An Open Letter in Defense of Historical Memory, Freedom of Expression, and Shahriar Kabir

Issued jointly by Genocide Watch (United States), Chair of the Alliance Against Genocide, together with Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (Canada), European Bangladesh Forum (UK and EU), International Crimes Strategy Forum (United Kingdom), South Asian Democratic Forum (Belgium), NEVER AGAIN Association (Poland), Greek Helsinki Monitor (Greece), Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security (United States), Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (United States), and Anti-Discrimination Centre Memorial Brussels (Belgium).

With the endorsement of distinguished international scholars and human rights experts, including: Professor Irwin Cotler, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada; Professor Ben Kiernan, A.Whitney Griswold Professor of History Emeritus, Yale University, Founding Director, Genocide Studies Program, Yale University; Professor Jan Tomasz Gross, Professor of History Emeritus, Princeton University, and author of *Neighbors*; Dr Helen Jarvis, Vice President, Permanent People's Tribunal, Cambodia; and Dr Gregory H. Stanton, Founding President, Genocide Watch, Chair, the Alliance Against Genocide. A full list of individual endorsers appears below.

5 October 2026

Renowned Bangladeshi writer (winner of the Bangla Academy Award), journalist, and documentary filmmaker Shahriar Kabir, born in 1950, has been detained since September 2024.
Kabir has spent much of his life documenting the history and legacy of the 1971 Liberation War of independence, including the international crimes committed during the war, the role of the Pakistani army and its local collaborators, raising questions of accountability and justice for past human rights violations. He has authored over 70 books and 16 documentary films to address these subjects. His work has received support from prominent scholars and organisations working at the intersection of

genocide prevention and human rights, including those with experience in the field of genocide and human rights in Bangladesh. Their involvement reflects an understanding of the significant historical dimensions of Kabir's case, which should be understood within the context of his struggle for historical memory and freedom of expression.

Kabir faces multiple criminal charges, including murder and crimes against humanity, which are widely viewed as politically motivated (see, for example, here, here, here, and here). The concerns about the motivation behind the charges are reinforced by the findings of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. Its Opinion No. 40/2025, discussed below, found that Kabir's detention was arbitrary and that his deprivation of liberty was linked to the exercise of his rights to freedom of expression and opinion.
In August 2025, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that Kabir's arrest was connected to his political opinions and his secular views opposing religious extremism, and involved numerous violations of his right to a fair trial and due process, an opinion reiterated on 14 April 2026 by five UN Special Rapporteurs. The Rapporteurs criticised the authorities for not having provided any evidence and for rejecting bail on humanitarian grounds. Kabir's deteriorating health and harsh prison conditions have also raised serious concerns.
In total, 14 cases have been filed against Kabir: 12 under the Penal Code and two before the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). Absolutely no evidence has been presented against Kabir in the murder cases and the prosecution is yet to submit any evidence against him in most of the other cases. In July 2026, Kabir was formally charged before the ICT – ironically, the court initially established to prosecute international crimes committed during the 1971 Liberation War, the subject of Kabir's lifelong advocacy.

In this context,

We, the undersigned,

express our deep concern about the continued detention of renowned Bangladeshi writer, journalist, documentary filmmaker, and historical justice advocate Shahriar Kabir.

We call on the government of Bangladesh to release Kabir immediately and to respect his fundamental rights, including his rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association, humane treatment and dignity, and adequate medical care. His continued detention raises serious concerns about arbitrary detention and the violation of these fundamental rights. Given his deteriorating health, we also call for his immediate release on humanitarian grounds. His treatment in the prison violates the Nelson Mandela Rules (UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners).

The 1971 Liberation War was marked by genocide and crimes against humanity, a historical legacy that remains deeply relevant to Bangladesh's political and human rights landscape today. Kabir himself belongs to a family directly affected by these atrocities, having lost two close family members who were killed during the genocide.

Kabir's work on the history and legacy of the Liberation War can be understood in the context of the principles of Dealing with the Past (DwP) needed for each society to heal after mass violence: the right to know, the right to justice, the right to reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence. Kabir serves as President of the Advisory Council of the Forum for Secular Bangladesh and Trial of War Criminals of 1971, Bangladesh's leading civil society organisation campaigning for justice and

accountability for the 1971 genocide. His advocacy for secularism, religious pluralism, and the protection of minorities can also be understood as part of a broader effort to prevent a recurrence of violence and exclusion.

Kabir's historical work is particularly relevant in relation to the proceedings before the Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal (ICT). The ICT was established to prosecute international crimes committed during the 1971 Liberation War, which has been the central subject of much of Kabir's historical research, writing, filmmaking, and public advocacy. Through his books, films, research, and education activities, Kabir has worked to address the atrocity crimes committed during the war. This includes examining the role of the Pakistani army and its local collaborators as well as pursuing the accountability of the perpetrators.

The proceedings do not directly concern Kabir's historical research and documentation as such, and this connection does not by itself establish the motive behind the prosecution. However, it provides important context for why the ICT prosecution of a prominent writer and justice advocate - whose work focused extensively on the history of the Liberation War - raises serious concerns regarding historical research, freedom of expression, and the preservation of historical memory. This context is evident to many unbiased observers and underscores the significance of Kabir's case.

Arrest, detention and United Nations findings

On 17 September 2024, under the authority of the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus following the July–August 2024 political unrest and the fall of the government of Sheikh Hasina, Kabir was arrested at his home in Dhaka. He was subsequently charged in multiple cases arising from the violence surrounding the 2024 student protests, including murder, attempted murder, abetment and rioting. Kabir has been accused of conspiring, aiding and abetting, directly or indirectly instigating, and participating in killings committed during the then administration, although he had no official position or government function. Kabir has never been connected to any forces involved in the clashes or present at any site of violence. Moreover, he was not involved in any decision related to it. The accusations against him have reportedly been submitted to the police by his political opponents, who have been linked to radical Islamist groups and have been critical of his work. Kabir has denied allegations and according to his lawyer, no evidence has yet been submitted in any of these cases. Moreover, through decades of his activism, Kabir has never endorsed violence and consistently used non-violent means, such as writing, filmmaking, advocacy, petitions, peaceful demonstrations, and legal reforms to promote peace, democratic secular values, seek justice, and defend the rights of minorities. The baseless charges against Kabir for crimes against humanity before Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) are connected with the Shapla Chattar case, concerning violence surrounding a 2013 rally organised by Hefazat-e-Islam, a radical fundamentalist movement that emerged in the early 2010s and campaigned against secularism and religious pluralism, including demands for strict blasphemy laws and repressive measures against secular and atheist bloggers. As in the other cases, Kabir was not present at the scene of the violence which occurred at the rally and he was not involved in any decisions related to it. The ICT proceedings involve multiple other individuals who have been accused of similar crimes, including former senior government, police and military officials. However, Kabir's case is of particular concern because of his status as a non-holder of any official position. Indeed, his lifelong work documenting the history and atrocities of the Liberation War and promoting justice and accountability for their perpetrators, makes his prosecution before the ICT particularly relevant to the protection of historical memory and freedom of expression.

Kabir had been previously imprisoned between 2001 and 2002. In November 2001, he was arrested upon his return to Bangladesh from India after documenting attacks on minorities. Amnesty International recognised Kabir as a 'prisoner of conscience'. Kabir was never convicted and the case was closed in 2008 after a court dismissed the charges as baseless.

Kabir's outspoken secularism and public criticism of religious extremism, including policies of the Islamist political parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam, might have also contributed to his arrest. He has addressed the historical facts of collaboration of Jamaat-e-Islami and other forces with the Pakistani military during the Liberation War in the context of atrocity crimes committed during that period. Moreover, he has been an outspoken critic of exclusionary attitudes towards minority groups (for more context, see here and here). For example, he created a documentary about the great Sufi poet Rumi, pointing to the humanistic conception of Islam.

In Opinion No. 40/2025, adopted on 25 August 2025, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found that Kabir's detention was arbitrary and fell under Categories I, II, III, and V. The Working Group concluded that Kabir's deprivation of liberty lacked a legal basis, resulted from Kabir's exercising his rights to freedom of expression and opinion, and involved numerous violations of his right to a fair trial and due process. It also found that Kabir was deprived of his liberty on discriminatory grounds, on the basis of his political opinions and his status as a human rights defender. The Working Group recommended Kabir's immediate release and the granting to him of an enforceable right to compensation and other reparations, in accordance with international law. It urged the government of Bangladesh to ensure a full and independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding the arbitrary deprivation of Kabir's liberty and to take appropriate measures against those responsible for the violation of his rights.

On 12 March 2026, leading civil society organisations from around the world working in the fields of genocide prevention and press freedom addressed an urgent appeal to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Tarique Rahman (in office since February 2026), concerning Kabir's continued detention, deteriorating health, and ill treatment, as well as calling for his immediate release on humanitarian grounds following the findings of the UN Working Group (see here, here, and here).

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has also raised concerns regarding press freedom and arbitrary detention in Bangladesh. In its recommendations to the new government in March 2026, RSF specifically called for the immediate release of Shahriar Kabir and guarantees for his right to a fair judicial process.

On 14 April 2026, five United Nations Special Rapporteurs reiterated serious concerns regarding Kabir's detention, due process, and the authorities' response to the humanitarian grounds for Kabir's release. Despite these findings, Kabir remains detained, with concerns regarding his treatment in detention continuing to be raised.

Health and humanitarian concerns

Kabir's health situation is particularly alarming. Kabir suffers from heart disease, diabetes, and kidney problems. He has a metal rod implanted in his leg that causes difficulty walking and requires that he use a wheelchair because decades ago he had been attacked and shot by a fanatic (the aim was to kill him, but the bullet missed the vital parts of the body).

According to his lawyer's reports, Kabir has experienced three mild heart attacks while in detention. Since his arrest, Kabir's weight has also decreased considerably. According to reports and publicly available photographs and videos, he has consistently been denied access to a wheelchair. Despite his inability to walk or use stairs, Kabir has reportedly been placed on the second floor of Kashimpur Prison, making it difficult for him to access food and medication.

Reports have raised other concerns about verbal abuse, humiliation, attacks by mob groups during court appearances, and the absence of adequate measures to protect Kabir. These circumstances raise the question of whether Kabir's continued detention and ill treatment might place his life at risk.

A matter of historical memory and freedom of expression

The case of Shahriar Kabir concerns the freedom to independently document, research, and discuss a country's collective memory of its past. Kabir's work on the Liberation War has contributed to public knowledge and discussion, both in Bangladesh and across the world.

It is important to emphasise that Shahriar Kabir's work represents a well-founded perspective of Bangladesh's history. His writings and advocacy are situated firmly within the mainstream historical understanding of the events of 1971, including the established historical recognition that mass atrocities, including genocide and crimes against humanity, were committed during the war. His work over several decades has been devoted to documenting the historical truth, preserving the memory of the victims, and campaigning for justice and accountability.

Since the political changes of 2024, concerns have appeared about attempts to revise or erase aspects of Bangladesh's historical memory, including through changes to, or destruction of monuments, museums, memorials and other sites and symbols associated with the Liberation War and the country's history, erasing or distorting the memory of the genocide.

Challenges to the established historical narrative of 1971 have emerged largely from revisionist efforts to dispute, distort, minimise or reinterpret central aspects of the Liberation War and the atrocities committed during it. Although such revisionist narratives are not new, they have intensified since the political turmoil of 2024. This has coincided with a much broader assault on Bangladesh's historical memory. Such debates are legitimate when pursued through historical study, documentation, evidence, and academic and public debate rather than through censorship, intimidation, criminal proceedings, and arbitrary detention.

It is within this wider context that the targeting of figures such as Shahriar Kabir should be understood. As one of Bangladesh's most prominent writers, journalists, and public advocates for justice for the atrocities of 1971, Kabir represents precisely the historical memory that these revisionist efforts seek to eliminate. His politically motivated prosecution cannot therefore be viewed in isolation from the wider political environment in which the history he has spent decades documenting and defending is itself increasingly under attack.

The repression of intellectuals, historians, writers, and journalists hinders a society's process of dealing with the past, making it difficult to know and confront what happened, establish accountability for past abuses, protect minorities, rebuild public trust, and build institutions based on justice.

Historical memory must be protected through open academic and public debate grounded in factual evidence, archival research, eyewitness accounts, and due process – not through silencing, prolonged detention, distortion or inversion of historical responsibility by shifting the guilt from perpetrators to victims. No society can achieve reconciliation, the non-recurrence of violence, and lasting peace without the freedom to remember, document, discuss, and critically examine its past.

We call on the government of Bangladesh to:

1. **Release Shahriar Kabir on humanitarian grounds immediately.**
2. **Ensure Shahriar Kabir's safety, dignity, and immediate, adequate, and independent medical care, including any specialist treatment required by his condition.**
3. **Give full consideration to the findings and recommendations of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention and the United Nations Special Procedures concerning Shahriar Kabir's case. Ensure an independent investigation into his detention and treatment.**
4. **Ensure Shahriar Kabir's protection from psychological, verbal and physical abuse, intimidation, and humiliation before, during, and after court proceedings.**
5. **Respect Shahriar Kabir's fundamental rights to due process and a fair trial, allowing regular contact with his lawyers, family, colleagues, and other people necessary for his wellbeing, including facilitating the issue of visas for those who wish to visit him from abroad and ensuring their safety while in Bangladesh.**
6. **Respect and protect freedom of expression and the independence of researchers, authors, journalists, historians, and human rights defenders, providing them a safe environment to research, document, discuss, and critically examine complex and sensitive aspects of Bangladesh's history, and prevent the denial, distortion, and minimisation of past atrocities.**

We call on the international community of academics, historians, writers, journalists, and human rights defenders to stand in solidarity with Shahriar Kabir and with all whose work preserves historical memory, documents past atrocities, promotes accountability and justice, and defends pluralism and human rights in Bangladesh and globally.

We stand for societies' freedom to address their histories critically and honestly.

We stand with Shahriar Kabir.

If you wish to support the open letter, please complete this form.

The list will be updated as additional individuals and organisations join the open letter. The final list of signatories will be submitted to the Government of Bangladesh and shared with relevant international human rights, academic, and civil society organisations, as well as media and diplomatic missions.

Signatories (in alphabetical order)

Hafsat Abiola, President, Women in Africa
Paulo Casaca, Founder and Director, South Asian Democratic Forum; former MEP
The Honourable Professor Irwin Cotler, P.C., O.C., O.Q., Ad.E.

Founder and International Chair, Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights; former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada

Panayote Dimitras, Greek Helsinki Monitor, Greece

Dr Daniel Feierstein, Director, Centre of Genocide Studies, National University of Tres de Febrero, and Director, Observatory of State Crimes, University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

Professor Jan Tomasz Gross, Norman B. Tomlinson '16 and '48 Professor of War and Society Emeritus and Professor of History, Princeton University, and author of *Neighbors*

Tarik Günersel, Int'l Advisory Board of PEN Writers for Peace Committee

Dr Helen Jarvis, Vice President, Permanent People's Tribunal, Cambodia

Professor Ben Kiernan, A.Whitney Griswold Professor of History Emeritus, Yale University, Founding Director, Genocide Studies Program, Yale University, 1994-2015

Stephania Kulaeva, Executive Director, Anti-Discrimination Center Memorial Brussels

Professor Rafał Pankowski, Collegium Civitas University; Cofounder of the NEVER AGAIN Association, Poland

Dr Rayhan Rashid, Trustee, International Crimes Strategy Forum (ICSF); Oxford Matrix, UK

Frank Schwalba-Hoth, Hamburg Environment Institute; former MEP

Mona Haghgou Strindberg, Human Rights Attorney; International Legal Representative of Shahriar Kabir

Dr Gregory H. Stanton, Founding President, Genocide Watch, Chair, the Alliance Against Genocide

Dr Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, Founder and Executive Director, Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, USA

Dr Wilhelmus J.A. van der Geest, Formerly Principal Economist, United Nations New York, Chief Development Policy