



*A Joint Statement by the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Maayer Daak, and Odhikar on the occasion of International Week of the Disappeared 2022*

## **BANGLADESH: Government must stop enforced disappearances and ensure right to truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence**

**Dhaka/Manila/Paris, 23 May 2022:** On the occasion of the International Week of the Disappeared, the Asian Federation against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Maayer Daak, and Odhikar remember and pay homage to victims of enforced disappearance and stand in solidarity with the families of the disappeared.

In Bangladesh, enforced disappearances continue to occur. Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies, particularly the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and the Detective Branch of police are responsible for the commission of the majority of cases of enforced disappearance in the country. Most of the victims of enforced disappearance have been identified as leaders and activists of opposition parties and dissidents.

The Awami League-led government has been using members of law enforcement agencies and security forces to suppress dissenting voices and law enforcers are using enforced disappearance as a tool to curb any criticism against the government.<sup>1</sup>

The government, which consists of a political party that has been in power since 2009,<sup>2</sup> has consistently denied the existence of enforced disappearances in the country. In the most recent instance of such official denial, on 5 February 2022, ahead of the 126<sup>th</sup> Session of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID), Bangladeshi Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told reporters that a lot of the people listed by some UN bodies as disappeared had actually drowned in the Mediterranean.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said that the security forces in the country were not involved in acts of enforced disappearance, that various incidents of individuals who have gone into hiding were being reported as disappearances, and that no one becomes a victim of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> AFAD, FIDH, Maayer Daak and Odhikar vehemently condemn these statements.

Since the United States issued targeted sanctions on several members of the RAB in December 2021, Bangladeshi authorities have become more repressive toward human rights defenders (HRDs) and families of the victims of enforced disappearances. In recent months, reports have surfaced of harassment, including by interrogating family members and relatives of the

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1 New Age, 15 February 2022; <https://www.newagebd.net/article/162786/un-body-examines-cases>

2 Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/02/bangladesh-election-abuses-need-independent-probe> .

3 Prothom Alo, 5 February 2022; <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/many-people-listed-by-un-as-disappeared-have-actually-drowned-in-the-mediterranean-fm>

4 Daily Star, 5 February 2022; <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/not-enforced-disappearance-rather-self-hiding-home-minister-2954846>

disappeared in their homes, calling them to the police station and, in some cases, forcing families to sign blank papers. The police, RAB and National Security Intelligence have also made threatening phone calls to family members of victims of enforced disappearance, summoning them to their local offices, and visiting their workplaces and homes at around midnight during the period from mid-February to early March 2022. Furthermore, police also pressured the families to sign statements stating that the disappeared persons were actually “missing” and that family members were hiding information. AFAD, FIDH, Maayer Daak and Odhikar strongly condemn these acts of harassment and intimidation and express grave concern over such illegal actions of law enforcement agencies.

UN human rights experts have raised concern regarding the intimidation and harassment of families of the disappeared persons, HRDs, and civil society actors in Bangladesh. They also called on the Bangladeshi government to immediately put an end to reprisals against human rights defenders and families of the victims of enforced disappearances for their activism and co-operation with international human rights bodies and UN mechanisms.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the WGEID transmitted general allegations to the Bangladeshi government on 4 May 2011, 9 March 2016, 22 February 2017, and 22 May 2019 - to which the government has provided no reply. The lack of replies from the government and its failure to respond to the WGEID’s request to carry out an official visit to the country, which was made on 12 March 2013, are tantamount to non-cooperation with the UN human rights mechanisms.

Bangladesh does not recognise the crime of enforced disappearance in its criminal law. Despite receiving recommendations by several UN member states to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Bangladesh has not yet taken any step towards ratification. The government’s denial of cases of enforced disappearance, its unwillingness to accede to the Convention, and the absence of a rule of law all contribute to a climate of impunity for Bangladeshi authorities responsible for this heinous crime.

Our organizations recall that enforced disappearance may amount to a crime against humanity under Article 7 of the [Rome Statute](#) of the ICC<sup>6</sup>, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack.

AFAD, FIDH, Maayer Daak, and Odhikar reiterate their commitment to stand in solidarity with the victims and their families in the struggle for a world without disappearances. We join the global call for a world without disappearances and for truth and justice to be finally delivered to all victims. We believe that the right to truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence must be ensured to all persons everywhere in the world, including Bangladesh. We also call upon the international community to pressure the Bangladeshi authorities to immediately stop this heinous crime, conduct impartial and thorough investigations into all cases of enforced disappearance, return the disappeared to their families, and bring the perpetrators to justice.

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*Every year in May, the world commemorates the International Week of the Disappeared to remember the disappeared, address the dark history of this crime, shed light on recent cases*

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5 Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/un-experts-urge-bangladesh-end-reprisals-against-human-rights-defenders-and>

6 Bangladesh ratified the Rome Statute of the ICC on 23 March 2010

*of enforced disappearances, and illuminate the ongoing struggle for truth and justice in countries around the world. The International Week of the Disappeared has been adopted by different organisations and families of disappeared persons around the world to serve as a venue to campaign against this crime and reaffirm solidarity with all victims and their families. The observation of IWD is a painful reminder that families await information on the whereabouts and fate of their loved ones and that disappeared persons are waiting to be freed from unknown places where they are wrongfully kept.*

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*The **Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)** is a federation of human rights organizations working directly on the issue of involuntary disappearances in Asia. Envisioning a world without desaparecidos, AFAD was founded on 4 June 1998 in Manila, Philippines. AFAD was the recipient of the 2016 Asia Democracy and Human Rights Award conferred by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy. [www.afad-online.org](http://www.afad-online.org)*

*The **International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)** is the world's oldest non-governmental human rights organization. Founded in 1922, FIDH federates 192 member organizations from 117 countries. Its core mandate is to promote respect for all the rights set out in the UDHR. [www.fidh.org](http://www.fidh.org)*

***Maayer 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**, meaning 'rights' in Bangla, is a registered human rights organization based in Dhaka, Bangladesh established on October 10, 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](http://www.odhikar.org)*