

# A tribute to Tasnim Jara

by Md Mahmudul Hasan

Sheikh Hasina's mafia-style autocracy ended on 5 August 2024. However, in a Hasina-free Bangladesh, we cannot simply put all the blame on one person and claim innocence from culpability for acts and circumstances that led to the rise of the autocracy. People who ran the country for decades and the opportunists who maintained strong links with the corridors of power (and influence) cannot escape responsibility for what Bangladesh became on Hasina's watch and what we are still witnessing under.

It is true that human rights violations during the Hasina regime reached unprecedented levels in Bangladesh. She and her ministers and cronies also flagrantly pilfered state coffers and public funds. However, let's turn our attention away from their human rights and financial crimes for a while.

How has Bangladesh been doing in general in the past half a century or so?

It may sound unbelievable, but the following is only a partial description of what Bangladesh became, or perhaps still is.

Corruption, rent-seeking and other forms of economic crime have become rampant in Bangladesh's public offices. Honesty and efficiency are considered of little importance for public officials (politicians and civil servants). Many honest and efficient government servants would not be promoted, as they refused to pay (often exorbitant) bribes to their superiors to secure a promotion (or because they have the wrong political background).

Moreover, an honest officer is a misfit in an institutional environment where corruption is pervasive. As they are considered an impediment to corrupt practices, their crooked colleagues would go the extra mile to get them transferred to a remote area.

Long story short, moral rectitude in our country is not rewarded. It is punished.

Ours is a country where we don't feel surprised by the news that a police officer can acquire so much ill-gotten wealth that they can own multiple resorts. It is no news that politicians and their cronies use black money to buy expensive properties in high-end countries.

On a separate note, our Dhaka airport is an interesting place to observe how those who sustain the financial health of Bangladesh are neglected and those who loot the country are given privileged treatment. Migrant workers who — through blood and sweat, and pain and suffering — keep our economy on a steady and stable track are often harassed at the time of both exit and arrival. Conversely, those who plunder our land and go on holiday to foreign destinations — and spend our money abroad — are saluted and attended to.



Tasnim Jara at the 80th session of the UN General Assembly, which opened on September 9.

— NCP

Accounts of the above and other aberrations and examples of structural damage to our country can go on and on.

Such a state of affairs prevailing in Bangladesh leads many of its bright minds to settle abroad and discourages others from returning and giving back and contributing to the well-being of their country. I am one of those who are having to regularly deal with the guilt of not being able to live with the people of my country and to serve them more directly.

Tasnim Jara is an exception. A graduate of the prestigious Viharunnisa Noon School and College, she studied medicine at Dhaka Medical College. She furthered her training in the field at the University of Oxford and was thriving as a healthcare professional and academic at Cambridge. Thus, she

received the best of education and training in Bangladesh and Britain.

Like many others, Tasnim Jara could have stayed back and pursued a highly rewarding career in the UK. However, she chose to come back to Bangladesh and serve its people in a true sense. She prepared herself to bear with Dhaka's (poor) living standards and with all the complaints that its inhabitants have about their city — all for the sake of her country and its people.

Given her academic accomplishments, experience and superb presentation skills (in both Bangla and English and in both oral and written), Tasnim Jara is best positioned to serve Bangladesh domestically and represent it internationally.

We all have our political views, and Tasnim

Jara has hers. Being a senior leader of a political party, she is probably more political than many of us. However, transcending political divisions that exist in our country, it is perhaps safe to say that she is a national asset for our country.

But are we ready to appreciate her intellect, confidence and sense of altruism?

Bangladeshi youth, especially young women, who dream and work for a better Bangladesh were perhaps very pleased to see Tasnim Jara included in the Bangladeshi delegation to the 2025 UN General Assembly. She was the only woman (and perhaps the brightest) in the professor Yunus-led delegation that went to the global forum to represent our country.

However, some New York-based Awami miscreants were unable to be happy and had a different agenda. They attacked Tasnim Jara

and other Bangladeshi politicians upon their arrival at New York's John F Kennedy International Airport on the evening of September 22, 2025. The Awami rascals singled out Tasnim Jara for vile sexist slurs. Against their sexist harassment, Tasnim Jara stood tall with her head held high. She faced the verbal vulgarity and aggressive behaviour on the part of those Awami men with an equanimity and grace that is worthy of a person of her stature.

The sexist mob assault on Tasnim Jara at JFK was an affront to the core values of gender egalitarianism and respect for women and for their right to participate in public life. The obscene verbal abuse and threats directed at her went beyond political rivalry. The language used to harass and intimidate her was blatantly sexist.

There are strong feminist organisations in Bangladesh that make statements and take to the streets to voice out their concerns about gender-related issues or to show their discontent about the marginality of women in society. Unfortunately, the vulgarity of the verbal assault on Tasnim Jara in New York has not elicited any strong response from the dominant feminist groups in Bangladesh.

Their silence about the verbal violence against Tasnim Jara rekindles the debate about their political linkages that I discussed in 'Silence over rape and feminist groups' political link' (2024). In that essay, I quoted Ashok Kumar, who said in his book *Women and Development* (2005): 'In Bangladesh, the women's movement is highly diverse. The largest associations are associated with political parties .... [T]heir autonomy in promoting gender-equity concerns in development policy is compromised by their association with the traditional parties.'

Given this debate about the political bias of Bangladesh's feminist groups, one can argue that they kept quiet about the sexual harassment at JFK against Tasnim Jara because of their clandestine linkages with the political party to which the attackers belong. Irrespective of the veracity or otherwise of this charge, the onus is on Dhaka-based feminist groups to prove that their activism is independent of any political affiliation.

Tasnim Jara is not simply an individual. She represents the hopes and aspirations of the Bangladeshi youth who are ready to make big sacrifices to bring post-Hasina Bangladesh to new heights. If Tasnim Jara succeeds, Bangladesh will succeed. If she is forced to regret her decision to have left Britain to serve Bangladesh, that may dampen the desire of other Tasnim Jaras to come back (after higher education abroad) and serve the country.

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## A FATHER'S CRY

# Silenced families of Bangladesh and Gaza

by Md Rabiul Alam

IT WAS the first of July, a school holiday, when I lived through what I can only describe as every parent's nightmare. The day began as usual. After the Fajr prayer, I left quietly for the university, believing all was in order at home. My five-year-old younger son was still asleep — or so I thought — while my wife and our elder son were resting in another bedroom. With that assurance, I set off for my office, never imagining how the morning would unfold.

Two hours later, at nine o'clock, my mobile phone rang. It was my wife. Her voice trembled with panic as she asked where our younger son was. I replied that he was not with me — and in that instant, our world turned upside down. He was missing. My heart sank, and my thoughts raced in disbelief. I rushed back home immediately, my footsteps heavy with dread.

The moment I reached our apartment, I joined my wife in frantically searching every corner. But he was nowhere to be found. Realising he was not within the building, I bolted outside. I ran from one park to another, then on to the campus parklands, scanning every corner, but still there was no trace of him. My heart pounded, my body felt like stone, and each minute stretched into an eternity. For ninety agonising minutes, my son was missing.

Just as hope began to fade, a message appeared on my phone. The school manager sent an email: 'A six-year-old boy has been found unaccompanied, wandering in front of the School of Education building lift.' My hands trembled as I read the words. Relief and dread collided inside me. Was it truly him? Was he safe? Without a second thought, I sprinted across campus, every step propelled by fear and hope.

When I arrived at the building, I saw him sitting quietly, surrounded by three police officers, three security guards, and several staff members. The sight of him — alive, unharmed — unleashed a wave of relief so powerful I nearly collapsed. Tears poured as I praised Allah and held him tightly. He was safe, though the ordeal's weight will never leave me.

Later, once calm had settled, I asked him how he had left the house. He explained that when he woke up and did not find me, he became anxious. Believing I was at the university, he decided to come to me. Without telling his mother, he opened the door and set out on his own. Step by step, he had walked the long path, eventually entering the School of Education building to find me. For a child so young, it was a remarkable journey, but for me as a father, it was deeply worrying.

As my panic subsided, I began to see echoes of my fear in wider struggles. That morning's events left me shaken to the core, but they also sparked two reflections: one on Bangladesh's enforced disappearances, the other on Gaza's unimaginable suffering. Both are bound by the same haunting truths: the agony of absence, the cruelty of silence, and the moral imperative of accountability.



Displaced Palestinian children line up to receive food in Rafah, Gaza.

— Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

For ninety minutes, I lived in excruciating suspension — not knowing where my child was, whether he was safe, or what had happened to him. That torment, though temporary, gave me a glimpse into the abyss of uncertainty that thousands of Bangladeshi families endured for years. My story ended with a reunion. Theirs did not. For sixteen years under autocracy, enforced disappearances became a grim feature of Bangladesh's political landscape. Families were left in anguish as loved ones vanished — from homes, workplaces, or airports. Some reappeared broken by detention; many never returned. These were not accidents of fate but deliberate strategies to erase human beings and silence dissent.

Enforced disappearance is not merely the removal of a body. It is also the removal of truth. Philosopher Miranda Ricker calls this an 'epistemic injustice' — a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. Families of the disappeared are denied the ability to know what happened, to grieve with certainty, and to speak with authority about their own suffering. This denial multiplies the cruelty, trapping them in an endless cycle of hope and despair. In Bangladesh, this cruelty was compounded by silence, fear, and denial, which allowed the

practice to become normalised.

The fall of the Hasina regime in August 2024, toppled by a student-led uprising that claimed more than a thousand lives and left tens of thousands injured, opened a new chapter. An interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus now faces a profound test: will it confront this legacy of violence and silence, or quietly cover it over in the name of stability? Justice requires more than acknowledgement. It requires a national registry of missing persons, accessible to families and the public, to ensure that the disappeared are not erased from history. Survivors must be supported with financial, legal, and psychosocial assistance. Most importantly, exemplary punishment must be ensured for perpetrators, so justice is not only done but seen to be done. International human rights organisations should also be invited to monitor progress, ensuring that Bangladesh aligns with global standards.

The agony I felt for ninety minutes was intolerable, yet it ended with relief. For countless families in Bangladesh, the agony continues — day after day, year after year. Their loved ones remain missing, their truth denied, their silence enforced. Forgetting would be complicity. Remembering, and demanding accountability,

is the only path to justice.

Even as my thoughts turned to Bangladesh, my heart could not ignore another wound in our world — the suffering of Gaza's children. While my own ordeal lasted only an hour and a half, children in Gaza live in a nightmare without end. My son was found safe. In Gaza, children are buried under rubble, torn from their families, or left to wander alone because their parents no longer live to call their names. Where my fear ended in reunion, theirs often ends in silence.

Each day in Gaza, children wake up to explosions and fall asleep to cries of grief. Schools become graves, playgrounds become battlefields, and homes collapse in an instant. The ordinary joys of childhood — running, playing, laughing — are swallowed by smoke, hunger, and blood. And now, even the act of survival has become perilous. Many children have been shot dead while standing in queues for food parcels donated by other countries. What should have been a moment of relief and nourishment turns into horror, where hunger meets bullets. The image of fragile bodies where children once queued for bread should haunt the world's conscience.

For parents in Gaza, the pain is relentless.

Like the families of the disappeared in Bangladesh, they live in constant uncertainty. But for them, the terror is multiplied each day. A father never knows if he will see his children alive again. A mother, clutching her baby, cannot be sure whether the next strike will shatter the fragile shield of her arms. Their lives are not suspended for an hour, as mine was, but for weeks, months, and years — an endless suspension between hope and despair.

To connect the agony of one father in Brisbane with the suffering of countless fathers and mothers in Gaza is not to equate experiences but to recognise a shared human truth: the unbearable pain of absence, the cruelty of silence, and the desperate longing for safety. When I finally held my child again, relief overwhelmed me. But that relief sharpened my awareness of the parents in Gaza who may never hold their children again, who are left with broken cradles, empty beds, and memories violently cut short.

If ninety minutes of fear felt like a lifetime to me, what words can capture the eternity of grief etched into the hearts of Gaza's parents? Their anguish is beyond measure, and yet their dignity remains: they weep, they bury, and still they love. The world must not look away. This tragedy demands more than sympathy — it demands action. World leaders, the United Nations, and human rights organisations cannot remain passive. They must press for an immediate ceasefire, ensure unimpeded humanitarian aid, and hold accountable those who commit crimes against children and civilians. Beyond speeches and resolutions, there must be real consequences for those who target the innocent. Otherwise, the cries of Gaza's children will echo as an indictment of our shared humanity.

That morning in Brisbane changed me forever. For an hour and a half, I experienced what it means to be suspended between hope and despair. My story ended in reunion, but it gave me a window into the permanent anguish of others. In Bangladesh, enforced disappearance is a political and epistemic crime that has stolen both lives and truths; it must be confronted with remembrance, accountability, and reform. In Gaza, the ongoing violence against children has robbed families of safety, dignity, and future.

Both truths converge on a single point: disappearance — whether political or personal, permanent or temporary — exposes our deepest vulnerabilities. Both demand action, for silence carries a terrible cost. Every disappearance leaves a wound — and our duty is to ensure those wounds are neither forgotten nor repeated.

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