

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Martyred intellectuals are our guiding lights

We must uphold intellectual freedom to honour their sacrifice

December 14 reminds us of the great sacrifices our intellectuals made for the nation's freedom. On this day in 1971, many of the brightest minds of the country—academics, journalists, doctors, writers, and artists—were systematically targeted and killed by the Pakistani army with the help of local collaborators. These murders were not random acts of violence; they were a calculated attempt to paralyse a nation at its birth. By eliminating the intellectuals who could guide, inspire, and critique, the perpetrators sought to destroy the conscience of an emerging nation.

Intellectuals serve as a society's moral compass. They hold power accountable, challenge injustice, and inspire change. Understanding their importance, Pakistan targeted these intellectuals from the very beginning of our Liberation War. Their loss has indeed left an irreplaceable void in the intellectual sphere of the country. Today, as we reflect on their sacrifice, it is sad to see that freedom of expression in our society still remains fragile and dissent is often suppressed. The struggle for truth and critical thought continues. This reminds us that honouring the martyred intellectuals is not only about remembering the past but also defending their values in the present.

During the period of Pakistani oppression, our writers, journalists, artists, and intellectuals stood as the nation's conscience, bravely opposing injustice. With their knowledge and wisdom, they guided the nation. From the night of March 25 up until the final hours of the war, we lost eminent intellectuals, including Professor Govinda Chandra Dev, Munier Choudhury, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Dr Mofazzal Haider Choudhury, Rashidul Hasan, Selina Parvin, Anwar Pasha, Dr Mohammed Fazle Rabbee, Dr Alim Chowdhury and others. The mass killing of so many intellectuals in such a brief period is rare in world history.

The horror of the events of 1971 is evident in accounts from across the country. In Saidpur, for instance, the Pakistani army and local collaborators systematically abducted, tortured, and executed the town's leading intellectuals between March and June 1971, months before the December 14 massacre. Victims included physicians, educators, businessmen, and cultural figures, who were brutally held in cantonments and later executed at Balarkhail. Survivors and eyewitnesses describe the coordinated nature of the killings and the extreme suffering endured by those taken. Such accounts remind us of the calculated cruelty inflicted upon the nation's brightest minds and the depth of their sacrifice.

Yet, even 54 years after independence, we have yet to complete the task of properly commemorating these heroes. Efforts to compile a comprehensive list of martyred intellectuals have remained incomplete. While several gazettes and research works have recorded hundreds of names, a definitive and verified list still does not exist. Ensuring transparency and completeness in documenting their contributions is our moral obligation.

Only by fostering a society founded on justice, equality, human dignity and intellectual freedom and one that holds power accountable, can we realise the cherished dreams of our martyred intellectuals.

No bureaucratic control of NHRC

This was the main cause of past failures

We demand that the government withdraw the current amended version of the ordinance of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), made public on December 8, 2025. The reason is most obvious. The earlier version, published as a gazette on November 9, was the result of wide-ranging stakeholders' discussions that included ones held in several districts with UNDP's assistance. In fact, not too many ordinances were produced with such public participation.

Without any discussion with the original participants, an amended version of the gazette was published that included two vital changes, one dealing with the setting up of a body to look into cases of torture, which we welcome, and the second, the inclusion of the cabinet secretary as a member of the committee that will select the new NHRC, which we strongly oppose. Through this inclusion, the very beginning of setting up the NHRC is weakened. Bureaucratic control of this vital body—intended to strengthen the fundamental rights of individuals—prevented it from delivering meaningful improvements to the overall human rights situation. Past NHRCs repeatedly failed to act when intervention was most needed, largely because bureaucrats seldom, if ever, permitted decisive action, especially in cases involving government institutions and officials. In fact, the NHRC's operational culture has been dominated by behind-the-scenes string-pulling bureaucracy.

It is an undeniable fact that most human rights violations occur because of government actions, especially when it tries to suppress dissent. The pattern is very simple. Since the government suppresses the opposition and victimises its leaders and activists through bureaucratic institutions, including the police, the intelligence agencies and government functionaries, the administration is never comfortable about the investigation of these rights violations. We consider the inclusion of the cabinet secretary in the selection committee of the NHRC to be a direct threat to its independent functioning. The Cabinet Division is the epicentre of bureaucracy and the main executive office of the council of ministers. As its head, the cabinet secretary has the power to greatly influence the functioning of any institution, especially those set up to hold the government—especially bureaucracy—accountable.

One of the main complaints against the past regime was its severe violations of human rights. The instances of forced disappearances, extra-judicial killings and the phenomenon of "Aynaghar" would never have occurred, or at least their functioning could have been stopped if the NHRC performed its duties. We in the media repeatedly brought out these facts, wrote editorials urging the NHRC to act, yet the commissioners never did. The area where the interim government has a chance to make a true difference from the past is to guarantee the independence of the NHRC, for which bureaucratic control or interference must totally stop.

Custodial torture remains business as usual



Monorom Polok
is a member of the editorial team
at The Daily Star.

MONOROM POLOK

In a just society with a properly functioning justice system, law enforcement is tasked with enforcing established laws to safeguard citizens and hold those who violate them accountable, without infringing on their rights. In Bangladesh, however, there is an anomaly. Our law enforcement, in the name of justice and the blanket protection granted under their uniform, continues to violate the rights of those they are supposed to bring to justice—the suspects and the accused. While custodial torture is not new in Bangladesh or even in South Asia, we must sincerely confront this predicament if we are to become a civil and just nation.

On November 21, 2025, two men died in police custody on the same day. Their deaths followed a familiar and chilling script: a person taken in alive, declared "ill" or "unresponsive," and then returned to the family as a dead body. Their families insist they were tortured; the police insist they were

Our constitution repeats these same promises in even clearer language. Article 35(5) outright prohibits torture and cruel, degrading or inhuman treatment. Articles 33, 27, 31 and 32 guarantee rights, such as the right to counsel, protection from arbitrary arrest, equality before the law, and the right to life and liberty. These are not abstract clauses; they are supposed to prevent custodial violence. They are what a frightened person should be able to rely on when police knock on his door at two in the morning.

not. And as always, the responsibility for investigating these deaths rests with the very institution accused of being responsible for them. It is an irrational arrangement. One that prevents truth from ever surfacing.

These incidents are far from isolated. According to a recent Odhikar report, 40 people have been victims of extrajudicial killings in the 14 months since the interim government took office in August 2024. These citizens died under the state's watch under a government that promised



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

accountability. While the chief adviser condemned such killings and ordered an investigation, such declarations rarely lead anywhere. Which leads to the questions: of the 40 custodial deaths that have occurred under this interim government, how many have gone to trial? How many officers have been suspended, let alone prosecuted? The laws are not what hold us back. It is our refusal to hold the police accountable.

It is not that legal proceedings do not move fast in Bangladesh at all. In fact, we have seen what the government can do when it decides to pursue a case with urgency as in the case of Asia—the eight-year-old child raped and murdered earlier this year. Yet, of the 40 citizens whose deaths occurred during the government's own tenure, under its direct responsibility, not a single case has been pursued with similar resolve. The difference: in Asia's case the perpetrator was a civilian while in case of these 40 victims, the suspects are law enforcers. It then leads to an uncomfortable question: is the law not equal for everyone?

The interim government has taken some institutional steps, such as

forming a Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. But even this historic initiative fell short. Of nearly 2,000 complaints the commission received—where law enforcers were often involved—punitive actions have not been taken yet against even a small number of law enforcement officials. Victims' families expected truth and justice served; what they received was hesitation and silence.

Meanwhile, the newly gazetted Police Commission Ordinance, 2025, created with the promise of ushering in accountability, was weakened before it even drew breath. Many who hoped for a bold, independent oversight body now describe it as a toothless tiger. Essential powers were

either trimmed or never included at all. It cannot control recruitment, transfers, or promotions. It cannot direct police operations. All it can do is draft recommendations. The decision to approve the recommendations lies entirely with the government. The Police Commission can receive complaints from the public, offer advice, and make recommendations—but the government is under no obligation to act on any of them. Therefore, the very political structure the commission was meant to provide a buffer against would continue to exercise control over it.

Of course, the laws and formal structures of public institutions were never the primary issue with regard to custodial torture. It is the utter disrespect for the laws and human rights of civilians that enables torture and violence in police custody. Bangladesh has already committed to rejecting torture in all its forms in its constitution, its domestic laws and by signing international conventions. Bangladesh acceded to the UN Convention against Torture (UNCAT) in 1998. Recently, Bangladesh's proposed accession to the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention against Torture

was approved, meaning Bangladesh has pledged to prevent torture, to investigate allegations promptly and impartially, and to ensure victims receive redress and rehabilitation. The UN Committee against Torture has repeatedly raised concerns about widespread torture, disappearances, remand abuses, and extrajudicial killings. Even follow-up reports on these issues were never submitted by Bangladesh. The country is signatory to several other international conventions that prohibit torture, arbitrary detention, and inhumane treatment. Our governments proudly cite these commitments abroad, while failing to uphold them at home.

Our constitution repeats these same promises in even clearer language. Article 35(5) outright prohibits torture and cruel, degrading or inhuman treatment. Articles 33, 27, 31 and 32 guarantee rights, such as the right to counsel, protection from arbitrary arrest, equality before the law, and the right to life and liberty. These are not abstract clauses; they are supposed to prevent custodial violence. They are what a frightened person should be able to rely on when police knock on his door at two in the morning. They are what the families of the two men who died in custody believed they had until the system betrayed them. Even the 2,699 individuals who became victims of extrajudicial killings during the Awami League tenure could have been protected under these clauses if laws and basic rights were respected in Bangladesh.

Our constitutional guarantees, like our international commitments, remain largely aspirational. Together, they should have formed a protective shield around every citizen. Instead, they resemble a list of promises we repeat on global platforms but rarely honour in our police stations, courtrooms, and interrogation rooms. Even the law designed specifically to prevent custodial torture, the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013, exists only on paper. Between 2014 and 2024, only one case filed under this law saw a conviction—only one case in a country where 29 people died in custody just in the last 11 months.

If Bangladesh truly wishes to become a democracy, then torture, death in custody, and state-sanctioned impunity for perpetrators cannot continue. Custodial and extrajudicial deaths cannot remain footnotes. The weakened commissions, the ignored UN recommendations, the hollow constitutional promises—all must change. To move towards justice, we must ensure accountability for torture by law enforcers.

Across the world, I found myself trying to explain the scale of suffering. I often felt frustrated that the discussion turned into an argument about statistics rather than an acknowledgement of the brutality our nation endured, as if the exact figures could decide whether the pain was real.

shortage of facts, but a shortage of attention. And that has consequences for how the world perceives us today.

Some analyses correctly discuss the geopolitical shifts of that era and the decisions made by powerful nations. Those elements are part of the story, but they are not the heart of it. The heart was elsewhere: In refugee camps, where mothers clutched their children, unsure if they had a home to return to. In villages where farmers took up makeshift arms. In classrooms where students exchanged books for barricades. In hidden shelters, where doctors worked through the night with barely any tools.

What pains me most is how invisible

was approved, meaning Bangladesh has pledged to prevent torture, to investigate allegations promptly and impartially, and to ensure victims receive redress and rehabilitation. The UN Committee against Torture has repeatedly raised concerns about widespread torture, disappearances, remand abuses, and extrajudicial killings. Even follow-up reports on these issues were never submitted by Bangladesh. The country is signatory to several other international conventions that prohibit torture, arbitrary detention, and inhumane treatment. Our governments proudly cite these commitments abroad, while failing to uphold them at home.

Our constitution repeats these same promises in even clearer language. Article 35(5) outright prohibits torture and cruel, degrading or inhuman treatment. Articles 33, 27, 31 and 32 guarantee rights, such as the right to counsel, protection from arbitrary arrest, equality before the law, and the right to life and liberty. These are not abstract clauses; they are supposed to prevent custodial violence. They are what a frightened person should be able to rely on when police knock on his door at two in the morning. They are what the families of the two men who died in custody believed they had until the system betrayed them. Even the 2,699 individuals who became victims of extrajudicial killings during the Awami League tenure could have been protected under these clauses if laws and basic rights were respected in Bangladesh.

Our constitutional guarantees, like our international commitments, remain largely aspirational. Together, they should have formed a protective shield around every citizen. Instead, they resemble a list of promises we repeat on global platforms but rarely honour in our police stations, courtrooms, and interrogation rooms. Even the law designed specifically to prevent custodial torture, the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act, 2013, exists only on paper. Between 2014 and 2024, only one case filed under this law saw a conviction—only one case in a country where 29 people died in custody just in the last 11 months.

If Bangladesh truly wishes to become a democracy, then torture, death in custody, and state-sanctioned impunity for perpetrators cannot continue. Custodial and extrajudicial deaths cannot remain footnotes. The weakened commissions, the ignored UN recommendations, the hollow constitutional promises—all must change. To move towards justice, we must ensure accountability for torture by law enforcers.

What pains me most is how invisible

The unfinished story of our liberation



Mamun Rashid,
an economic analyst, is chairman at Financial
Excellence Ltd and former managing partner
of PwC Bangladesh.

MAMUN RASHID

I was caught off guard when someone asked about my memories of the 1971 Liberation War. I was not prepared for the question, nor did I ever imagine speaking publicly about something so deeply personal. For most of my life, I kept those memories tucked away and offered quiet respect to the brave souls of that time—the commanders who led from the front, the uniformed fighters who risked everything, and the countless civilian freedom fighters who came from classrooms, fields, clinics, courtrooms, factories, and homes. I never felt my own story mattered beside theirs. I was only a child. Yet childhood carries its own kind of truth.

My own act of resistance was small. It came in the form of a tiny pebble thrown at a military jeep passing through our town. A second later, I was already underwater in a nearby pond, trembling in fear yet unwilling to let go of whatever courage had pushed me to do it. I was about ten years old. I was naïve, reckless, and almost humorous when I look back. But at the time, it was the only language of defiance I understood. That memory returned to me unexpectedly, carrying with it everything that childhood could not articulate about war, dignity, and the

cost of freedom.

What troubles me most today is how little the world truly knows about our Liberation War. The story of 1971 has never been told internationally with the clarity and seriousness it deserves. The global understanding of that period is scattered, incomplete, and often distorted. During my years working across Africa and Asia, I encountered people who believed the number of casualties in 1971 was exaggerated. Others insisted it was merely a confrontation between regional powers. Some viewed it as an inevitable outcome of long-standing tensions, shaped entirely by intelligence agencies and old rivalries. Very few understood a simple truth—that it was a people's war, not a proxy conflict or an extension of someone else's agenda. It was an uprising of ordinary men and women who refused to live without dignity.

Across the world, I found myself trying to explain the scale of suffering. I often felt frustrated that the discussion turned into an argument about statistics rather than an acknowledgement of the brutality our nation endured, as if the exact figures could decide whether the pain was real.

In recent years, I revisited some

of the literature that attempts to document that period. What struck me most was the lack of rigorous global scholarship on our war. The world has extensive documentation on World War II, Vietnam, Rwanda, and so many other tragedies. Yet the atrocities of 1971 remain underexamined in global academic and historical discourse. There is no

this human story remains beyond our borders. I have spoken to colleagues abroad who had never heard of the massacres of 1971. Most of them knew little of the suffering, even less of the resilience, and almost nothing of the sacrifices that ordinary Bangladeshis made. When films or documentaries talk about the war, they often do so through the perspectives of other nations, shaped by their interests rather than ours. Our voice rarely makes it to global platforms in its authentic, unfiltered form.

Winning the war gave us a nation. Giving that nation's story its rightful place in global memory is a task we have yet to accomplish. The tragedy is that half a century later, the world still struggles to see us clearly, and our suffering is often dismissed as regional, political, or too complicated to grasp. But the truth is simple. A nation paid an unimaginable price to claim its freedom.

Today, when I think about that small pebble I once threw, I no longer see it as a childish impulse. I see it as a symbol of instinctive resistance, the refusal to bow even when one is powerless, and the quiet courage that lives inside millions of Bangladeshis. Our war did not begin with trained armies. It began with ordinary people deciding that they had suffered enough.

If the world still struggles to understand 1971, then it becomes our responsibility to tell the story again and again until it is finally heard. Bangladesh was born from courage—not dramatic, not glamorous, but humble, relentless, and shared across every corner of the country.