

Commemorating the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearance

Odhikar

On 29 August, 2025 Odhikar convened a powerful public discussion at the Tofazzal Hossain Manik Miah Auditorium of Dhaka Press Club to mark the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearance. The event brought together 160 participants, including survivors who had reappeared following abduction, family members of those still missing, Adviser to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, representatives from the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (CIED), prosecutors from the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT), human rights defenders, journalists, academics, and students. The discussion was followed by a human chain in front of the National Press Club, attended by human rights activists, including those who attended the forum.

Opening Reflections and Institutional Framing

Facilitated by Odhikar's President, Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui, the forum opened with a keynote by Senior Researcher Taskin Fahmina, who contextualized the current landscape of enforced disappearances in Bangladesh. The discussion centered on powerful firsthand testimonies from victims and family members, offering a stark reminder of the human cost of impunity. These accounts were deepened by reflections from institutional representatives and journalists, who emphasized the urgent need for justice, accountability, and legislative measures to criminalize, prosecute, and prevent enforced disappearance. The event fostered cross-sectoral solidarity and reaffirmed the collective responsibility to confront enforced disappearances.

In her address, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, Adviser to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, acknowledged the deep mistrust and disconnect that had developed between the State and its citizens during Bangladesh's prolonged

authoritarian rule. She emphasized the urgent need to rebuild public trust and called

"We must remain united. If division grows among us, if hopelessness takes over, then the group actually responsible for these crimes will become stronger," -Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan



Picture 1: Adviser to Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change speaks at the forum

government's commitment to prosecuting perpetrators of enforced disappearance. Rizwana warned that the foundation of a renewed Bangladesh cannot be laid without ensuring justice for the crimes against humanity committed under the previous regime. She urged survivors and families of the disappeared to hold onto hope and persist in their demands for truth and accountability.

In her keynote, Taskin highlighted Odhikar's longstanding advocacy for Bangladesh's accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006. She commended the interim



Picture 2: Odhikar's Senior Researcher Taskin Fahmina presents keynote at the forum

administration for formally signing the Convention following the student-led mass uprising that ended Sheikh Hasina's 15-year authoritarian rule. Taskin further asserted that the Hasina regime had systematically weaponized enforced disappearance to silence dissent and suppress opposition political activism—despite its classification as a crime against humanity under international law. Her

remarks underscored the deliberate use of state machinery to target critics and the urgent need for institutional reform. She highlighted the need for trauma counselling for victims and financial support for their families.

Voices of Survivors and Families

Nasrin Jahan Smrity, wife of forcibly disappeared Ismail Hossain Baten, became visibly overcome with emotion as she recounted her painful journey. She described the unbearable moment when her young son asks whether his father is alive or dead—a question she cannot answer. Smrity expressed deep skepticism about the prospect of justice under any political administration, noting that if the current interim government fails to act, hope may remain elusive. She spoke candidly about the daily hardships of raising her family alone, navigating legal and financial barriers that persist years after her husband's disappearance. Despite the passage of time, she remains unable to access or manage her husband's bank account due to restrictive legal provisions. Smrity issued a heartfelt call for justice and urged

"My son asks if his father is alive or dead. I have no answer."

—Nasrin Jahan Smrity, wife of Ismail Hossain Baten, disappeared years ago. She still can't access his bank account.

immediate reforms to remove bureaucratic obstacles that prevent families of the disappeared from securing their financial rights.

“Even his body would give us closure.”

—Shawon Hawlader, waiting 15 years for his father’s return. Families are still searching. Still grieving. Still demanding answers.

Amena Akter, whose husband was forcibly disappeared, shared that she has been waiting for her husband’s return for 13 years—clinging to a hope that remains painfully elusive. She called for exemplary punishment for those responsible, emphasising that enforced disappearance is not only

a crime but a prolonged form of suffering for families. Amena stressed that it is the government’s duty to ensure restitution and rehabilitation for victims’ families, noting that meaningful support is essential to alleviating the enduring hardship they face.

Shawon Hawlader, son of another victim, shared that his family has waited 15 years for his father’s return. He urged the interim administration to prosecute those responsible, expressing doubt that justice would be served under a future political government following the upcoming national elections. Shawon added that even the recovery of his father’s body would offer a measure of solace, allowing the family to perform final rites and find closure.



Rahmat Ullah, a survivor, recounted his harrowing experience of being forcibly taken by members of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), blindfolded and handcuffed, and held in custody at RAB headquarters. He was later handed over to Indian security agency and detained in two Indian jails for nine months before being released and sent back to Bangladesh across a cross-border river. Rahmat shared that the trauma of his ordeal has left lasting psychological scars—he now struggles with cognitive and speech impairments, a consequence of the severe mental distress he endured.

“Blindfolded, handed to foreign agents—now I struggle to speak.”



Iqbal Chowdhury, another survivor, described the utter disorientation of illegal detention, where the only indication of time passing was the sound of the Azaan at dawn. He referred to the detention site as a “living grave,” underscoring the psychological torment he endured. Iqbal recounted severe physical torture, including the uprooting of his nails. During interrogation, security officials questioned his criticism of the Awami League and India, warning him that such dissent was tantamount to opposing the interests of the State.

“Azaan was the only way to tell time. It was a living grave.”

All family members of the victims present at the discussion issued a collective appeal to the government, urging immediate action to locate their disappeared loved ones. Their unified call underscored the enduring pain of uncertainty and the urgent need for truth, accountability, and state responsibility.

Legal Reflections and Policy Recommendations

ICT prosecutor Tasmirul Islam emphasized that enforced disappearance constitutes a systemic crime, yet its prosecution is often hindered by evidentiary challenges. He cautioned that the forthcoming Enforced Disappearance Prevention Act must adopt a precise and robust definition. He asserted that the very act of denying an arrest should be recognized as the onset of enforced disappearance. He further emphasized that the proposed legislation must enable the prosecution of political organizations alongside law enforcement agencies, arguing that accountability must extend to those who orchestrate or authorize such crimes.

Nabila Idris, a member of the CIED, reported that the Commission had received over 1,800 complaints related to enforced disappearance. Following preliminary investigations, 250 cases were forwarded to the ICT for prosecution. She underscored the critical need for sustained political commitment and the importance of equipping law enforcement agencies with the necessary skills and tools to effectively prevent and respond to such crimes.

Dr. Faiezul Hakim Lala, editor of *Shaptahik Janajug*, highlighted the deliberate efforts by perpetrators to cast doubt on the existence of secret detention centres used to confine victims. He warned that such tactics aim to erase public memory and obscure the reality of illegal and clandestine sites of detention. Dr. Faiezul urged the interim government to elevate the issue to the global stage, advocating for international consensus to hold those responsible—particularly Sheikh Hasina—accountable for crimes against humanity.

The Executive Editor of *Amar Desh*, Syed Abdal Ahmed voiced serious concern regarding the prosecution of security force personnel implicated in enforced disappearances. He noted persistent allegations of non-cooperation by certain officials, which obstruct accountability. He further warned that many alleged perpetrators remain in positions of authority, posing a significant risk of interference in ongoing investigations and undermining the integrity of the justice process.

Closing Reflections

In her concluding remarks, Dr. Tasneem Siddiqui reiterated the call for justice, restitution, and rehabilitation for the families of victims. She strongly emphasized the need for psychosocial support and institutional responsiveness to address the long-term impacts of enforced disappearance.



Following the forum's conclusion, a human chain was organised in front of the National Press Club. Human rights defenders, including participants from the earlier discussion, joined in solidarity to amplify the collective demand for locating victims of enforced disappearance, ensuring restitution and rehabilitation for survivors and affected families, and prosecuting those responsible for these grave violations.