

Letter to the U.N. Secretary-General in Advance of His Visit to Bangladesh

March 10, 2025

His Excellency António Guterres
Secretary-General of the United Nations

Dear Secretary-General:

As human rights organizations, we write to respectfully urge you to do everything in your power to provide U.N. support to Bangladesh during this critical period in the country's political transition.

Bangladesh is now undergoing unprecedented changes following widespread protests that led to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government in August 2024. As concluded by the February 2025 fact-finding report of the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Bangladeshi security forces engaged in extrajudicial killings and other abuses to suppress the protests with the approval and direction of top political leaders. These actions were the culmination of fifteen years of gross human rights violations by security forces under Hasina's government, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention of human rights defenders, members of the political opposition, journalists, and other perceived critics.

Profound changes are now urgently needed to protect civic space, ensure justice for victims of human rights abuses, and reform the security sector, the judiciary, and electoral processes in accordance with principles of transparency, accountability, and respect for fundamental rights. The Interim Government of Bangladesh has a critical but also narrowing window of opportunity before elections to make lasting institutional reforms that withstand backsliding by future governments.

To support accountability and security sector reform, the U.N. Department of Peace Operations should immediately **suspend from U.N. missions all current and former members of the Rapid Action Battalion, Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Detective Branch**, and all other units implicated in abuses, pending Bangladesh's implementation of rigorous screening processes of security forces recommended by the OHCHR report. OHCHR's recommendation echoes the concerns expressed by other U.N. experts, including the U.N. Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances and the U.N. Committee against Torture, that Bangladeshi security forces implicated in grave human rights abuses should not be deployed for U.N. peace operations.

The Interim Government has also expressed concerns about the pressure of hosting over a million Rohingya refugees. Not only has the refugee population grown over the past year, but more Rohingya, as well as others, are now fleeing renewed hostilities between the Arakan Army and the military in Myanmar and seeking shelter in Bangladesh. **We are deeply concerned that funding shortfalls may force the U.N. World Food Programme to more than halve the value of food vouchers given to Rohingya refugees to just US\$6 per person per month from April 1.** We ask you to redouble efforts to ensure that U.N. agencies have adequate resources to support the humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees. We urge you to ensure U.N. leadership in hosting a high-level conference on Rohingya, as decided by the U.N. General Assembly in the Third Committee resolution last year, explores avenues for justice and accountability in Myanmar that would end decades of impunity, and discusses enhanced humanitarian assistance, including for those across the border.

In the current context, we recognize the value of U.N. experts in supporting the people of Bangladesh in the country's transition to a flourishing democracy. We ask you to urge the Interim Government of Bangladesh to carry out the following recommendations, which we have also put to them ourselves, and to pledge the U.N.'s support in helping them in the process:

- **Hold perpetrators accountable for gross human rights violations, including members of security forces who are responsible directly or through command responsibility.** Conduct independent, impartial, and credible investigations into all past abuses—including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention by Hasina's government since 2009—and the killings in July and August 2024. With arrest warrants issued by Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) for Sheikh Hasina and dozens of others, it is essential that investigations comply with established international standards and lead to fair prosecutions of all alleged perpetrators, regardless of their institutional or political affiliation in Bangladesh's pursuit of ending impunity.
- **Ensure the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act is further amended in line with international standards to guarantee fair trials for all alleged perpetrators, and declare a moratorium on the death penalty,** with a view towards enacting a law to abolish capital punishment for all crimes. Though the Interim Government has made progress in amending the Act, the elimination of the death penalty and additional due process protections that adhere to international standards are still necessary to break with the ICT's past fair trial violations and secure meaningful justice.
- **Security forces must immediately release anyone who is forcibly disappeared or in unlawful or arbitrary custody and provide answers about those who were extrajudicially executed or are missing.** Security forces must ensure unfettered and ongoing access to all detention centers in Bangladesh and provide free access to their records regarding those seized or detained to Bangladesh's Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances and other key actors, including the National Human Rights Commission.
- **Disband the Rapid Action Battalion,** as recommended by the OHCHR report and Bangladesh's Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. The Rapid Action Battalion's track record of committing extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture with impunity not only demands accountability but also underscores that the institution is beyond reform. It must be fully disbanded to guard against the serious risk of future abuses and to demonstrate commitment to building a rights-respecting security force.
- **Implement rigorous, fair, transparent, and independent vetting processes across all security forces** to remove those involved in gross human rights violations from their positions, and ensure ongoing vetting to prevent the deployment in U.N. peace operations of anyone facing credible allegations of abuse. Pending the establishment of this screening process, the government should immediately suspend from U.N. missions all current and former members of the Rapid Action Battalion, Directorate General of Forces Intelligence, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Detective Branch, and all others facing credible allegations of abuse. Vetting processes should prioritize identifying those responsible for human rights abuses, provide adequate due process, and take place in consultation with the public and international experts.
- **Pursue a resolution under item 10 at the U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC).** The resolution should request technical assistance, monitoring, reporting, and further investigations from U.N. experts to advance accountability, justice processes, and critical institutional reforms. An HRC

resolution will provide the strong institutional framework necessary to bolster positive reform efforts by both current and future administrations, with ongoing U.N. support and reporting.

- **Approve the establishment of a permanent mission of the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bangladesh** to support transparent investigations into past abuses, compliance with human rights obligations, and effective institutional reforms, particularly of the security sector, judiciary, election commission, and the National Human Rights Commission.
- **Guarantee access to the country for international human rights monitors**, including by extending a standing invitation to all U.N. Human Rights Council special procedures, as recommended by the OHCHR report, including the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and the Special Rapporteur on torture, to support efforts to ensure justice for victims, reform laws, and rebuild criminal justice institutions. Human rights monitors should be free to carry out their work in all areas of the country and have unfettered access to detention sites to engage in effective investigations and reporting.
- **Repeal or amend in line with international standards abusive laws that have been used to restrict freedom of expression, the right to privacy, and other fundamental rights**, such as the Anti-Terrorism Act, the Official Secrets Act, criminal defamation under the Penal Code, the Special Powers Act, the Cyber Security Act 2023, and the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulation Act following a robust public consultative process. The government should withdraw or facilitate the dismissal of all politically motivated and other malicious cases against journalists, human rights defenders, activists, and other citizens, regardless of their political affiliation, brought in violation of international human rights standards, particularly concerning the exercise of the right to freedom of expression.
- **Ensure the protection, access to aid, and rights of Rohingya refugees**. We urge the Interim Government to allow new refugees fleeing Myanmar to enter Bangladesh, to register them in partnership with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, and to ensure they receive humanitarian assistance. All Rohingya refugees should be guaranteed access to aid, livelihoods, education, and freedom of movement, and should not be subjected to forcible relocations to Bhasan Char or forced repatriations to Myanmar. Although the government has said that repatriation is the only solution to the refugee crisis, we know that all parts of Myanmar currently remain unsafe for return. We encourage the Interim Government to use the upcoming high-level conference on Rohingya to pursue avenues for justice and accountability in Myanmar.
- **Adopt a gender sensitive and intersectional approach** in the implementation of all of these recommendations, as human rights violations and their impacts are often experienced differently based on gender, as well as other factors, such as ethnicity, disability, religion, or socio-economic status. This approach will ensure that the reforms and accountability measures comprehensively address the diverse needs and experiences of all people in the country.

We trust you share our goal of ensuring that the people of Bangladesh, who fought so hard for the country's future, receive every opportunity for international support in the pursuit of democratic and rights-respecting institutions.

Sincerely,

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

Human Rights Watch

International Truth and Justice Project

CIVICUS

Tech Global Institute

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

Fortify Rights

Capital Punishment Justice Project (CPJP)

Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network (ADPAN)

Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)