



**Mayer
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A Joint Statement by the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances, Mayer Daak and Odhikar on the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 2021

BANGLADESH: UN human rights experts must undertake an independent investigation into enforced disappearances and hold perpetrators accountable

Manila/Dhaka, 30 August 2021: AFAD, Mayer Daak and Odhikar pay tribute to victims of enforced disappearances and stand in solidarity with the families and relatives of the disappeared in Bangladesh and across the world while commemorating [International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances](#). Enforced disappearances, along with an array of other grave human rights violations, are not new phenomenon in Bangladesh. However, state-sponsored human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances have become a systematic tool to suppress political opponents and silence dissenting voices since 2009, when the Awami League - led government assumed power. The issue of enforced disappearances has been discussed at various levels of the United Nations, including the [Universal Periodic Review](#), for the past decade. Despite international criticism, the incumbent Awami League government has never taken the matter seriously.

Acts of [enforced disappearances continue](#) in Bangladesh amid the COVID-19 pandemic, targeting dissenting voices that are critical of the government's repressive policies and actions.[1] Some of the disappeared persons have resurfaced in law enforcement custody, having been arrested under the [Digital Security Act](#), a repressive law enacted in 2018 granting law enforcers the powers to arrest anyone accused of transmitting any 'defamatory information' online that 'destroys communal harmony', or 'creates unrest or disorder', or 'hurts religious sentiments or values'.

Although fear and threats may deter some from reporting a disappearance, according to Odhikar, 603 persons have been reportedly subjected to enforced disappearances in Bangladesh between January 2009 and June 2021. Among them, 153 persons are still missing. The bodies of 81 disappeared victims have been recovered, and 369 persons have been returned alive after several days/months/years of being disappeared. Furthermore, a large number of surfaced victims of enforced disappearance, have later been shown as arrested under different criminal laws and sent to jail through court orders. Odhikar has also documented 16 cases of enforced disappearance from January to June 2021. Most of the victims of enforced disappearance are political activists belonging to the opposition and other dissidents, including academics and journalists. [Odhikar's data](#) show that a large majority of persons were disappeared by the Rapid Action Battalion and the Detective Branch of Police.

Despite [credible information and evidences](#), the incumbent Awami League government has consistently denied the commissions of enforced disappearance and ignored calls by the United Nations, national and international human rights organisations and civil society to end the culture of impunity indulged by law enforcement and security forces. There are allegations that victims of enforced disappearance, particularly opposition party leaders and activists, have also been tortured and/or killed extra-judicially. Such killings have been termed as death in "crossfire" or "gunfights". These have become an institutionalized practice in the country's law enforcement system.

Commissions of gross human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings by the members of Bangladeshi law enforcement, continue to take place in the

country due to a deep rooted culture of impunity. Impunity prevails in the country due to the absence of an accountable government and rule of law; lack of independence of the judiciary and corruption; and lack of transparency and accountability in the state institutions. Bangladesh has never had an effective mechanism to combat impunity and establish justice. The Judiciary as a whole is subjugated by the incumbent government, which means that the victims of human rights abuses hardly receive remedy.

The [UN human rights experts](#) have also expressed deep concern at persistent allegations of enforced disappearances by Bangladeshi law enforcement, targeting political opponents and dissenters.[2] Bangladesh has failed to respect and follow international mandatory obligations regarding the protection and promotion of human rights. It also failed to implement the [UPR recommendations](#) to conduct a thorough investigation into cases of enforced disappearance and to ensure that the perpetrators were brought to justice while human rights defenders and victim-families expressed their concern over a deteriorating human rights situation and shrinking space for dissent in the country.

The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) has asked the Bangladesh government about the whereabouts and fate of several disappeared persons. The government did not respond to the letters sent by the WGEID. Even though the [WGEID wanted to visit Bangladesh](#), as expressed in several communications since 2013, the government did not respond. On the contrary, the government has always denied the incidents of disappearance.

AFAD, Mayer Daak and Odhikar urge UN human rights experts to initiate an independent international investigation into enforced disappearances in Bangladesh. The UN Human Rights Council (HRC) should take effective measures to hold members of law enforcement and security forces, accountable; to stop grave human rights violations, including enforced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial killings and end impunity and prevent future violations. The HRC should also press the government to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and enact a domestic law criminalising enforced disappearances.

The Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) is a federation of human rights organisations working directly on the issue of enforced disappearances in Asia. Envisioning a world without desaparecidos, AFAD was founded on June 4, 1998 in Manila, Philippines. www.afad-online.org

Mayer Daak (“Mother’s Call”) is a platform of the families of victims of enforced disappearances in Bangladesh with the common goal of seeking the whereabouts of their loved ones and advocating for justice for the victims.

Odhikar is a registered human rights organisation based in Dhaka, Bangladesh established on 10 October 1994 by a group of human rights defenders, to monitor human rights violations and create wider awareness. It holds special consultative status with the ECOSOC of the United Nations.

www.odhikar.org

[1] Odhikar, “Annual Human Rights Report 2020 on Bangladesh”, (25 January 2021), http://odhikar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Annual-HR-Report-2020_Eng.pdf

[2] UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, *Post-Sessional Report*, 123rd session (15-19 February 2021) [A/HRC/WGEID/123/1](http://www.unhcr.org/refugees/123/1)