

26 June 2025



Seminar on **Addressing Enforced Disappearance: How to Move Forward** Odhikar

On 26 July, 2025 Odhikar convened a seminar titled “Addressing Enforced Disappearance: How to Move Forward” in the auditorium at the Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy Central Laboratory, University of Khulna. The event was co-organized with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office (UNRCO), and brought together 47 participants—including individuals who had reappeared following enforced disappearance, family members of those still missing, students, human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, and academics.



The seminar, facilitated by Odhikar’s Director ASM Nasiruddin Elan, brought together powerful testimonies from victims of enforced disappearance. It also featured insightful remarks by Sazzad Hussain, a member of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, Zahid Hossain from the UN Resident Coordinator's Office UNRCO, and a diverse group of local voices—including human rights defenders, lawyers, university faculty, journalists, and students.



Nilufa Begum—wife of Abdul Kalam Azad, whose family has ties to the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—shared the distressing account of her husband's enforced disappearance. On the evening of 20 January 2019, around 7:30 pm, when Azad was walking back home from a nearby

tea stall, 10–15 men in plainclothes, identifying themselves as members of the Detective Branch (DB) of Police, arrived on motorbikes and forcibly took him away.



Just over an hour later, a DB official named Enamul visited Nilufa’s home and asked for Azad’s whereabouts - as if the DB hadn’t been involved in the incident. He collected the couple’s permanent addresses. The gesture, Nilufa felt, was both deceptive and intimidating. In the days that followed, Nilufa searched for her husband at the Khulna DB office, the Superintendent of Police office, and the RAB office. Each authority denied any knowledge or arrest, deepening her despair. Her efforts were met with derision. Nilufa recounted that when she pressed for information, Enamul hurled vulgar insults at her, even branding her a “prostitute.” What followed was an ominous threat: that if she did not stop searching or pursued legal action, “there would be no one left in her family to light a lamp at their homestead.” During the authoritarian regime, Nilufa’s attempts to seek justice were met with repeated refusals and intimidation. Despite tremendous effort, she was only able to file a general diary. Now, with conditions shifting, she is preparing to pursue formal legal action.



Nur Mohammad Anik—then a student at Khulna University—said that on 08 January 2020, he was expelled without due process by the provost of Bangabandhu Hall and handed over to law enforcement. The grounds were mere accusations of ties to Islamist militant groups—claims that surfaced after Nur publicly opposed Indian interference in Bangladesh’s internal affairs.

Instead of being produced before a court within 24 hours of arrest, as legally required, Nur was reportedly taken to Bogra police lines and held incommunicado until the morning of 24

January, 2020. That night, he was transferred to the Khulna Metropolitan Police. Mere hours later, on 25 January, 2020 Nur was officially shown as arrested in cases linked to an alleged gunfight between police and Islamist militants—an incident that took place on the very night he was transferred, raising strong suspicion of fabrication. He was charged under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009 and the Explosive Substances Act, 1908. This manufactured arrest was followed by 17 days of undocumented -and thus illegal- detention. During his confinement in Bogra, Nur was reportedly coerced into signing a blank sheet of paper. He was threatened with "crossfire"—a euphemism widely associated with extrajudicial execution—unless his university peers and faculty staged protests demanding his release. After enduring five and a half years behind bars, Nur was finally released on bail in July 2025. Reflecting on his harrowing experience, Nur later shared: “Enforced disappearance is more terrible than death—it torments not just the victim, but leaves families in endless agony.” Nur called for immediate measures to reinstate the academic pursuits of individuals whose education had been disrupted due to abduction and detention. He also demanded comprehensive rehabilitation and restitution for all victims of enforced disappearance.



Addressing the seminar, Sazzad Hussain, a member of the Inquiry Commission, said enforced disappearance (ED) is recognized under international law as a crime against humanity, and Bangladesh is now obligated to criminalise it after the government signed the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance on 29 August 2024. The government must enact a domestic law to address enforced disappearance, and a draft bill is currently under cabinet review, he added. However, he expressed concerns that many victims still remain fearful—both of the possible return of the previous authoritarian regime which resorted to enforced disappearance to silence dissenting voices, and of perpetrators who still hold positions of power. As a result, numerous cases remain unreported. He observed that some of the victims were falsely labeled as militants and wrongfully charged. Identifying major obstacles to pursue justice for enforced disappearance. He remarked that evidence has been destroyed, cooperation with the Inquiry Commission is limited, and perpetrators continue to intimidate survivors.

Speaking at the seminar, the Vice-Chancellor (VC) of the Khulna University, Professor Dr. Md Rezaul Karim said for far too long, enforced disappearances were treated as a grim fact of life under the authoritarian Sheikh Hasina regime. Today, we stand in solemn remembrance—and in honor of those who dared to resist, and who helped dismantle that machinery of repression.



Citing the examples of the case of Maksudul Mumeneen, a student of Khulna University detained simply for possessing the Islamic book; and female Muslim students at the university expelled solely for keeping religious books, the VC observed that these were not isolated cases of injustice, but were symptoms of a systemic campaign against basic freedoms. Exploring possible pathways to justice, the VC said the Inquiry Commission must widen its scope to examine politically motivated and farcical criminal charges. Unless meaningful reform is introduced within the bureaucracy and operational structures of government, the trial and punishment of those responsible will remain out of reach, the VC concluded.



UNRCO representative Zahid Hossain underscored a vital principle of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance: its mandate of absolute prohibition. The Convention asserts that enforced disappearance is impermissible under any circumstances. It also obligates state parties to foster an environment that prevents such violations and affirms every victim's right to the truth—including the context of the disappearance, progress and outcomes of investigations, and the fate of the disappeared individual.

While the Bangladesh government has taken a commendable step forward by signing the Convention, he emphasized the need for two critical actions to advance accountability and reform:

1. Acceptance of international oversight to assess and strengthen the country's human rights record
2. Enactment of domestic legislation specifically designed to prevent and respond to enforced disappearance.



Human rights defenders and lawyers attending the seminar voiced grave concerns that individuals implicated in enforced disappearances and other serious human rights violations, continue to occupy positions of authority. This enduring impunity, they warned, erodes public trust and stifles the pursuit of justice. To accelerate accountability for justice, they called for the establishment of at least one branch of the International Crimes Tribunal in every district—ensuring that trials related to enforced disappearances are timely, accessible, and community-rooted.



Odhikar’s Director, ASM Nasiruddin Elan, expressed deep concern that individuals responsible for enforced disappearances continue to hold positions of power, perpetuating a climate of fear and impunity. He remarked that this not only undermines democratic accountability—it also deters victims from coming forward to share their experiences or pursue justice. Despite these challenges, Elan reaffirmed Odhikar’s unwavering commitment to defending and advancing human rights, with a specific focus on ending enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture.