. The Indian NHRC has likewise ensured interim financial relief and recommended preventive measures in numerous cases, including the disappearance of Tayab Ali by paramilitary force (1999-2000), the killing of two civilians by India Border Security Force (BSF) in Rajasthan (2000-2001), and the killing of a 16-year-old

own report nor clarified who may rely on its findings in judicial or quasi-judicial proceedings.

Nonetheless, the report remains a milestone in documenting serious human rights violations in Bangladesh, acknowledging that "enforced disappearances are among the gravest violations of human rights, constituting crimes against humanity. When the state itself is complicit in such crimes, it not only erodes trust in public institutions but also entrenches a climate of fear." Yet, its recommendations stop short of addressing how that erosion of trust might be repaired realistically. This way, it has missed a crucial opportunity to strengthen the nation's human rights architecture that could ensure justice for victims, accountability for violations, and guarantees of non-repetition beyond the narrow lens of criminalisation.

It is time for Bangladesh to move past the politics of violence



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In a year that was meant to mark a new phase of political stability under the interim government, Bangladesh finds itself revisiting old ghosts. The latest report by the Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) paints a grim portrait of our political landscape: 160 people killed and more than 8,000 injured in 1,047 incidents of political violence over just 13 months, between September 2024 and September 2025.

The figures reveal a pattern all too familiar to Bangladeshis. Of those killed, 104 were affiliated with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and 38 with the Awami League (AL). Others belonged to smaller parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami and the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF). Even more troubling, intra-party clashes claimed 88 lives. The violence reflects deep fissures within the parties where internal loyalty contests often turn fatal.

The persistent and almost predictable tragedy portrayed in the HRSS report notes a steady climb in political deaths: 82 in 2021, 92 in 2022, 96 in 2023, and 160 between September 2024 and September 2025. These numbers are not just statistics; they are signposts of a political culture

that has grown desensitised to violence.

For decades, political dialogues have been replaced by hostility. Rival parties treat political competition as warfare, where victory is measured not by fair votes or vision, but by the dominance one can impose on the streets. Elections, protests, and policy disputes frequently spill into pitched battles, while the space for reasoned debate continues to shrink.

The most unsettling aspect is how it has been normalised. Violence is now seen not as a breakdown of politics, but as its active, to some extent, only instrument. Party operatives are mobilised as foot soldiers, and young supporters are taught that confrontation is proof of loyalty. From city streets to university campuses, the language of political engagement has been replaced by the rhetoric of aggression.

This normalisation thrives in a context of impunity. When institutions tasked with upholding justice appear politically biased and aligned, accountability becomes selective and violence becomes cyclical and pervasive. Perpetrators, emboldened by political protection, act without fear

of consequence, while victims' families are left to navigate a system that offers neither recognition nor redress. The real toll of political violence is not just physical; it is psychological and moral. It corrodes public trust, breeds cynicism, and teaches citizens that power is born from intimidation, not integrity. Intra-party clashes, which claimed dozens of lives last year, are telling reminders that political patronage and personal ambition now outweigh ideology or principle.

The state, too, bears responsibility. Law enforcement often responds reactively rather than preventively, and their perceived partisanship only fuels mistrust. Without institutional neutrality, violence fills the void that governance leaves behind.

Ending this entrenched culture of violence demands more than temporary calm before the next election; it requires a structural and moral reset. Let's start with political responsibility, where party leaders must publicly commit to zero tolerance for violence and back it with disciplinary action. Rhetorical condemnation is no substitute for internal reform. Institutional nonchalance and the act of witnessing violence while actively denying it must come to an end. The police and judiciary must act with transparency and impartiality. Depoliticising law enforcement is crucial to restoring public confidence. Independent oversight is also critical; engaging civil society groups like HRSS should be strengthened, not sidelined. Particularly, an independent national observatory on political violence

could document incidents, track accountability, and recommend legal action in this case. Civic education and youth engagement should be viewed as a necessary tool to combat these malpractices. The country's youth, often used as instruments of violence, should instead be empowered through civic education, dialogue platforms, and community service programmes. Last but not least, government-supported compensation and rehabilitation schemes for victims and their families would send a powerful message.

Bangladesh cannot afford to treat these numbers as routine collateral damage of politics. Political violence is not an inevitable by-product of democracy; it is its undoing. The measure of a mature democracy lies not in the noise of rallies, but in the civility of disagreement. The HRSS report should thus serve as a national mirror. It reflects not just the brutality of our streets, but the poverty of our political imagination. For all our economic and social progress, we continue to lag in the most fundamental metric of modern statehood, the ability to resolve disputes and differences peacefully.

As Bangladesh looks towards future elections and leadership transitions, we must decide if we want to remain captive to a culture where one's party flag determines one's safety, or we will choose the path of restraint, reform, and respect for life. True political strength does not emerge from fear or force; it emanates from the courage to listen, compromise, and lead without bloodshed. Bangladesh longs for a political era that heals, not leaves scars.