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Evaluating the Effectiveness of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) in Addressing Bangladesh's Enforced Disappearances Crisis

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Introduction

Enforced disappearances constitute a grave human rights crisis in Bangladesh. This phenomenon, historically traceable to the country's 1971 Genocide era, alarmingly resurged following the Awami League's rise to power in 2009. The phenomenon is legally defined by the International Convention on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (ICPPED) as the:

[…] arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by an agent of the State … followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by the concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person.

Enforced disappearances constitute a systematic problem in Bangladesh, widely attributable to the country's State actors. Amongst them, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), a composite security force drawing personnel from the police, army, navy, air force and other security agencies, has been consistently implicated in cases of persons going missing under suspicious circumstances.

Despite its international obligations to protect its citizens, Bangladesh has demonstrably failed to take measures to halt this egregious practice. At least 708 cases were reported between 2009 and June 2024 by local NGO Odhikar. This period coincided with the rule of Bangladesh's former authoritarian ruler, Sheikh Hasina. In reality, the number of enforced disappearances during her rule is now estimated to be much higher, with 4,000 to 6,000 people gone missing. Responding to this dire situation, International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) have emerged as critical advocates for accountability. They operate as virtually the only forums, alongside local NGOs, pressuring the State of Bangladesh for decisive action. Their vital role encompasses monitoring human

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rights violations, basing their findings in international human rights principles stemming from treaty law and customary international law. They also utilise their influence to lobby governmental actors, ensure adherence to the aforementioned international legal standards, and even push for the adoption of necessary legal reforms. Particularly in repressive political environments, INGOs are paramount, as local NGOs often face considerable opposition, suppression or reprisals by political authorities on the ground if they report on human rights violations. What is more, INGOs enjoy considerable legitimacy, as information coming from their reporting activities is held to high credibility standards.

This blog analyses the responses of INGOs to Bangladesh's enforced disappearances crisis, evaluating their effectiveness in positively influencing accountability and awareness-raising efforts globally and within the country. It argues that while INGOs have been effective in shaping global awareness, their ability to generate lasting accountability within Bangladesh is more turbulent. This perspective purports to demonstrate that where a receptive domestic state apparatus is lacking, the capacity of external actors such as INGOs to compel localised institutional reform is limited, redirecting the optimal path of INGO efficacy toward global and forward-looking awareness campaigns. The blog begins with a brief contextual overview of patterns of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh, followed by an examination of the relevant legal framework that Bangladesh is bound to adhere to. These two sections set the scene for an evaluation of the INGO responses, both at the legal and sociopolitical level, to the enforced disappearances crisis in the country, to assess their effectiveness in pushing for positive change.

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Contextual Overview and Patterns of Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh

Enforced disappearances have historically represented a State-sanctioned method of suppressing political dissent since the country’s genesis. Nevertheless, the RAB’s creation in 2004 brought about an unprecedented dimension of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh, with Human Rights Watch having expressed concern for the increasing levels of violence from the early days of the Awami League’s rise to power. Testimonies from victims' families often implicate the RAB or police forces, describing abductions carried out by armed men in plain clothes, with the abductees frequently turning up dead following their disappearance.

Most often, political motivations have underpinned enforced disappearances, with the RAB arresting opposition figures, dissenters and critics of Hasina’s regime. According to an Amnesty Report from 2014, at least 20 victims were prominent members of opposition parties like the BNP or Jamaat-e-Islami. Notable BNP members who

disappeared include Saiful Islam Huru (a former MP and president of the BNP's Laksam branch), Humayun Kabir Parvez (a BNP official) Joshim (a local BNP activist), Ilias Ali (the Sylhet division secretary of the BNP) and Salahuddin Ahmed (a BNP spokesperson). Similarly, Jamaat-e-Islami activists have reportedly disappeared and died in custody in 2015, with police and RAB officials denying any involvement or responsibility. Such patterns of political repression are carried out to normalise the notion that violence can legitimately dominate the public sphere in Bangladesh.

Beyond political motives, corruption and financial gain have perpetuated the enforced disappearances crisis, with the RAB reportedly accepting payments to remove business competitors or individuals with local influence from the public sphere. For instance, the abduction of Abu Bakar Siddique was interpreted by Amnesty International as a warning to his wife, Rizwana Hasan, the executive director of Bangladesh's Environmental Lawyers' Association, who had challenged powerful, polluting companies through lawsuits. The delayed investigation into Siddique's disappearance suggested the involvement of security forces. Another grim example is the 2012 disappearance and subsequent brutal murder of political figure Nazrul Islam and six other persons in Narayanganj by RAB officials.

There exists a pervasive lack of institutional accountability for State authorities who enable the enforced disappearance crisis in Bangladesh. Despite repeated requests and pleadings to the police, it is rare for families of victims to hear back about the whereabouts of their abducted relatives. An entrenched culture of institutional secrecy amongst State actors sustains this system of impunity: when family members have suspected the RAB's involvement in enforced disappearances, the police have often refused to hear their case. Even when complaints are successfully filed, investigations proceed at glacial pace, hampered by deliberate efforts to shield the RAB from scrutiny. Moreover, families who actively seek information or justice for disappeared relatives face the risk of reprisals by the RAB.

The Applicable International Legal Framework on Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh

Throughout Sheikh Hasina's rule, Bangladesh conspicuously lacked a domestic legal framework to address enforced disappearances. However, the State remained bound to well-established obligations under international human rights law. At the treaty level, Bangladesh is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which imposes binding obligations relevant to enforced disappearances. The very nature of such practice, characterised by secret detention, denial of information, and removal from legal

protection, engages multiple protected rights, such as the right to life (Art. 6), liberty and security (Art. 9), freedom from torture and inhuman treatment (Art. 7), and the right to recognition before the law (Art. 16).

Additional treaty obligations arise from the country's ratification of the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT). Given that enforced disappearances involve incommunicado confinement and ill-treatment during detention, they squarely fall within the Convention's scope. Importantly, UNCAT does not only impose negative obligations on State actors to refrain from torture, but also positive obligations to prevent and investigate enforced disappearances. Yet, the country has been in violation of such obligations, due to the mistreatment of persons held in custody by security forces. This was outlined by a Recommendation issued in 2019 by the UN Committee Against Torture that allegations of enforced disappearances were not properly or adequately investigated by State forces.

Even before becoming a party to any of the aforementioned Conventions, Bangladesh was still bound by customary international law to take measures to prevent enforced disappearances from taking place. This is because the prohibition of enforced disappearances is understood within academic and jurisprudential debates as well as the international community to engage *jus cogens* norms. More precisely, while the existence of a standalone *jus cogens* norm prohibiting enforced disappearance remains debated, its constituent elements — including the prohibitions of torture, arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killing, and denial of recognition before the law — are grounded in international human rights law, with torture and arbitrary deprivation of life recognised as non-derogable and/or peremptory prohibitions. Therefore, Bangladesh's obligations are firmly grounded in the reality that enforced disappearances constitute composite violations of established, indisputable *jus cogens* prohibitions. As such, Bangladesh's obligations in this area are non-derogable and apply irrespective of treaty ratification. It is important to briefly acknowledge that the prohibition of arbitrary detention and deprivation of life and liberty are also present in domestic law. Articles 31, 32, and 33 of the Bangladesh Constitution directly protect against arbitrary detention and deprivation of life and liberty.

Nevertheless, a real turning point for the country came in 2024, following Hasina's removal from power, when Bangladesh's interim government acceded to the ICPPED by depositing its instrument of accession with the UN Secretary-General. For the first time, the country took active steps at the international treaty level towards combating this grievous human rights crisis. It is important to note that Bangladesh's accession of the ICPPED would not have happened without the pressure exerted by INGOs on the country's interim government to tangibly demonstrate its commitment to investigating cases of enforced disappearances.

INGOs' Responses to the Bangladesh Enforced Disappearances Crisis

In light of Bangladesh's failure to respect its international law obligations, INGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have assumed the critical task of formally pushing for accountability efforts. First and foremost, INGOs have been instrumental in documenting violations, particularly during Hasina's reign. Through detailed investigations, the verification of individual cases, and the collection of testimonies from victims' families, INGOs produce a sizable evidentiary record. This documentation not only serves an informational purpose, but more crucially, constitutes a form of legal fact-finding, by mapping patterns of breach under the ICCPR and the UNCAT.

INGOs are also indispensable for translating legal standards into actionable steps for Bangladesh. They act as forums that regularly issue statements to Bangladesh's government according to the country's positive obligations under international law, urging State authorities to locate missing persons without delay, secure the release of abductees, initiate rigorous and independent investigations, guarantee fair trials, and protect victims from reprisals. Furthermore, INGOs contribute to the internationalisation of what may otherwise be concealed abuses, by closely collaborating with domestic NGOs like Odhikar and Ain O Salish, who provide them with detailed on-the-ground data of enforced disappearances. These affiliations provide INGOs with indispensable and reliable information from the ground.

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of INGOs' Responses

The effectiveness of INGOs in addressing Bangladesh's enforced disappearances crisis is most pronounced at the global level, where their capacity to shape narratives and mobilise international support has been significant. By translating composite and often opaque patterns of abuse into accessible and compelling formats for public audiences to follow, INGOs ensure that enforced disappearances remain relevant in international discourse. Initiatives such as Amnesty International's Virtual Museum, featuring the profiles of forcibly-disappeared persons, or Joint INGO Statements shedding light on real-time developments, exemplify how human rights violations can be rendered visible and intelligible for international audiences to follow.

Moreover, INGOs have been successful at constructing authoritative narratives around enforced disappearances that extend beyond Bangladesh's borders. Through detailed documentation and collaboration with local partners, INGOs have been instrumental in producing comprehensive reports on enforced disappearances, successfully refuting any official justifications or evasions as to why such instances occur. They consistently expose to the global community the grim reality that enforced disappearances in Bangladesh serve as a

precursor to extrajudicial killings, given the fact that many abductees are found dead. Furthermore, INGOs are successful at identifying patterns behind disappearances, whether political or socioeconomic, which then aid in classifying instances, and evaluating their broader implications such as the rise of impunity, the breakdown of the legal safeguards, and the normalisation of anarchy within civil society. Such documentation carries legal significance: INGOs provide tangible evidence supporting claims that Bangladesh has breached its obligations under the ICCPR and UNCAT, while also providing a basis for assessing Bangladesh's post-accession compliance with the ICPPED.

However, the impact of INGOs within Bangladesh itself is a much more complicated story. During Hasina's rule, the government consistently rejected accounts of enforced disappearances, despite INGO reports being damaging to the country's standing at the international level. At the time, pressure from INGOs proved largely ineffective in changing the government's stance, with Human Rights Watch acknowledging the government's lack of intent to address violations. That being said, pressure from INGOs did achieve some targeted successes, particularly when their advocacy intersected with other international pressure mechanisms. For example, sustained campaigning by Amnesty International coupled with public outcry led to a key development in 2014, when three RAB officials were removed from duty and faced investigations for alleged abuse of power, including involvement in the abduction and murder of the seven individuals in Narayanganj. This pressure also resulted in the initiation of court proceedings against various RAB officers. Such outcomes demonstrate that INGOs did facilitate partial accountability during Hasina's reign, especially their findings generated sufficient public scrutiny.

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More recently, between 2021 and 2022, Human Rights Watch and eleven other human rights NGOs urged the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations to bar the RAB from UN peacekeeping operations because of its extensive record of enforced disappearances. This move drew unwanted attention to the UN's peacekeeping activities, compelling the international community to act. International stakeholders began to openly criticise the RAB, and the United States even imposed economic sanctions on the unit. While seemingly a purely political outcome, the targeted deployment of economic sanctions as a mechanism for enforcing human rights accountability represents an effective but also much debated practice in international law. In any case, the US sanctions proved to be influential: following their imposition, reported enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh declined significantly, demonstrating that targeted sanctions can operate as a strategic tool for addressing gross human rights violations.

The period following Sheikh Hasina's removal from power has brought about a more receptive environment for INGO influence on the enforced disappearances crisis. Following consistent INGO advocacy, individuals previously held in secret prisons were released. Another success for INGOs' campaigning efforts was the signing of the ICPPED by the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus. Smriti Singh, the Regional Director for South Asia at Amnesty International, welcomed this step towards "the long road to truth, justice and reparations for victims and their families".

Despite these initial successes, there is still much work ahead for INGOs. Since August 2024, Amnesty International had been urging the interim government to translate the ICPPED into a domestic legal framework that criminalises enforced disappearances, applies retrospectively to address past violations, and facilitates the reporting of new incidents. This pressure led to the announcement of a Disappearances Inquiry Commission. Additionally, the interim government promulgated a set of ordinances, including the National Human Rights Commission Ordinance and the Enforced Disappearance Prevention and Remedy Ordinance, in an effort to strengthen domestic accountability mechanisms and implement Bangladesh's ICPPED obligations. The legal significance of the two Ordinances was that they would considerably strengthen the NHRC to investigate abuses committed by security forces as well as monitor detention centres in a manner consistent with the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT). Following the first national elections in February 2026, the BNP-led government continued to push for the NHRC's renewed powers to provide redress, with 1,569 complaints of enforced disappearances being registered. Nevertheless, progress remains fragile. Although international human rights organisations urged the government to enact the relevant NHRC and enforced disappearance ordinances, the ordinances subsequently lapsed after they were not introduced and approved as bills within the required timeframe. The government has indicated that revised bills may be introduced after further scrutiny. It is therefore deducible that INGOs' ability to produce lasting change within Bangladesh remains dependent on the domestic political dynamics and attitudes of institutional enforcement.

Unfortunately, Hasina's legacy of enforced disappearances still lives on in Bangladesh despite the change of governance and the work of INGOs: in a statement to the country's newly-elected government, INGOs such as Human Rights Watch, CIVICUS, and Article 19 claim that at least 287 people are still missing in the country.

Conclusion

Enforced disappearances in Bangladesh remain a severe and persistent human rights issue, rooted in State complicity and exacerbated by weak institutional accountability. Despite being bound by obligations under

international human rights law, for many years, Bangladesh's government failed to prevent, investigate, and remedy violations. In this vacuum, this blog has explored how INGOs have stepped in as counterweights, forcing the crisis onto the international stage, by exposing State abuses, raising awareness, and advocating for positive change. Yet, as this blog has demonstrated, while INGOs have succeeded at global narrative-building, mobilising international scrutiny and triggering extraterritorial pressure, their impact on the ground inside Bangladesh remains fragmented and, at times, insufficient. While the latest changes in government have brought some initial successes for INGO campaigns on the enforced disappearance crisis, such as the signing of the ICPPED, much work remains ahead. Specifically, the lapse of the Enforced Disappearance Prevention and Remedy Ordinance without parliamentary enactment by the newly elected parliament reveals a sobering reality: INGOs can pressure an interim administration into making international commitments, but they cannot guarantee the legislative willpower required to sustain them.

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