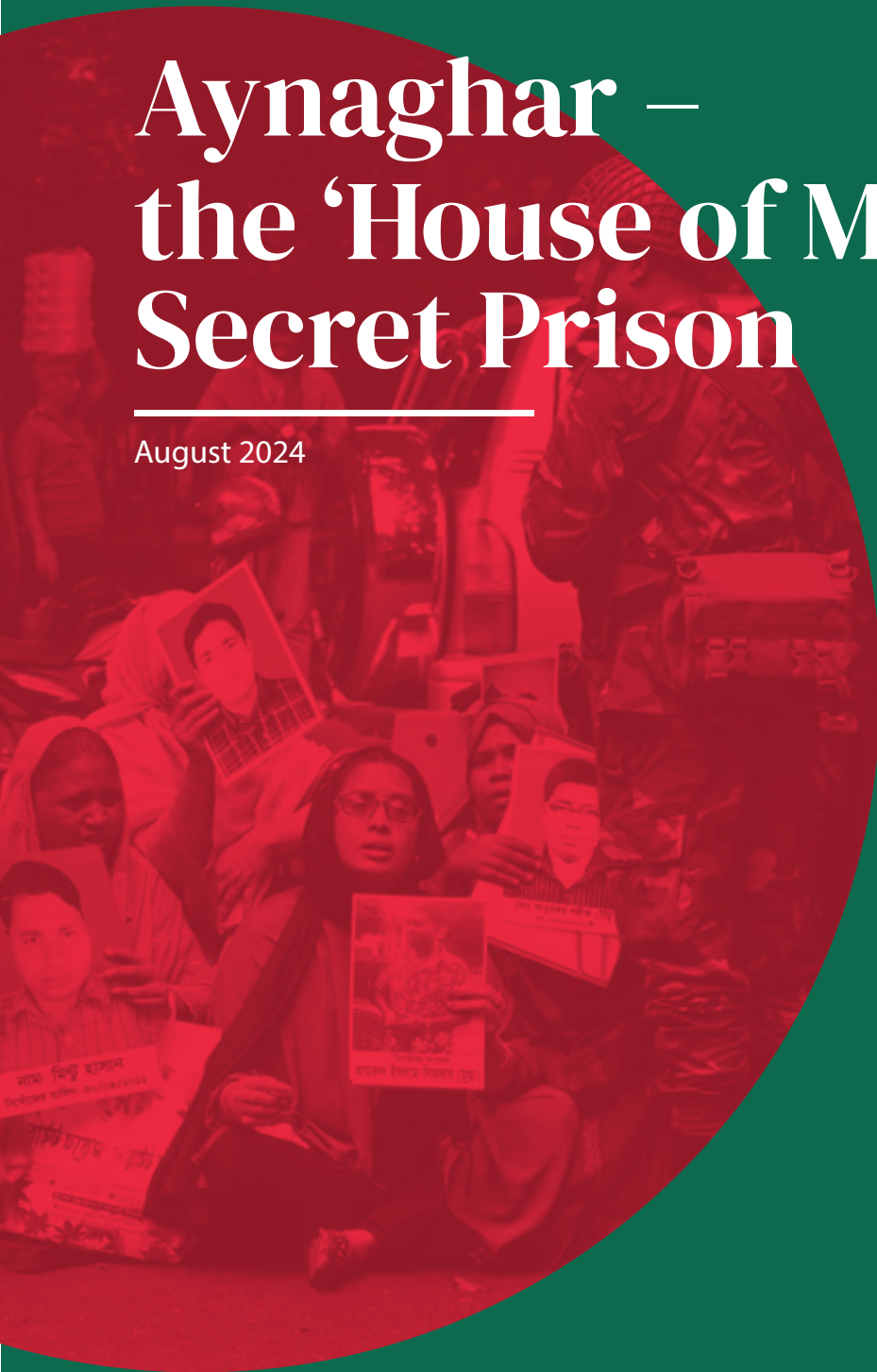


# Aynaghar – the ‘House of Mirrors’ Secret Prison

August 2024



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**“Those who will be murdered are taken to the torture cell of this Aynaghar, and those who will be kept alive are tortured and confined here for years.”**

**Tarique Rahman**

Acting chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.<sup>1</sup>

1



# Enforced Disappearance Under Sheikh Hasina



# Enforced Disappearance Under Sheikh Hasina

Since Sheikh Hasina rose to power in 2009, over 750 Bangladeshis were forcibly disappeared by security forces, mostly political opponents and activists. Over 150 people still remain missing.<sup>2</sup>

During Hasina's rule, there were rumours of secret prisons where these prisoners were being kept. However, Hasina's government always denied the existence of such prisons.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, Hasina's government claimed that Bangladeshis reported missing had drowned in small boats whilst trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout her rule, Hasina denied the existence of enforced disappearances altogether, and ignored appeals from the families of the disappeared, inquiries from Bangladesh's Supreme Court, the UN Committee Against Torture, and NGOs such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, to investigate the matter.<sup>5</sup>

**“While I was there in that prison, I heard a lot of people crying in different cells. I am lucky that I got released, but many unfortunate people are still there.”**

**Sheikh Mohammad Salim**

Former prisoner at Aynaghar.<sup>6</sup>



2



## What Is The House Of Mirrors (Aynaghar) Prison?

## 2

# What Is The House Of Mirrors (Aynaghar) Prison?

Aynaghar, or the House of Mirrors, was a secret prison in Bangladesh where political dissidents were imprisoned for years without trial, tortured, and even executed.<sup>7</sup>

The prison was given the name Aynaghar because prisoners were only able to see themselves; kept in solitary confinement throughout their detention, and they could only hear the screams of other prisoners being tortured.<sup>8</sup>

The prison was run by army intelligence officers from the Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Bureau of the Director General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), who did not relay any news to prisoners from the outside world and played music constantly throughout the day to prevent prisoners from knowing how much time had passed based on the sound of the Adhan from local mosques.<sup>9</sup>

The prison's existence first became public in 2022, following a report by a whistleblower.

There are reportedly 30 cells inside Aynaghar, with soundproof investigation cells where prisoners are tortured.<sup>10</sup>

However, only since the Bangladesh Students Against Discrimination Movement, which overthrew Hasina's regime on 5 August 2024, has the secret prison and the torture which took place there become public knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Several prisoners have been released since Hasina was overthrown, and as of 7 August 2024, the Bangladesh Armed Forces have stated that there are no detainees remaining in Aynaghar.<sup>12</sup>

Families of the disappeared reject the DGFI's statement and have been protesting outside its headquarters, demanding to inspect Aynaghar and 23 other detention centres across Bangladesh where the disappeared are believed to be imprisoned.<sup>13</sup>



**“Please ask my family to  
not stop searching for  
me and tell them that the  
government brought me  
here.”**

...

A note carved onto a wall inside one of the prison cells inside the  
House of Mirrors.<sup>14</sup>

**3**



# Torture And Abuse Of Prisoners

# 3

## Torture And Abuse Of Prisoners

Torture of prisoners has been widespread in Bangladesh under successive governments.<sup>15</sup>

### Reports of torture include:

- Beatings with iron rods, belts, and sticks
- Using electric shocks on their ears and sexual organs
- Waterboarding
- Hanging detainees from ceilings and beating them
- Deliberately shooting to maim, including kneecapping them
- Forcing prolonged exposure to loud music and sounds
- Committing mock executions; and subjecting them to forced nudity.<sup>16</sup>

Allegations of torture in Bangladesh under Hasina were rarely investigated or prosecuted.<sup>17</sup>

In July 2019, the 'UN Committee Against Torture' described the Bangladesh police as a "state within a state", and "the police, as well as other law enforcement agencies, were able to operate with impunity and zero accountability".<sup>18</sup>

“I often begged the guard who escorted me to the toilet to just shoot and kill me, as I saw no hope of seeing my family or daylight again.”

**Michael Chakma**

An Indigenous rights activist from Bangladesh forcibly disappeared for over five years, who was released from prison on 5 August 2024.<sup>19</sup>

# 4



## Testimonies From Survivors

## 4

# Testimonies From Survivors



**Ahmad Bin Quasem**

Ahmad Bin Quasem is a lawyer who was imprisoned in the House of Mirrors for eight years before being released on 5 August 2024.<sup>20</sup>

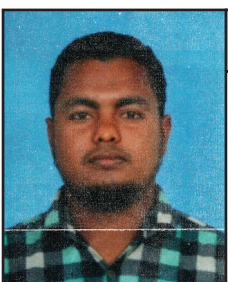
He had been taken from his family home by a group of men during the night, whilst preparing the legal defence for his father, Mir Quasem Ali, who was under trial by Hasina for allegedly torturing pro-independence Bangladeshis during Bangladesh’s Liberation War against Pakistan in 1971.<sup>21</sup>

Quasem’s father was hanged four weeks after his son’s disappearance, which Quasem did not know about for another three years.<sup>22</sup>

Quasem was shackled in windowless solitary confinement for the entire eight years of his imprisonment, was prevented from knowing the time to conduct his five daily prayers, and often heard the screams of other prisoners being tortured.<sup>23</sup>

After Hasina fled the country - unbeknownst to Quasem – he was blindfolded, handcuffed, and shoved into a car, and then dumped in a ditch on the outskirts of Dhaka: “the first time [he] got fresh air in eight years”.<sup>24</sup>

He then walked through the night until he was able to find a medical clinic that could reconnect him with his family.<sup>25</sup>



**Sheikh Mohammad Salim**

Sheikh Mohammad Salim was abducted by a group of men at an auto repair shop and was severely tortured and beaten whilst in prison.<sup>26</sup>

Salim reported that his cells in Aynaghar had no windows, a high ceiling with just one light, loud and huge exhaust fans, the sounds of which drowned out every other sound in the room.<sup>27</sup>

He recorded that the walls of his cell had been carved with the writings of many prisoners before him, many of whom wrote about their abduction by the DGFI.<sup>28</sup>

Salim was not the security services intended target, and as a victim of mistaken identity, he was soon released, after which he fled to Malaysia.<sup>29</sup>



**Abdullah Aman Azmi**

Former army brigadier, Abdullah Aman Azmi - son of the late Ghulam Azam, who was the leader of the Jamaat-e-Islami party of Bangladesh - spent eight years in Aynaghar

after being captured from his home in 2016 for defending his father’s ideologies.<sup>31</sup>

His family were oblivious to his capture, leading to his wife believing him dead and remarrying after seven years. During his detainment, he learned of his mother’s death three years after it occurred.<sup>32</sup>

Azmi reported that he faced intense isolation during his eight years spent in detention, stating after his release: “How long have I not seen the light and air, I have not seen the world of Allah, I have not been allowed to hear the call to prayer”.<sup>33</sup>

Azmi was released on 6 August after Hasina’s resignation.<sup>34</sup>



“It didn’t feel like eight years for us. It felt like eight lifetimes.”

**Ayesha Khatoon**

Mother of Ahmad Bin Quasem, who was imprisoned in the House of Mirrors for eight years.<sup>30</sup>



# FOOTNOTES

**1** ‘What is Aynaghar, Sheikh Hasina’s house of horrors for political prisoners’ *India Today* (7 August 2024) available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/aynaghar-aynaghor-sheikh-hasina-house-of-mirror-political-prisoners-bangladesh-protests-pm-forced-disappearances-2578386-2024-08-07>

**2** ‘My family held a funeral for me’: Bangladesh’s ‘disappeared’ emerge from secret prisons’ *The Guardian* (15 August 2024) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/article/2024/aug/15/bangladesh-sheikh-hasina-michael-chakma-disappeared>

**3-4** ‘Bangladeshi Lawyer Reveals Sheikh Hasina’s Secret Jail “House Of Mirrors”’ *NDTV World* (14 August 2024) available at <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/disappeared-bangladeshi-lawyer-recounts-hasinas-secret-jail-6334392>

**5** ‘My family held a funeral for me’: Bangladesh’s ‘disappeared’ emerge from secret prisons’ *The Guardian*

**6** ‘What is Aynaghar, Sheikh Hasina’s house of horrors for political prisoners’ *India Today*

**7-9** ‘Bangladeshi Lawyer Reveals Sheikh Hasina’s Secret Jail “House Of Mirrors”’ *NDTV World*

**10** ‘What is Aynaghar, Sheikh Hasina’s house of horrors for political prisoners’ *India Today*

**11** ‘Bangladeshi Lawyer Reveals Sheikh Hasina’s Secret Jail “House Of Mirrors”’ *NDTV World*

**12-14** ‘What is Aynaghar, Sheikh Hasina’s house of horrors for political prisoners’ *India Today*

**15** ‘Bangladesh: Torture and Impunity’ *Amnesty International*

(November 2000) available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa130072000en.pdf>

**16** ‘Bangladesh: Hold Security Forces Accountable for Torture’ Human Rights Watch (26 June 2021) available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/26/bangladesh-hold-security-forces-accountable-torture>

**17-18** ‘Allegations of Bangladesh Police Torture, Illegal Detentions’ Human Rights Watch (3 January 2023) available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/03/allegations-bangladesh-police-torture-illegal-detentions>

**19** ‘My family held a funeral for me’: Bangladesh’s ‘disappeared’ emerge from secret prisons’ *The Guardian*

**20-25** ‘Bangladeshi Lawyer Reveals Sheikh Hasina’s Secret Jail “House Of Mirrors”’ *NDTV World*

**26-29** ‘What is Aynaghar, Sheikh Hasina’s house of horrors for political prisoners’ *India Today*

**30** ‘Bangladeshi Lawyer Reveals Sheikh Hasina’s Secret Jail “House Of Mirrors”’ *NDTV World*

**31-34** ‘Former army brigadier released after 8 years following Hasina’s downfall’ *The Siasat Daily* (10 August 2024) available at <https://www.siasat.com/former-army-brigadier-released-after-8-years-following-hasinas-downfall-3077022/amp/>