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3.1.2. Involvement in human rights abuse

Sources reported that the former government allegedly used law enforcement as a tool for its own agenda,212 to undermine the political opposition,213 supress dissent, and spread fear.214 Human Rights Watch described enforced disappearances as a 'hallmark' of Hasina's rule.215 Among those forcibly disappeared were leaders and supporters of opposition parties,216 alleged Islamist militants,217 and seemingly ordinary people.218 Victims were sometimes abducted by men in plainclothes claiming to represent law enforcement agencies219 and were commonly deprived of liberty repeated times, sometimes directly after being released from jail, 220 finding themselves in a continuous cycle of arrests.221 State authorities put victims' family members under surveillance,222 and threatened and harassed those seeking justice.223

Law enforcement engaged in enforced disappearances224 and extrajudicial killings.225 Multiple agencies were involved, including the ordinary police,226 but sources indicated that the RAB, DB, and intelligence agencies were leading actors.227 The inquiry commission on enforced disappearance, set up by the interim government, reported on a 'systematic practice' or enforced disappearance under the previous government. Security agencies used a 'coordinated strategy' to avoid detection, by attributing activities to each other and dividing responsibilities; 228 while one agency would abduct a victim, another agency would detain them, and a third one would either release or kill them.229 According to the commission, this division led to situations where those involved 'often lacked knowledge of who they were eliminating or the broader context of the operation'.230 The commission further stated that enforced disappearance was a practice taking place under a central command structure.231 Other sources have also reported on enforced disappearance and extrajudicial killings committed by the RAB, as deliberate, planned232 and covered up.233 Whistle-blowers told Deutsche Welle (DW) and Netra News that operations with a political target were explicitly sanctioned from above, 'at least from the Ministry of Home Affairs'.234 Officers involved in enforced disappearance have also told Human Rights Watch that senior members of the former government, including the prime minister, knew about incommunicado detentions, and that some enforced disappearances and killings were carried out on the direct order of Hasina.235

In some cases, victims were forcibly disappeared before being extrajudicially killed.236 Their bodies were commonly dumped in rivers.237 People have also been killed in what the authorities falsely described as 'crossfire' or 'gunfights'.238 According to local human rights organisation Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), 1 926 persons were killed extrajudicially in such 'crossfire' and 'gunfight' incidents under the former government's 15 years in power.239 As reported by Human Rights Watch, this practice became so institutionalised that members of parliament called for more 'crossfire killings'.240 The commission of enquiry estimated that

more than 3 500 individuals were subjected to enforced disappearance under the former government,241 while local and regional human rights organisations have recorded about 2 600 extrajudicial killings.242

In the aftermath of the former government's fall, some victims of enforced disappearance resurfaced, disclosing that they had been kept in secret prisons (aynaghar) for years.243 The inquiry commission has identified 16 secret detention facilities,244 holding victims across the country,245 including the 'notorious' Joint Interrogation Cell and Taskforce for Interrogation in Uttara.246 However, 40–200 secret detention sites are believed to exist.247 Security forces have reportedly attempted to destroy evidence at the sites.248 According to the commission, security staff engaged in 'torture rituals', that were methodological and 'profoundly brutal'.249 Other sources have also reported on torture at these sites.250

Torture and other forms of abuse were reportedly widespread practice within law enforcement in general; inter alia as a means to extract forced confessions,251 but also to humiliate victims, and instill fear.252 Victims of detention and subsequent torture included opposition members 253 and other critics,254 alleged 'militants',255 and ordinary citizens.256 Law enforcement agencies reportedly enjoyed extensive impunity257 and harassed both victims and their relatives filing cases against law enforcement officers.258 As reported by Human Rights Watch in 2023, only one case of torture had led to a conviction under Bangladesh's Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act since its adoption in 2013.259

For a timeline of the protests in July–August 2024, and information on violence of law enforcement, see Annex 1: Timeline of the protests in July–August 2024.

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