

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Two custodial deaths in a single day!

Govt must ensure safety of detainees, punish errant police officers

It is deeply disturbing that two men died in the custody of the Detective Branch (DB) of police on Friday in two separate incidents. In both cases, the families of the deceased have alleged that they were tortured to death. It is quite telling that what was quite common during the tenure of an authoritarian regime is still occurring, suggesting that the old, repressive practices of custodial torture have very much remained in place. Just imagine, there have been 45 custodial deaths in the country between August 2024 and October 2025, as per data from Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK).

In one of the cases cited above, 40-year-old Moktar Hossain was arrested in connection with the killing of a Jubo Dal leader in Pallabi, Dhaka. A report by this daily says that DB officers raided a location to arrest him on Thursday. Police claimed that Moktar tried to flee and was caught and beaten by local residents. They further claimed Moktar fell ill at around 1:30am on Friday and was then taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) for treatment before being discharged and returned to custody. At around 10am, officers said they found him unresponsive when they called him to eat and took him back to DMCH, where he was declared dead. Was he really well enough after treatment to be taken back to the DB office? What happened between the time he was returned to custody and the time he was found unresponsive?

The same day, another suspect in a murder case, Md Shahadat Hossain—an auto-rickshaw driver who was arrested the day before—“fell ill” and died at the Sirajganj General Hospital. Shahadat’s brother has alleged he was beaten to death while in custody, and that the police had demanded Tk 5 lakh for his release.

We may recall that in late January this year, the chief adviser strongly condemned any form of custodial torture and extrajudicial killing, ordering an urgent investigation into the death of Jubo Dal leader Tohidul Islam who died after being arrested by the joint forces. Yet despite the chief adviser’s condemnation, custodial torture and deaths have continued. The Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013 remains a law on paper only. So far, perpetrators have been punished in only one case of custodial death, that too back in 2020.

Reportedly, the government has finalised a draft ordinance to form an independent police commission. This aims to ensure accountability within the force and to make it fair, transparent, and free from politicisation. The commission would investigate citizens’ complaints against police members and take necessary action. But will it also monitor police actions when a suspect is detained or interrogated? This must be part of any meaningful police reform. Until the commission is formed, it remains the responsibility of those in charge to ensure the safety of anyone held in custody, regardless of what crime they are accused of. We expect fair probes into these deaths, with the responsible officers brought to book.

A looming disaster in Chattogram

Quake resilience of buildings must be ensured

The latest revelations about Chattogram’s earthquake vulnerability should alarm city authorities and policymakers alike. While the city’s location makes it vulnerable to severe earthquakes, unplanned urbanisation, widespread building code violations, and years of weak monitoring and regulatory negligence have added to the risks. Experts warn that at least 70 percent of the city’s multi-storey buildings could collapse if a major quake of magnitude 7 or higher strikes. Last Friday’s 5.7-magnitude tremor, during which a previously tilted six-storey building in Mansurabad leaned further towards a neighbouring structure, clearly showed how precarious the situation has become.

Rapid and unplanned growth has turned Chattogram city into a concrete jungle where safety is often ignored. According to the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA), the city has around 4.11 lakh buildings of varying heights, and many taller structures were built in violation of building codes. In coastal areas like Chattogram, building materials deteriorate faster, while narrow roads would make rescue operations extremely difficult during an earthquake. Oversight is also weak, and many buildings are constructed without proper expert supervision. Additionally, unchecked groundwater extraction has weakened the soil beneath the high rises. If these issues persist, a strong earthquake could cause large-scale damage and casualties.

However, the lack of preparedness among city authorities is deeply worrying. Reportedly, many buildings, which were damaged and tilted during previous earthquakes, still stand today. CDA says that it can only identify unsafe buildings and that demolition work falls under the Chattogram City Corporation (CCC). If so, why has the CCC not demolished these risky buildings yet? This reflects poor coordination among city authorities. CDA’s lack of a structural and design cell and severe manpower shortages worsen the problem.

To reduce earthquake risks in Chattogram, authorities must take immediate and coordinated action. CDA needs to increase its manpower to properly monitor construction practices and stop irregularities. Vulnerable buildings should be identified and strengthened using modern retrofitting methods, while very old and unsafe structures should be demolished without delay. Residents must follow building codes strictly when constructing new buildings. Additionally, groundwater extraction should be reduced to protect the soil’s stability. Government agencies must also enforce building code compliance and ensure that new structures include proper emergency entry and exit routes. While building fully earthquake-proof structures may be costly, making them earthquake-tolerant can significantly reduce casualties in future disasters.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Tazreen fire kills workers



On this day in 2022, a blaze killed at least 117 workers and injured more than 150 workers at Tazreen Fashions, located in Nishchintipur of Ashulia.

Human rights abuses persist under interim government



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There was widespread hope that, after the mass uprising, Bangladesh would finally see an end to extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, unlawful detention, and other serious human rights violations. The interim government set up a commission to investigate cases of enforced disappearance—a long-awaited step. Sadly, despite this gesture, extrajudicial killings, custodial deaths, mob violence and other forms of abuse have continued during its tenure. This is deeply disappointing.

According to human rights group Odhakar, 40 people have been victims of extrajudicial killings in the 14 months since the interim government assumed responsibility. Among them, 19 were shot dead, 14 died due to torture, and seven were beaten to death. Allegations have surfaced implicating the police, joint forces, and the army. What is particularly noteworthy is that, although the interim government has initiated investigations into enforced disappearances, no comparable initiative has been taken to investigate or prosecute extrajudicial killings and so-called “crossfires.”

The persistence of such killings under the interim government demonstrates that little has changed within the country’s law-enforcement agencies beyond the reshuffling of individuals. Without structural reform of the police, intelligence bodies, and other security forces, even basic human rights cannot be ensured. The UN Human Rights Office had recommended dissolving the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), restricting the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) to border-protection duties, and limiting DGF strictly to military intelligence. But the interim government changed only the uniform, not the institutions—and the result is visible in the continuing rights violations.

Although the interim government has repeatedly stated that it opposes mob violence, its actions have not reflected a serious commitment. According to the human rights organisation Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 220 people were killed in mob violence between August 2024 and September 2025. Many of these incidents were driven by personal, group, or business interests. If the government had ensured swift prosecution and exemplary punishment of the perpetrators, it would have sent a strong message that mob justice would not be tolerated.

Instead, arrest rates remain extremely low.

Prothom Alo’s investigation into 46 mob violence incidents that killed 67 people over 13 months shows how weak the enforcement response has been. Of the 46 incidents, cases were filed in 36, while no cases were filed in 10. In the incidents where cases were filed, there were over 9,000 accused, including unidentified individuals. Among these, 114 people were arrested in 27 cases, resulting in an arrest rate of just 1.27 per cent. Charge sheets have been

detainees have died in custody.

Under the guise of KNF suppression, the military has imposed sweeping restrictions on the daily lives of the Bawm people. They require written permission from army camps to transport crops or travel outside the district. For example, according to an investigation by the Netra News, a Bawm resident from Paitong Para in Ruma upazila had to submit a formal, deferential written request to move 40 maunds of turmeric to market. Another resident needed military approval to travel to Dhaka for dental treatment.

By any measure, such blanket restrictions on civilians amount to serious violations of human rights and civil liberties. Collective punishment of an entire ethnic community is characteristic of occupying powers, not of a sovereign state’s treatment of its own people. That such practices continue reflects the grim state of human rights in Bangladesh.

Mancha 71. Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in a statement issued on October 28, 2025, also condemned the arrests, including that of journalist Monjurul Alam (Panna), calling it evidence of the interim government’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

Journalist Monjurul Alam was recently released on bail after spending more than two months in jail. Meanwhile, DB police, without a warrant, forcibly picked up a journalist and a businessman from their home late at night. Although the journalist was released after 10 hours, the incident once again revealed that law enforcement behaviour has not changed. In Sylhet, police detained 22 members of Socialist Party of Bangladesh (SPB) from the party’s city office and another 16 activists of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) from various locations for protesting the eviction of battery-run rickshaws. The way Sylhet Metropolitan Police picked



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

submitted in only six cases.

Meanwhile, the military’s crackdown on the Bawm ethnic community in Bandarban—initiated during the previous Awami League government under the pretext of suppressing the Kuki Chin National Front (KNF)—has continued unabated under the interim government. Instead of targeting an armed group, the entire Bawm population appears to have been treated as collectively suspect, subjected to punitive restrictions.

According to Amnesty International, at least 126 Bawm civilians—including 30 women and children—were arrested without specific charges during April–May 2024 under the previous government. Over a year later, during the interim administration, some have obtained bail while others remain detained. Many are physically ill and psychologically distressed. Three Bawm

The human rights violations during the interim regime have drawn international attention as well. Human Rights Watch (HRW) in a statement issued on October 8, 2025, accused that thousands had been arrested under the interim government, many on dubious murder allegations, while scores were being held under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009. Between August 2024 and October 2025, there have been 45 custodial deaths, as per ASK data. Even two men died in police custody as recently as this Friday, with the families alleging torture in both cases. Many others also alleged mistreatment in custody, including lack of access to medical care. HRW specifically condemned the arrest of 16 individuals, including journalists and academics, who were detained under the anti-terrorism law on August 28 during a discussion organised by

up SPB and CPB activists relying merely on suspicion and invoking excuses such as “third-party instigation” and “creating instability” strongly echoes the repression tactics used by previous authoritarian governments to suppress dissent. In fact, throughout the interim government’s tenure, police have often acted aggressively in suppressing protests by workers, teachers and other professional groups.

Taken together, the persistence of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, and human rights abuses shows that the expectations raised after the mass uprising have not been fulfilled. With elections approaching and only a few months left for the interim government, it remains to be seen whether any meaningful improvement will occur or whether this troubling continuity will become further entrenched.

Can the draft regulation make the microfinance sector stronger?



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For many years, leading microfinance institutions (MFIs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been managed through their respective boards of directors. These boards, usually comprising five to ten members, have long operated with relative autonomy. However, the government is now preparing to introduce a new regulation requiring every medium and large MFIs to include two independent directors on their boards, which is a significant shift in the governance structure of the microfinance sector.

Although the inclusion of independent directors has long been common in banks and other financial institutions, this will be the first such initiative in this industry. The Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA), a government body under the Ministry of Finance, has reportedly almost finalised the draft of this regulation. The proposed provision aims to enhance transparency, strengthen MRA’s supervisory authority, and establish greater discipline in the sector.

According to the draft, only institutions with outstanding loan portfolios exceeding Tk 50 crore will be required to appoint independent

directors. It is estimated that about 100 institutions in Bangladesh will fall under this category. Each will propose four candidates, from which the MRA will approve two. To prevent conflicts of interest, close relatives of existing board members will not be eligible. Independent directors must be between 35 and 70 years old, possess at least 10 years of senior-level experience in a government or autonomous body, and preferably have a financial background. Furthermore, no individual may serve as an independent director in more than one MFI at a time.

While the MRA asserts that the initiative will promote good governance and help curb nepotism, critics warn that it could open the door to political influence and excessive control. Many fear a repeat of the bureaucratic culture and political appointments that have plagued state-owned banks, leading to weak governance and corruption. Associations within the microfinance sector argue that such regulation could undermine the independent, community-driven model that has made Bangladesh’s microfinance system a global example of financial inclusion.

The MRA, however, has clarified that the process will remain institution-

driven: MFIs will nominate candidates, and the authority will ensure compliance and transparency. Alongside this move, the MRA has also proposed new requirements for appointing chief executive officers (CEOs) or executive directors. Institutions must obtain MRA approval within one month of appointing a new CEO, who must be between 40 and 65 years old, have at least 15 years of relevant experience, including five in a managerial role, and hold a postgraduate degree. The CEO’s tenure will be five years, renewable upon reappointment.

While the government’s goal is to enhance accountability, much will depend on effective implementation. The real challenge will be maintaining a balance where oversight is strengthened without compromising the sector’s innovative and autonomous nature.

Across the world, microfinance institutions and similar organisations operate under governance frameworks that ensure both accountability and independence. Typically, boards include executive, non-executive, and independent members with no conflicts of interest. They oversee specialised committees—such as audit, risk, nomination, and remuneration committees—that monitor specific areas of operation. Clear rules define director appointments, tenure, age limits, and reappointments. Day-to-day operations are managed by a CEO or managing director (MD), who reports directly to the board. The clear separation between governance and oversight is a hallmark of strong institutions. Most MFIs are also regulated by a central bank or financial

regulator, which ensures licensing, financial reporting, and compliance.

Comparative studies on MFIs in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Malaysia show that sustainability depends on strong internal audit mechanisms, competent boards, adherence to the rule of law, and independent oversight. These factors are now widely recognised as essential components of sound governance and long-term institutional stability.

In countries with more advanced financial systems, governance structures are even more detailed. The definition of independence is clearer, directors’ tenure limits are set, and each committee must include at least one independent member. To promote transparency, institutions must disclose directors’ qualifications, meeting attendance, and remuneration. In many organisations, the roles of CEO and board chair are deliberately separated to prevent concentration of power. Boards are also subject to regular performance evaluations, often conducted by external reviewers. Strong regulatory supervision and capital adequacy requirements further reinforce financial stability and public confidence.

Ultimately, Bangladesh’s proposed reforms align with international best practices, but their success will depend on fair, consistent implementation. Genuine good governance will be achieved only when these reforms enhance transparency, accountability, and credibility, while preserving the independence and community-based spirit that have long made Bangladesh’s microfinance sector a global model for inclusive finance.