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FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Restore NHRC's functionality

Enact a law that ensures its operational and financial independence

For years, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has remained ineffective and powerless, issuing muted statements in response to even the worst human rights violations in the country. With the promulgation of the National Human Rights Commission Ordinance in 2025, there was hope that the new commission would be much more powerful, and bring the state and its security forces to account. That hope became uncertain when the ordinance was repealed and the faulty National Human Rights Commission Act, 2009 was reinstated during the first session of the 13th parliament. This move by the BNP government not only made the commission defunct—with the commissioners appointed under the ordinance during the interim government's tenure now unofficially dismissed—but also raised concerns about the possibility of investigations of human rights violations by state agencies themselves. As pointed out by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture, Dr Alice Edwards, in an interview with *The Daily Star*, under this law, the NHRC cannot "investigate disciplined forces." As a result, state-sanctioned human rights abuses could continue to occur with impunity.

It is largely because of such constraints that the NHRC has never earned the UN-accredited Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions A-status, unlike some of our neighbours. It has consistently failed in terms of displaying political, operational, and financial independence. When the government can influence the selection process of its commissioners, as is the case under the existing 2009 act, institutional independence is inevitably compromised. Revival of the old law thus enhances the risk of partisan appointments. Besides, the 2025 ordinance ensured full financial autonomy for the organisation. Without this, effective functioning in terms of both investigation and compensation becomes difficult, as experienced by past commissions.

The government justified the repeal and reinstatement saying there were flaws in the 2025 ordinance. But it has failed to answer why the ordinance could not be amended and improved instead of being repealed and replaced by a weaker, older law. The law minister, in an interview with this daily last month, said that a new law would be enacted after further scrutiny and verification. Alice Edwards also mentioned similar commitments she had received from the government. However, what remains uncertain is whether a future human rights commission law or an amendment to the 2009 act will ensure full operational and financial independence of the NHRC. Our concerns mirror those of the special rapporteur. The uncertainty surrounding legislation also raises concerns about accountability for any abuses committed during this legal vacuum.

The NHRC was non-functional for 15 months after the fall of the Awami League regime in 2024, as political appointees of the time left their posts. The interim government appointed five commissioners on February 5, 2026. But in less than three months, they too had to leave, although without official notice. In the meantime, according to a Human Rights Support Society report, there have been 39 custodial deaths in the first three months of this year. A defunct NHRC cannot investigate these or any other human rights abuses. Therefore, we urge the government to quickly present a law ensuring the NHRC's independence and restoring its functionality.

Improve health services in the hills

Remote areas must be prioritised in countering measles

The ongoing measles crisis has exposed myriad gaps in our public healthcare infrastructure, especially in the most remote regions. One such case involves Bandarban's Alikadam upazila where, as per a report by this daily, at least five children have died of measles-like symptoms since the beginning of this month. Tens of others have also been suffering severely from similar symptoms. The number of cases is also increasing, with 86 cases reported between April 25 and 30 alone.

Unfortunately, proper medical treatment remains inaccessible for most families in these hilly areas. The affected—most of them children—are being treated either at the upazila health complex or at a temporary medical camp set up at Bidyamoni Government Primary School near the remote Powa Muhuri Doripara area. Some critical cases are referred to Cox's Bazar Medical College Hospital. The temporary camp is being operated by a volunteer team consisting of youth from the Mro community, along with students from various universities and colleges, working jointly with the local administration. However, due to the lack of electricity, only primary care is being provided at the camp, and all patients are being referred directly to the upazila health complex.

Meanwhile, given the recent rainy weather, and with the nearest medical services being miles away and costing thousands of taka, many families are having to stay at home and opt for homemade herbal treatments. Owing to their remote location, health workers rarely visit them to provide routine vaccination. Many of these families are also not fully aware of the seriousness of measles symptoms.

By now, it is an established fact that the measles outbreak has worsened due to vaccination-related missteps by the interim government. However, the outbreak has also exposed our persistently poor preparedness: despite its experience of the Covid pandemic, the health sector still struggles to respond effectively to sudden crises. That many in remote areas are still having to resort to traditional healing practices, or remain generally unaware of the danger of measles, is largely an institutional failure.

It is vital that proper medical treatment is made accessible across the country, both in terms of covering cost and distance. This means not only adding new health facilities and strengthening existing ones, but also deploying temporary health workers to address the measles situation in remote areas. The ongoing vaccination campaign is commendable, especially as it is reaching remote communities, but it is crucial that health services in rural and remote areas are strengthened to treat more severe measles cases, so that no more children die preventable deaths.

Anti-torture laws without real safeguards are not enough



Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury is a former judge of the High Court Division of the Supreme Court, who authored the landmark 16th Amendment judgment. He also served as chairman of the National Human Rights Commission and the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances.

MOYEENUL ISLAM CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh does not suffer from a shortage of solemn words against torture. Article 35(5) of the constitution prohibits torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The country has long been a party to the Convention against Torture, has enacted the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act 2013, acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT), and joined the Convention on Enforced Disappearance. The legal vocabulary is impressive. The institutional reality, however, is not. The state signing such treaties while leaving police stations, prisons, remand rooms, and intelligence cells effectively unmonitored has not defeated torture; it has only moved it from the text of law to the shadows of power.

The recent National Consultation on the Prevention of Torture and the Implementation held in Dhaka on April 25-26 should, therefore, be read less as a ceremonial event and more as an indictment of our unfinished statehood. The presence of UN Special Rapporteur Alice Jill Edwards in Dhaka underlined an uncomfortable truth: Bangladesh's problem is not merely the occasional excess of individual officers. It is a system in which coercion has too often been treated as an investigative method, a disciplinary shortcut, a tool of political control, and a populist substitute for justice.

Torture persists because it serves bureaucratic convenience. When investigators are poorly trained, under resourced, exposed to political pressure, and judged by confessions extracted rather than by evidence they uncover, violence becomes administratively rational. It is quicker to beat a statement out of a suspect than to reconstruct a crime from witnesses, forensic evidence, surveillance records, and lawful questioning. It is easier to frighten a family into silence than to defend a case in court. It is more convenient to call a custodial death an "accident", "illness", or "suicide" than to admit that the state has failed to protect the life and dignity of those in its custody.

This is why the 2013 Act, despite its moral force, has remained painfully underused. The first known conviction under the law in the Ishtiaque Hossain

Jonny case was rightly celebrated. Still, the fact that this case was exceptional even after years of custodial torture allegations exposes the weakness of the surrounding architecture. A torture law within the same institutional culture it seeks to restrain cannot be expected to transform that culture. Without independent investigation, witness protection, medical documentation, judicial vigilance and protection against reprisals, the law risks becoming a monument to good intentions rather than an instrument of accountability.



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

OPCAT changes the question. It is not satisfied with punishment after abuse. It demands prevention. That means Bangladesh must establish a national preventive mechanism which will have the authority, resources and independence to enter all places where people are deprived of liberty, without prior notice and without fear of obstruction. Such places must include police stations, prisons, remand rooms, immigration detention, psychiatric institutions, juvenile facilities, and any informal spaces used by intelligence or security agencies. A preventive mechanism that cannot reach the most dangerous rooms will be nothing more than a public relations office.

Of course, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) cannot perform this task unless it is rebuilt. Bangladesh's continued B status in the GANHRI accreditation system is not a technical embarrassment; it is an indication that the commission

lacked the independence, appointment process, budgetary control, and investigative powers expected of a credible national institution. A commission that cannot independently investigate allegations against law enforcement agencies cannot meaningfully protect people from their abuse. The government should stop treating A status as an international image problem and start treating it as a domestic rule of law problem.

No reform will be credible if it avoids the legacy of special forces and political policing. Bangladesh has repeatedly learned that elite units created in the name of public security can become machinery for fear when command responsibility, transparent oversight and prosecutorial independence are absent. Rebranding an abusive institution is not reform. Dissolution without accountability is not reform either. The test is whether files are opened, commanders questioned,

and towards rapport-based, evidence-based interviewing. This is not softness towards crime. It is professionalism. Torture produces false confessions, contaminates evidence, destroys public trust and allows real offenders to escape behind cases built on fear. Proper interviewing, forensic capacity, audio-visual recording of interrogation, prompt access to counsel, medical examination after arrest, notification to family and early judicial oversight are not luxuries; they are the infrastructure of justice.

Judges have a central role here. Every remand order should be treated as a site of constitutional responsibility, not a procedural formality. Courts must ask where the detainee was held, whether counsel was present, if there are injuries, whether the medical examination was independent, and whether any statement was obtained through coercion. Prosecutors must also refuse tainted evidence. Magistrates must not operate as clerks of custody. The judiciary cannot condemn torture in principle while allowing its products (coerced confessions and other tainted evidence) to be used in practice.

Enforced disappearance, custodial torture, extrajudicial killing, and false implication do not belong in separate moral categories. They are connected techniques of unaccountable power. A justice process that isolates them into disconnected files will miss the pattern. Survivors do not need another round of symbolic sympathy. They need disclosure, rehabilitation, compensation, prosecution and guarantees that the same agencies will not reinvent the same practices under new names.

Bangladesh now faces a stark choice. It can convert its treaty accessions into real institutional redesign, or it can continue the familiar cycle of speeches, committees, promises and denial. The first path requires political courage: disclosing detention spaces, empowering independent monitors, protecting complainants, prosecuting officials, reforming police law, changing interrogation culture and accepting scrutiny as a safeguard rather than an insult. The second path is easier, and it is precisely why torture survives.

The measure of democratic renewal is not whether the state can speak the language of human rights in conferences. It is whether a poor detainee, an opposition activist, a suspect in an ordinary criminal case, a prisoner, a protester, or a person with no influence at all can enter state custody and come out alive, unharmed and with dignity intact. Until that is secured, Bangladesh's promise of reform will remain conditional, fragile and morally incomplete.

The illusion of education reform



Md Reza E Rabbi is research associate at the BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University.

MD REZA E RABBI

There is a particular condition that afflicts policymakers in developing democracies, and Bangladesh's education sector establishment has a textbook example for it. A video was recently circulated on social media showing the education minister stepping out of a car in a village, a microphone clipped to his collar, and posing a question to a group of schoolchildren with theatrical flair: "There will be no more cheating in exams. You are studying properly, aren't you?"

When a minister's primary talking point—at field visits, board meetings, and education seminars—is exam hall discipline, what does that tell us about the ceiling of our ambitions?

The fact that the minister considers plagiarism prevention a selling point announces, loudly and without irony, that we have set the bar for reform at administrative adequacy. The minister's agenda reads like a checklist of procedural anxieties: preventing cheating in exam halls, drafting new legislation to criminalise digital fraud in examinations, and overhauling how answer scripts are evaluated and marked. These are not unimportant matters, but obsessing over how strictly we mark a test tells us nothing about whether the test is worth taking. Criminalising digital cheating does not produce a single curious, capable, or

creative mind. Compare this with what policymakers in high performing education systems actually discuss. In Finland, South Korea, or Singapore, the national conversation in education circles revolves around cultivating creativity, building research capacity, redesigning curricula to address

When a party comes to power with a five-year mandate, its core incentive is to produce visible wins before the next ballot. A shiny new school building can be photographed. Distributing devices to thousands of students generates a front-page headline and gives the impression of a country going digital overnight. But no one can photograph the improving quality of a lesson.

21st-century skills, and preparing students for labour markets that will look radically different in 20 years. Bangladesh, meanwhile, remains imprisoned in a conversation about exam centres and grade sheets. And this is not simply our minister's personal failing. It is a structural one, rooted in how our political economy works.

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a front page headline and gives the impression of a country going digital overnight. But no one can photograph the improving quality of a lesson.

The new policy announcements popping up in recent months—mandatory third languages and vocational training—follow exactly this pattern. They are presented as forward-thinking reforms, but without the foundational structural work that any serious curricular overhaul requires: teacher retraining at scale, assessment reform, coherent implementation frameworks, and a willingness to sit with complexity for years before results arrive.

The tablets would be distributed; whether teachers could use them, whether the curriculum would be

compatible with digital learning, whether students in those schools even would have reliable electricity—these questions often dissolve into the background. The GPA-5 count swells year on year, pass rates reach improbable heights, and yet we continue producing graduates who are uncompetitive in the global workforce.

The real tragedy is that the reforms which could actually matter are obvious and achievable. Teacher dignity is one of them. In countries where education works, the teaching profession carries social prestige and

financial security. In Bangladesh, we have systematically undermined both. A teacher who is poorly paid, professionally unsupported, and socially marginalised is not going to transform classrooms no matter how many syllabi we redesign above their heads.

The curriculum problem is similarly neglected. We live in an era of rapid technological disruption, where artificial intelligence is reshaping white-collar work, where the skills that will matter most to today's schoolchildren are adaptability, critical reasoning, and comfort with ambiguity. Instead, our curriculum asks students to remember, reproduce, perform at narrow cognitive tasks under timed pressure. The result is young people who are literate on paper but practically unprepared for the world ahead.

Our policymakers know this. The problem is that fixing it takes a decade, requires political courage, and none of it promises an easy win. It requires a government to trust that doing the right, unglamorous thing today will matter enormously to a generation of children who cannot yet vote. We must be clear about what we are asking for: the boring, difficult, unphotographable work of building a real education system.

A nation's true development is measured by the depth of its people's thinking. Our ministers can choose to be remembered as the generation that fixed exam hall conduct, or as the generation that finally decided to build something that lasts. So far, they are choosing the wrong thing to be proud of.

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