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Bangladesh: An Outburst of Hope for South Asia

AFAD commends the people and interim government of Bangladesh for taking the historic step of becoming a state party to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (ICPPED). By signing the Instrument of Accession and submitting it to the UN Headquarters, Bangladesh has shown a firm commitment to fully implement the provisions of the Convention. AFAD urges the interim government to adopt robust legislation against enforced disappearances and establish effective mechanisms to ensure accountability and justice for victims and their families. Additionally, AFAD calls on the government to formally recognize the competence of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, further demonstrating its dedication to upholding the Convention's principles.

For many years, families in Bangladesh have endured immense pain and suffering due to enforced disappearances. The decision to sign this treaty, led by Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, marks a significant departure from the ousted past administration. It signals a renewed dedication to human rights and justice, offering hope for a future where such inhumane practices are no longer tolerated.

The context in which Bangladesh's accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) took place cannot be overlooked. The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in power since 2009 had long been criticized for its human rights record. Reports from Amnesty International, including "Stop Them, Now!", documented a disturbing pattern of human rights abuses under her administration, including enforced disappearances, torture, and restrictions on freedom of expression.

Sheikh Hasina's tenure was marked by increasing authoritarianism and a crackdown on dissent. Her 15-year rule became synonymous with human rights violations, culminating in the United States imposing sanctions on Bangladesh's elite Rapid Action Battalion for its involvement in enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. The political landscape further shifted in 2024 when Hasina, facing massive protests and calls for her resignation, fled the country after 15 years in power. This departure marked a significant turning point in Bangladesh's political history, with the future of the country now hinging on the ability of the interim government to organize fair elections and address both domestic and international concerns about human rights and governance.

According to data collected by Odhikar, between January 2009 and June 2024, 709 people were subjected to enforced disappearances by law enforcement and security forces under Hasina's regime, with 155 individuals still missing. Odhikar believes the actual number of victims is likely higher, as many families have not come forward due to the culture of fear created by the authoritarian government. Many of these victims were political opponents, primarily from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami and dissenting voices, including academics,

journalists The establishment of a five-member commission led by retired high court judge Moeenul Islam Chowdhury is a critical step forward. This commission, ordered to begin work by the interim government, has been given 45 days to submit its report, and there is a strong call from the public and rights groups like Maayer Daak for full transparency in its findings. The interim government's efforts to investigate these grave violations offer a beacon of hope to the families of the disappeared, who have long sought justice. However, it is imperative that the investigation is thorough, impartial, and results in accountability for those responsible, including within the ranks of security forces.

This bold move by Bangladesh sets an important example for other countries in the region, such as Pakistan and India, to follow. It demonstrates that even in the face of a challenging history, a nation can take significant steps toward justice and human rights. We urge Bangladesh to continue down this path, ensuring that the acceding of this treaty marks the beginning of a broader commitment to human rights for all its citizens.

Once again, we salute Bangladesh on this significant milestone and look forward to witnessing the positive changes this decision will bring, not only to Bangladesh but to the entire region.

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