

The Shapla Chattar atrocity (2013) in Bangladesh: A case of state-perpetrated human rights violations

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Abstract

Background: The 2013 Shapla Chattar event in Dhaka remains one of the most underreported state-perpetrated atrocities in South Asia; a peaceful protest was violently dispersed by state forces, resulting in mass casualties. For over a decade, media suppression, political repression, and the authoritarian climate silenced public discourse and academic inquiry. Following the regime's collapse in August 2024, new evidence has emerged, warranting a fresh investigation from a human rights perspective. **Methods:** This study was conducted based on secondary sources, including fact-finding reports from human rights organization including Odhikar and Human Rights Watch, government data, and media archives. It evaluates the Shapla incident within the framework of international human rights law and the criteria for crimes against humanity. **Results:** An estimated 93 to 322 individuals were killed during the 5–6 May 2013 Shapla Chattar operation. Approximately 7,500 security personnel were deployed, and over 150,000 rounds of live ammunition were used. The demographic analysis of the 61 confirmed death cases shows that 80% of victims came from non-madrasa backgrounds. The use of excessive force, media blackout, and suppression of civil society point to a state-orchestrated assault. The Shapla atrocity satisfies all key criteria for crimes against humanity: it was widespread, systematic, targeted civilians, and was conducted with full knowledge of its consequences. **Conclusion:** This study assessed the Shapla Chattar atrocity as a case of state-sanctioned violence qualifying as a crime against humanity. It underscores the urgent need for judicial accountability and transparent investigation through the reformed International Crimes Tribunal.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Shapla Chattar, human rights violations, job quota reform, crime against humanity, massacre, atrocity

Introduction

Respect for human rights is critical for maintaining peace, justice, and sustainable development. In contrast, violations undermine these foundations, leading to deep divisions, fear, and distrust, which ultimately hinder progress. Human rights documentation is essential to the success of transitional justice, as it provides the necessary evidence, truth, and historical context to pursue justice, accountability, and reconciliation (Baumgartner et al., 2016; Joanna Marszałek-Kawa, n.d.). Through documenting human rights violations, societies can ensure that the victims' voices are heard, perpetrators are held accountable, and future

violations are prevented. It serves as a cornerstone for healing, rebuilding trust, and establishing the rule of law in post-authoritarian or post-conflict societies (Joanna Marszałek-Kawa, n.d.). For example, in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission granted amnesty to perpetrators in exchange for truth. Its findings and public acknowledgement of atrocities played a crucial role in fostering reconciliation and preventing future cycles of violence.

More recently, Bangladesh has confronted a massive student-led uprising in July 2024. This was initially sparked by demands for 'Quota Reform' in government jobs, which led to

the collapse of the Sheikh Hasina regime on August 5, 2024, when the Prime Minister fled to neighbouring India. During the 2024 uprising, at least 1,400 people were killed and nearly 19,000 injured (OHCHR Fact-Finding Report, 2025) and 401 permanently blinded (Islam et al., 2025). Security forces reportedly obstructed medical care, raided hospitals, arrested the wounded, and falsified records to cover up state violence (OHCHR Fact-Finding Report, 2025).

In 2013, the ousted regime brutally suppressed a peaceful protest at Shapla Chattar in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. This protest was organised by Hefazat-e-Islam, a non-political Islamic advocacy group led by madrasa teachers and students of Kawmi school of thought (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013). For over a decade, the Shapla Chattar crackdown was shrouded in silence due to systematic media suppression, criminalisation of innocent protesters, and an atmosphere of fear fostered by the authoritarian state (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2013a, 2014; BBC, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2020; Meixler, 2018). Researchers, journalists, and human rights activists faced threats, imprisonment, or enforced disappearance if they engaged with sensitive topics or state abuses. After the fall of the suppressive regime, journalists and families of victims began to speak freely (GTV News, 2025; Zyma, 2025), shedding new light on the 2013 Shapla crackdown.

Religion and role of Islamic religious leaders in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is the third-largest Muslim-majority nation in the world, with a population of nearly 170 million, over 90% of whom identify as Muslim (BSS News, n.d.). Islam plays a vital role in shaping the social and cultural norms of the country. Religious leaders and Islamic scholars have significant influence over communities (Nathaniel Adams, 2015). Contrary to the common Western perception, religious leaders (especially those from the conservative Kawmi school of thought) have made positive contributions to public health initiatives and educational campaigns. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they promoted vaccination through sermons and community outreach, aligning Islamic teachings with scientific recommendations (UNICEF, 2020). Similarly, when the Human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine was introduced, religious leaders were engaged to ensure community acceptance and encourage vaccination among adolescent girls (Path, n.d.). In terms of education, Islamic scholars have also encouraged women to pursue education, and institutions like madrasas provide opportunities for women to receive proper education. For example, in 2025, 349,776 students participated in the Kawmi madrasa board exam, Befaulq Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh (BEFAQ), with 57.9% of them

being female (Admission, 2025). This increasing participation highlights the supportive attitude of conservative religious leaders towards women's education, challenging the stereotype that madrasa systems inherently marginalise girls.

The story: Emergence of the Shabbagh and Shapla movement

In early 2013, Bangladesh went through a period of unrest, which was triggered by the long-delayed prosecution of individuals accused of committing war crimes during the 1971 Liberation War. The Sheikh Hasina regime had established the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in 2009 to prosecute alleged war criminals, many of whom were associated with the Islamist political party, Jamaat-e-Islami. Initially, the establishment of the tribunal was welcomed by the general public. However, both national and international observers raised concerns about the fairness and transparency of the trials, as the process deviated from international judicial standards (BBC, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2016). Interestingly, the concern about ICT impartiality has finally proven to be true after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina regime (2008-2024). The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court reversed its verdict on ATM Azharul Islam on 28 May 2025 and released the individual who had previously been sentenced to death (The Daily Star, 2019). In its verdict, the apex court stated (The Financial Express, 2025):

The conviction of the appellant was occasioned by a manifest disregard for the fundamental principles of criminal jurisprudence, resulting in a gross miscarriage of justice. (...) Furthermore, this Division acknowledged its earlier lapse to properly assess the evidence relating to the allegations of crimes against humanity in relation to the convict appellant. The failure to adhere to these fundamental tenets has led to a travesty of justice of the gravest kind.

It is important to note that there are two major Islamic ideological movements in Bangladesh. One is *Jamaat-e-Islami*, which participates in the formal political system and in parliamentary elections. In contrast, *Hefazat-e-Islam* (Defenders of Islam) is not a conventional political party; rather, it is a movement aimed at safeguarding Islamic values. Its members are predominantly from a Qawmi madrasa background, particularly the Deobandi school of thought. The War Crimes Tribunal prosecuted individuals largely affiliated with Jamaat-e-Islami—rather than Hefazat-e-Islam—who were accused of supporting the Pakistan Army during the War of Independence in 1971. The Shapla movement was driven by Hefazat-e-Islam.

Even many people in Bangladesh and in Western media believe that Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam are allies.

However, in reality, they appear to be arch-rivals and have long-standing ideological differences (Saifuddin, 2024). Numerous Qawmi scholars from South Asia—specifically Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan—have authored various books critiquing the misinterpretations of Islam propagated by Jamaat-e-Islami (IslamQA, 2012).

On 5 February 2013, the ICT sentenced Abdul Quader Molla, a senior *Jamaat-e-Islami* leader, to life imprisonment. This sparked protests demanding the death penalty for Molla. The popular outcry manifested in the form of the Shahbagh Movement, which was initiated by secular online activists and bloggers (Anam, 2013).

Protesters gathered at Shahbagh Square in Dhaka, demanding capital punishment for convicted war criminals and a ban on Jamaat-e-Islami from politics. Initially, the movement was supported by many, who saw it as a continuation of the spirit of the 1971 Liberation War. However, the tone of the movement began to polarize from 17 February 2013, when two popular mainstream print media outlets, *Inqilab* and *Amar Desh*, published the bloggers' highly derogatory remarks about Islam, Allah, the Prophet Muhammad (SM), and Islamic practices (Parvez 2022).

The murder of blogger Rajib Haider (who wrote under the pseudonym *Thaba Baba*) on 15 February 2013 was perhaps the most decisive moment in the fate of the Shahbagh movement (Shariff, 2019). Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina labelled him the “first martyr of the second liberation war,” elevating the Shahbagh bloggers to near-iconic status in some quarters (Daily Amar Desh, 2025). This move deeply offended many citizens, as the state was glorifying individuals accused of perceived blasphemy while marginalising religious voices. Bangladesh-based human rights organisation Odhikar reports: “in some cases the Prophet was portrayed as a pornographic character, which infuriated the people of all walks of life” (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 2013). This created a critical socio-political divide between secular and conservative groups in Bangladesh. It is important to note that this study analyses these accusations not as objective truths, but as pivotal social dynamics that the state and protesters used to mobilise their respective bases. It is relevant to mention here that the murderers of Rajib were sentenced to death on 31 December 2015 by a special tribunal, and later it was confirmed by the High Court in 2017 (The Daily Star, 2017). This case is currently before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court (as of 10 April 2026), as the convict has appealed for a review (The New Age, 2024).

The revelation of the highly alleged derogatory content from the bloggers in print media sparked a severe backlash in Bangladesh, where Islam plays a significant cultural and emo-

tional role in public life. As a result, the movement's image became deeply polarising. While secularists viewed the bloggers as freedom fighters in the “second liberation war,” the majority of the population began to perceive them as anti-Islamic provocateurs.

To Muslims, Prophet Muhammad is held in the highest reverence. For instance, when a newspaper in Denmark published satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005, millions of Muslims across the globe erupted in protest, and nearly 100 people were killed in violent clashes in Nigeria (Al Jazeera, 2006; The New York Times, 2006). Even though Muslims of Bangladesh do not practice religion to that extent in day-to-day life (such as five times daily prayer), the majority of Muslims have historically shown profound reverence for Islamic values. This deep-rooted emotional attachment has led to widespread public reactions whenever Islamic beliefs are satirised or insulted.

These incidents demonstrate that any offence to Islamic principles can quickly escalate into national controversy. This enduring religious sensitivity formed a critical backdrop to the public reaction against the bloggers involved in Shahbagh in 2013. Their derogatory statements about Islam and its prophet led to a significant shift in public opinion, turning what was initially a justice movement into an ideological conflict.

Beginning on 19 February 2013, Hefazat-e-Islam systematically began protesting against the humiliating and provocative remarks regarding Islam, Allah, and the Prophet Muhammad. On 6 April 2013, Hefazat-e-Islam held a long march at Shapla Chattar, where hundreds of thousands of people gathered peacefully from across the country. Since then, they have held peaceful meetings across various districts, remaining non-violent despite provocation (baton charges to disperse protesters) from law enforcement and armed activists of the governing party, Awami League (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013.). Hefazat-e-Islam demanded the implementation of their 13-point charter. Since their demands were not fulfilled, on 5 May 2013, Hefazat-e-Islam again organised a large, peaceful protest at the same location. The protest aimed to establish the 13-point charter, which included demands for blasphemy laws, punishment for atheists who insulted Islam, and greater regulation of public morality in Bangladesh. Hundreds of thousands of protesters from across the country gathered peacefully to voice their demands. However, in the early hours of 6 May, unarmed protesters were brutally dispersed in a highly coordinated and deliberate operation (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013.).

This study aims to document the 2013 Shapla Chattar incident by compiling available evidence from the reports of hu-

man rights organisations and media outlets, while analysing the state's responses in the context of international human rights frameworks.

This paper adopts the UN Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes definition of "atrocity" as an umbrella term for crimes against humanity. We specifically evaluate the event against the criteria set out in Article 7(1) of the Rome Statute. The term "massacre" is used as a direct citation of national mainstream media in Bangladesh.

Method

This study employs a narrative documentary review using a triangulation approach. Findings were cross-referenced across three source categories to ensure accuracy in a data-scarce environment: (1) human rights reports from local (Odhikar) and international (HRW) NGOs; (2) institutional burial records from *Anjuman-e-Mofidul Islam*; and (3) a synthesis of international and local media archives. It evaluates the Shapla incident within the framework of international human rights law and the criteria for crimes against humanity.

Notably, Odhikar has been documenting and raising awareness about human rights violations in Bangladesh since 1994. This organisation documented human rights violations at Shapla Chattar through ground-level investigation and published its fact-finding report on June 10, 2013. Following the release of this report, Odhikar activists faced state repression. The government pressured the organisation to disclose the complete list of those killed in the operation. On 11 August 2013, the police raided Odhikar's office, seizing computers and various documents. However, Odhikar refused to comply, concerned that revealing the identities could lead to harassment or intimidation of the victims' families. Subsequently, the government filed cases against two of the organisation's top officials, arrested them, and later sentenced them (Odhikar, 2025). Twelve years later, after the fall of the authoritarian government, Odhikar publicly released the full list of those killed in the Shapla Chattar incident (Dhaka Tribune, 2024).

Human Rights Watch also published its own report titled *Blood on the Streets: The Use of Excessive Force during Bangladesh Protests* in August 2013. In addition to these two fact-finding reports, this study relies on information from international media outlets (such as the BBC, The Guardian, and Al Jazeera) and some local news sources.

It is important to recognise that the Shapla Chattar incident occurred within a highly polarised socio-political environment, and this polarisation was reflected in media coverage. Since Bangladesh's independence in 1971, secular-oriented outlets have been influential in the country's media landscape

(Islam, 2018). Contemporary reporting by several widely circulated newspapers largely reflected the government's account of the events, placing greater emphasis on allegations of vandalism and public disorder than on allegations of excessive use of force against protesters (e.g., The Daily Star, 2013). At the same time, two Islamic-oriented television channels were shut down during the operation, and reports by international media and human rights organisations documented subsequent restrictions on media coverage and civil society activities (Al Jazeera, 2013a, 2014).

Information bias and management

To mitigate the extreme polarisation of the Bangladeshi media (pro-secular vs pro-Islamic), reports from politically aligned outlets were weighed against ground-verified NGO data. Post-2024 evidence was considered essential new data but was cross-verified to account for potential recency bias.

Evidence could be categorised by level of robustness:

- *Robust (verified)*: The 58–61 confirmed deaths identified by Odhikar/HRW represent the most forensically reliable data (Odhika, 2024).
- *Moderate (reported)*: Retrospective victim lists (e.g., 93 names from 2025) provide higher resolution but lack immediate post-event verification (Saifuddin, 2025).
- *Speculative (indirect)*: Estimates derived from unidentified burial records (229) provide circumstantial evidence of a cover-up but remain speculative due to the lack of individual identification (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025).

Positionality statement

The authors of this study are academic researchers based in Bangladesh with a professional background in public health and human rights documentation. This analysis is situated within Bangladesh's post-2024 transitional justice period. Our objective is to document state-perpetrated violence through the lens of international human rights frameworks. We recognise the inherent challenges of documenting an event that was subject to a decade of government censorship and a deeply polarised media landscape.

Result

Magnitude of the state operation

Recently released information has revealed that nearly 7,500 law enforcement personnel participated in the Shapla Chattar operation (Table 1) (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025). The operation was referred to by different forces under different names: the police called it "*Operation Secure Shapla*," the Rapid

Action Battalion (RAB) named it “*Operation Flash Out*,” and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) referred to it as “*Operation Capture Shapla*” (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013).

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, over 150,000 rounds of live ammunition were used in the operation (Table 1) (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025). Alongside this, the involvement of armed ruling party, Awami League, cadres was also significant (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013).

The law enforcement authority of Bangladesh filed 83 criminal cases accusing nearly 88,000 protesters, of whom 3,416 were named, and 84,796 were unnamed (The Business Standard, 2021).

Death toll and demography of death cases

Due to the lack of forensic or judicial investigation, the exact death toll of the Shapla Chattar atrocity remains unknown. The fact-finding report conducted by Human Rights Watch estimates that at least 58 people were killed in the Shapla Chattar incident on 5-6 May 2013. However, the actual death toll could be higher, according to the report (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Odhikar’s fact-finding report revealed 61 deaths in the Shapla Chattar atrocity (Dhaka Tribune, 2024). Recently, Hefazat-e-Islam released a list of 93 names of those who died during Shapla Chattar incident (Table 2) (Saifuddin, 2025).

Table 1. Scale of state operation at Shapla Chattar in 2013 (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025)

Shapla operation	Number
Forces used in the operation	
Police	5712
Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)	1300
Border Guard Bangladesh	576
Type of live ammunition used in the operation	
Total live ammunition	155,000
Tear shells used	80,000
Rubber bullets	60,000
Shotgun ammunition	15,000
Sound grenades	12,000
Revolver ammunition	350

Table 2. Estimated death cases of Shapla Chattar atrocity (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Odhikar, 2024; Saifuddin, 2025; Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025)

Source	Method	Count	Degree of Certainty
HRW / Odhikar	Independent forensic/field verification (2013)	58–61	High: Circumstances and individually verified (immediate) (Odhikar, 2024).
Hefazat-e-Islam (2025)	Post-2024 victim family reporting	93	Moderate: Identified individuals, but forensic verification delayed by 12 years (retrospective).
Anjuman-e-Mofidul Islam	Analysis of monthly burial records (May 2013)	229	Speculative: Unidentified burials.
Analytical synthesis (this study)	Lower bound: 93 identified victims; upper bound: addition of 229 unidentified burials as speculative evidence	93–322	Proposed analytical range

Recently, based on the burial of unidentified bodies, mainstream media outlets estimated the number of deaths in the Shapla atrocity (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025). *Anjuman-e-Mofidul Islam* is the only institution that buries unclaimed or unidentified bodies in Bangladesh. By analysing data on unidentified bodies buried between July 2010 and October 2014, the study concluded that 229 unidentified bodies were buried in May 2013. For comparison, excluding May 2013, the monthly number of unidentified burials ranged from 50 to 145, while the average for the remaining eleven months of 2013 was approximately 96 bodies per month.

Although these unidentified death cases cannot be directly attributed to the Shapla Chattar operation because individual identities and causes of death are unavailable, they provide circumstantial evidence that an unusually large number of unidentified deaths occurred during the same period. Consistent

with the evidence-grading framework adopted in this study, these burial data are therefore treated as speculative evidence rather than confirmed fatalities.

Accordingly, this study adopts an analytical estimate of 93–322 deaths. The lower bound represents the 93 individually identified victims reported after the political transition, whereas the upper bound incorporates the 229 unidentified burials as a hypothetical maximum supported by circumstantial evidence. This range should therefore be interpreted as an analytical synthesis of the best available evidence rather than a definitive casualty count. In addition, an Al Jazeera report published on 14 May 2013 documented the burial of 14 unidentified bodies in Dhaka shortly after the operation, providing contemporaneous evidence that unidentified burials occurred following the crackdown (Al Jazeera, 2013b).

According to Odhikar's 61 death cases, the estimated mean age of the victims was 29.06 years (SD = 11.01), with an age range spanning from 11 to 60 years. The majority of the victims were young adults (64.4%), falling within the 11–30 age range. Five children (13–16 years) were among the death cases. Interestingly, contrary to the popular belief that the Shapla movement was primarily madrasa teacher- and student-centric, Approximately 80% of the victims did not have a madrasa background (Table 3); around 85% died from gunshot wounds (Table 4).

Table-3. Demographics of death cases (n=61) reported by the Odhikar (Odhikar, 2024).

Variables	n	%
Age		
Mean age (year), SD	29.06	
Sex		
Male	61	100
Occupation		
Madrasa student	9	14.8
Madrasa teacher/Imam	4	6.6
School & college student	9	14.8
Service (e.g., salesman, business)	5	8.2
Garment/factory worker	6	9.8
Driver/rickshaw puller/covered van driver	7	11.5
Vegetable trader/Petty Businessman/Street hawker/Water supplier	5	8.2
Journalist	2	3.3
Mason/electrician	2	3.3
Bus helper/van helper/transport worker	4	6.6
Tailor/farmer/Day-labourer	3	4.9
Unknown	5	8.2

Media censorship, suppression of civil society and judicial inquiry

Two independent television channels, *Diganta* Television and *Islamic* Television, were shut down during live coverage of the 2013 government crackdown in the early hours of 6 May 2013 (Odhikar, 2024). The prominent newspapers *Amar Desh* and *Inqilab* also faced government suppression. Journalists encountered obstruction, assault, and post-event censorship (Al Jazeera, 2014). Odhikar's secretary, Adilur Rahman Khan, was arrested

Table-4. Causes of death (n=61) reported by Odhikar (2024)

Cause of death	n	%
Gunshot (head)	14	22.9
Gunshot (chest/abdomen/waist)	19	31.1
Gunshot (unspecified)	20	32.8
Stabbed	1	1.6
Beaten to death	2	3.3

for publishing the casualty report and sentenced to two years in prison (The Daily Star, 2023; BBC, 2023; Odhikar, 2025).

No judicial inquiry has been initiated over the past decade. The High Court has not taken any action despite demands from human rights bodies. Finally, the Hefazat-e-Islam filed a legal case at the International Crimes Tribunal, naming Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and others as accused in a “mass murder” case (The Daily Star, 2024a). As of April 2026, the case is in the investigative phase.

Discussion

The evidence presented in this study supports that the Shapla Chattar atrocity constitutes a crime against humanity under international legal standards. The coordinated deployment of approximately 7,500 law enforcement personnel, deliberate electricity blackout, disruption of communication systems, the use of live ammunition and targeted assault on unarmed civilian protesters reflect a deliberate and systematic attack sanctioned at the highest levels of government.

‘Mass killings’ of ordinary citizens

Like any state-sponsored atrocity or massacre, the true number of casualties at Shapla Chattar perhaps will never be known. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police claimed only 11 deaths (The Daily Star 2013d). The former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, said in the National Parliament that people used red colour and acted dead that night, and when police came, they ran away (Daily Amar Desh, 2025). The official death toll was eleven. Initially, Hefazat leaders, however, claimed that between 2,500 and 3,000 protesters were killed, and around 10,000 were injured (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013.). Based on all available information present in this study, it can be concluded that at least between 93 and 322 people lost their lives in the Shapla Chattar atrocity (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025).

National and international media have often portrayed the Shapla movement as primarily driven by madrasa students and teachers. However, this perspective fails to capture the true nature of the event. While the movement was initially led by Hefazat-e-Islam, it garnered widespread support from devout ordinary citizens. This is clearly reflected in the detailed death records compiled by Odhikar. Demographic analysis shows that, among the 61 victims, only 13 (20%) were madrasa students, teachers, or mosque imams. The professions of the remaining victims identified in the Odhikar report indicate they were likely from non-madrasa backgrounds. For instance, one documented case illustrates the diversity of the victims. According to contemporaneous reports, Rehan Ahsan, a univer-

sity student (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology), was among those killed during the operation (Zyma, 2025). His case illustrates that the victims were not exclusively madrasa students or religious leaders, consistent with the demographic distribution presented in Table 3.

Human rights violations against unarmed protesters

The use of excessive force against peaceful protesters at Shapla Chattar after the electricity blackout and the removal of media presence suggest an intentional suppression of the events. The arrests of activists and censorship of human rights advocates indicate an attempt to erase the public memory of the event.

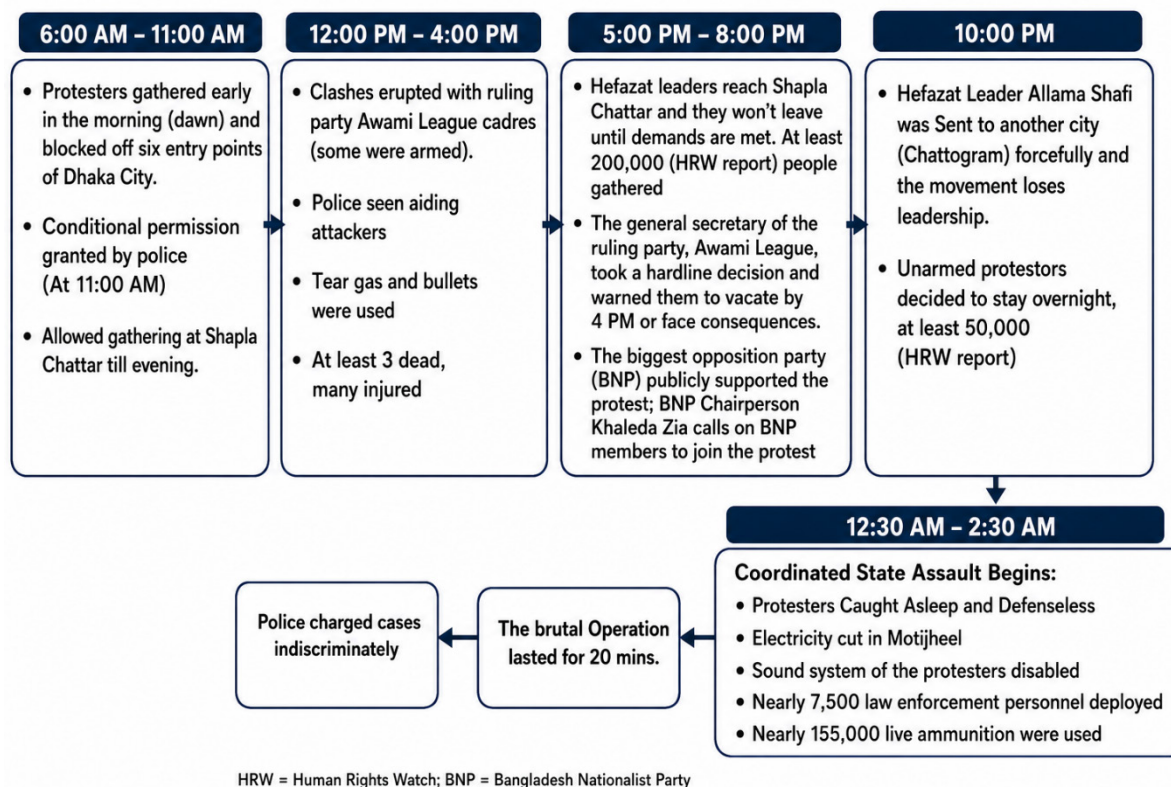
After the government failed to respond to its 13-point demand, Hefazat-e-Islam announced a Dhaka blockade for 5 May (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013.). From the night of 4 May, hundreds of thousands of supporters—including madrasa students, scholars, and ordinary citizens—began entering the capital. By dawn on 5 May, they had gathered at all six major entry points and effectively blocked the city (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025; Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013). Hefazat leaders negotiated with Dhaka Metropolitan Police for permission to hold a peaceful gathering and prayer led by their leader, Allama Shah Ahmad Shafi, at Shapla Chattar. After initial hesitation, police granted conditional permission for the program to continue until the evening, ending with a final prayer (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013).

As the day progressed, massive processions broke through barricades and converged on Shapla Chattar. On their way, Hefazat activists came under organised attack by ruling party Awami League cadres—some reportedly armed. Police were seen aiding the attackers instead of stopping the violence (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013). Clashes erupted, tear gas and bullets were fired and at least three people were killed and many injured. Hefazat supporters defended themselves by throwing bricks and stones (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013).

Despite the violence, Hefazat leaders reached Shapla Chattar by afternoon. The area was filled with tens of thousands of supporters. Leaders gave speeches declaring they would not leave until their demands were met. Around 8:00 p.m., the largest opposition party, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia publicly expressed support and urged party members to assist Hefazat (Dhaka Tribune, 2013; Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013).

In response, the ruling party, Awami League, took a hard-line position. Its General Secretary issued an ultimatum to vacate the area by 4 p.m., warning of severe consequences for

Figure 1. Timeline of 5–6 May operation of the Shapla Chattar incident (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013; Daily Amar Desh, 2025; GTV News, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2013)



failure to comply with their orders (Daily Amar Desh, 2025). Meanwhile, Hefazat's Chief leader and other senior leaders were reportedly staying at Lalbagh Madrasa. Police surrounded the madrasa and pressured the Chief leader to call off the rally. Around 10 pm, he was taken away under the pretext of addressing the crowd at Shapla Chattar, but en route, there was an announcement that he was "ill". He was quickly put on a plane and sent back to Chattogram, effectively removing the symbolic leadership from the protest ground (Daily Amar Desh, 2025; Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013).

Later that night, the situation appeared to settle. Protesters prepared to spend the night on the streets. Many lay down on the pavement, using their panjabis to cover bags and sandals, while others engaged in quiet 'Zikir' (remembrance of God) (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013).

Around 12:30 am on 6 May, the electricity supply in the Motijheel area was deliberately cut off. The protesters' sound systems were disconnected. Then, at approximately 2:15 a.m., nearly 7,500 members of combined law enforcement launched a sudden assault on the sleeping protesters (Daily Amar Desh,

2025, 2025; Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013). Tear gas, sound grenades, boiling water, and live bullets were used. According to eyewitness accounts cited by Odhikar and HRW, many protesters were asleep when the operation began. The operation dispersed at least 50,000 unarmed protesters in approximately 20 minutes. Notably, the operation was swift, brutal and indiscriminate. Based on the testimony of eyewitnesses, HRW attempted to depict the scale of the brutality that occurred at Shapla Chattar as follows (Human Rights Watch, 2013):

Hundreds of protesters were treated for wounds in hospitals. Many corpses were also brought in. Staff in four hospitals told Human Rights Watch that wounds were caused by small metal pellets or buckshot, small rubber bullets, actual bullets, and by large cuts and bruises. Some protesters had broken limbs, and at least four were fully or partially blinded. Video footage shows police officers beating apparently unarmed men lying on the ground, one of

whom looks unconscious or dead and starts to bleed heavily from the head.

The government prevented the families of the victims from filing cases in their fight for justice. For instance, Rehan Ahsan's mother, whose son was killed at Shapla Chattar recently, spoke to the media and said (The Daily Star, 2024b):

Following the autopsy, the police allegedly refused to hand over the body until Vasha's family assured them that they would not file any cases

A crime against humanity

Complaints about the Shapla atrocity have been filed with the recently reformed International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) after the fall of the repressive regime. The 'crime against humanity' is now clearly defined to align with international standards (Siddiq, 2024). Given the fact that the ICT only has jurisdiction to try international crimes, including genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, the Shapla atrocities must be categorised as crimes against humanity to fall within its jurisdiction. Human Rights Watch (HRW), in its *Blood on the Streets* report (Human Rights Watch, 2013), condemned the unlawful use of force and killings and called for an independent investigation and accountability, but stopped short of labelling the Shapla dispersal a crime against humanity. However, a similar atrocity took place around the same time—on 14 August 2013—at Rabaa al-Adabiya Square in Egypt, which was rightly classified

as a crime against humanity (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The similarities between the two events warrant consideration of whether the Shapla operation may also satisfy the legal threshold for crimes against humanity. While there may be a tendency to differentiate the two based on the number of deaths—over 1,100 at Rabaa and at least 58 at Shapla, according to Human Rights Watch—this comparison can be misleading. What matters is not just how many people died, but the nature and intent of the attack.

While HRW rightly identified the crimes committed at Rabaa Square as crimes against humanity, it did not go to that extent in its report on the Shapla Chattar massacre. It appears that the sheer scale of killings may have influenced such categorisation. This paper argues that the number of casualties is significantly higher than previously reported in national and international human rights accounts.

First, by establishing an estimated range of 93 to 322 casualties in the Shapla Chattar massacre, we highlight the gruesome nature of the atrocities committed against unarmed civilian protesters in the middle of the night, amid an electricity and media blackout. Subsequently, attempts to document and report these violations—essential for accountability and transitional justice—were reportedly suppressed. During this period, coverage in several mainstream newspapers largely reflected the government's account of the events, emphasising allegations of vandalism by Hefazat-e-Islam activists while giving comparatively limited attention to allegations of excessive use of force against protesters. Headlines such as "*Hefajat Strikes Horror*"

Figure 2a. Photographic documentation of Chapla Chattar gathering on 5 May 2013 (Deutsche Welle, 2022, credit: STR/AFP/Getty Images)



Figure 2b. Photographic documentation of the 5–6 May 2013 Shapla Chattar operation (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013)



Figure 2c. Photographic documentation of the 5–6 May 2013 Shapla Chattar operation (Odhikar Fact-Finding Report 10 June 2013)



(The Daily Star, 2013a), *“From cheapening of life to culling!”* (The Daily Star, 2013a), and *“How flush-out took place”* (The Daily Star, 2013c) illustrate the dominant framing adopted by some outlets at the time. Although this study does not attempt

a systematic media content analysis, the available evidence suggests that these narratives may have influenced public perceptions of the protest and reduced scrutiny of the state’s response. The divergence between contemporaneous media coverage

and subsequent documentation by human rights organisations highlights the challenges of documenting politically contested events in highly polarised environments. A comprehensive analysis of media framing and its influence on public discourse lies beyond the scope of this study.

Second, this paper systematically applies the criteria for crimes against humanity to the Shapla massacre, demonstrating that the legal elements of such crimes, as established in international criminal law, are satisfied in this case. A detailed elaboration is provided in Table 5 below.

Crimes against humanity is defined as murder (including a number of other offences) “*when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack*”(Rome Statute- Article 7(1)). The International Crimes Tribunals Act, 1973 (Bangladesh) also adopted this definition under section 3. Persecution on political grounds is also included, which may further bring the atrocities under the definition of crimes against humanity. This paper argues that the mass atrocities committed on 5-6 May qualify as crimes against humanity both under the Rome Statute and the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973. Based on the number of killings documented in this paper—ranging from at least 93 to 322—the attack was clearly indiscriminate and resulted in widespread casualties, provoking outrage in the conscience of humanity. Once a crime reaches this level, it is considered an international crime and can be prosecuted by

any country, regardless of jurisdiction (Universal Jurisdiction, 2012). While crimes against humanity may trigger universal jurisdiction, the practical application of this principle is not absolute. It is subject to specific national legislation, the accused’s physical presence, and various diplomatic and political constraints. David Luban identified some key elements of crimes against humanity and summarised them as follows (Luban, 2004):

Crimes against humanity are international crimes committed by politically organized groups acting under color of policy, consisting of the most severe and abominable acts of violence and persecution, and inflicted on victims because of their membership in a population or group rather than their individual characteristics.

David Luban’s framework can be applied to the Shapla Chattar atrocity. The events at Shapla Chattar reflect violence carried out under colour of policy, as the operation to disperse protesters appears to have been conducted by state forces in a coordinated manner, indicating political authorisation rather than spontaneous action. The scale and intensity of the crack-down leading to significant casualties and injuries align with Luban’s characterisation of severe and abominable acts of violence.

Table 5. *Assessment of Shapla atrocity as crimes against humanity (Rome Statute, Article 7(1): murder)*

Criterion	Definition	Application to Shapla Atrocity
Widespread	The crime must be part of a widespread attack on a civilian population.	The Shapla atrocity involved the violent dispersal of a large sit-in protest, with an estimated 50,000 participants, resulting in 93 to 322 casualties.
Systematic	The crime must be part of a systematic attack, with a planned, coordinated, or organised pattern.	The operation was pre-planned and executed as a government policy, using law enforcement and state resources to disperse peaceful protesters.
Attack Against Civilians	The target of the attack must be civilians, and the victims must be unarmed or not directly engaged in combat.	The victims at Shapla Chattar were unarmed civilians, peacefully protesting for religious causes, not engaging in any form of armed resistance.
Knowledge of the Attack	The perpetrators must have knowledge of the attack’s widespread or systematic nature.	The large-scale use of live ammunition (nearly 155,000), alongside an electricity and media blackout, indicates that the forces anticipated significant casualties. The blackout appears intended to conceal the operation and ensure impunity. This demonstrates that policymakers, senior officials, and executing forces had knowledge of the attack and its likely violent consequences.

Furthermore, the killings and injuries occurred across multiple locations in and around Shapla Chattar and extended to nearby areas, suggesting a widespread and systematic pattern rather than isolated incidents. This pattern is reinforced by reports of similar force used against individuals associated with Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh in surrounding areas. Finally, the victims appear to have been targeted as members of a collective group (protesters/Hefazat affiliates) rather than as individuals, which satisfies Luban's criterion that crimes against humanity are directed against persons based on their group identity.

The use of a huge amount of live ammunition, while enforcing an electricity and media blackout (as shown above), suggests that the forces involved in the operation that night to disperse the large crowd were aware that a significant number of casualties were inevitable. To carry out the forced dispersal while ensuring cover-up and impunity, an electricity and media blackout was imposed. This provides compelling evidence that policymakers, leaders, senior officials, and the ground forces executing the operation were aware of the violent outcome. This fulfils the requirement to know the attack and its brutal consequences.

From the above analysis, the available evidence is consistent with the legal elements of the crimes against humanity found in the Shapla massacre atrocity.

Abuse of state power is at the heart of crimes against humanity, and this threshold has certainly been crossed in this case. By exercising excessive and disproportionate force, security officials violated the UN Basic Guidelines on the Use of Force and Firearms (OHCHR, 1990). Firearms should only be used in self-defence, yet evidence suggests that indiscriminate force, including live ammunition, was deployed during the Shapla dispersal and over 80% of the death cases reported by the Odhikar were related to gunshots (Table 4). Furthermore, the deliberate intimidation of victim families and the enforced silence surrounding the deaths fall under the threshold of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment as prohibited by the Convention against Torture (CAT) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The denial of medical assistance to wounded protesters constitutes a grave violation of the right to life and a form of inhuman treatment that exacerbates the physical and psychological trauma of the victims.

Implications for the ICT investigation and trial

The case is currently under investigation by the Investigation Office. This paper contributes substantively to the investigation and prosecution in two ways. First, it documents and analyzes the casualties of the Shapla atrocity based on existing literature and relevant data. Second, it demonstrates how the atrocities

qualify as crimes against humanity. The individual perpetrators must be held accountable. Most importantly, those in positions of power should be investigated and prosecuted in accordance with the principle of command responsibility for ordering, aiding, abetting, or, at the very least, failing to prevent these crimes against humanity.

Psychological impact

No empirical studies have specifically examined the psychological consequences of the 2013 Shapla Chattar operation, largely because the political environment in Bangladesh constrained independent research and public discussion. Therefore, the following discussion should be interpreted as a reasoned extrapolation from the broader literature on political violence rather than direct evidence from this event.

Evidence from other settings indicates that exposure to mass violence is associated with increased risks of acute stress reactions, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, complicated grief, substance misuse, and long-term functional impairment (Peterson et al., 2025; Srinivasa Murthy, 2007). Trauma may also have intergenerational effects through disruptions in family functioning and parenting (de Zulueta, 2007). At the societal level, such events can foster fear, mistrust, social polarisation, and deterioration of collective mental well-being (WHO, 2023; Williams et al., 2023).

Following the 2024 political transition in Bangladesh, renewed public attention to the Shapla incident may have provided opportunities for acknowledgement and justice for survivors and bereaved families. However, renewed media coverage, public testimony, and legal proceedings may also have contributed to re-traumatisation by reactivating painful memories. Future research is needed to investigate the long-term mental health consequences among survivors, bereaved families, and affected communities.

Limitations

This study, while offering the first academic analysis of the Shapla Chattar atrocity, is subject to several limitations. First, due to the repressive political climate under the previous regime, there was a systematic suppression of information, including restricted access to government records, media censorship, and harassment of rights organisations. As a result, this study relies primarily on secondary sources, which may have inherent limitations in data accuracy and completeness. Second, no official list of the deceased has ever been published by the state, and the exact number of casualties remains contested. While this paper uses the best available data, the lack of comprehensive, independently verified records constrains the scope of empirical analysis. Third,

the study does not include interviews with victims' families, survivors, or law enforcement officials involved in the operation due to safety and access concerns. First-hand testimonies would have enriched the qualitative dimension of the research and provided deeper insight into the planning, execution, and aftermath of the crackdown. The mentioned psychological aspects are generic rather than based on local evidence. Lastly, while this study synthesises evidence from independent human rights organisations, burial records, and converging media reports, an academic documentation review has inherent limitations. It cannot substitute for a formal, state-led legal process. Therefore, we emphasise the urgent necessity for a comprehensive, independent judicial inquiry. Such a process is essential for the transition toward accountability and the fulfilment of the right to truth for the victims' families.

Conclusion

The 2013 Shapla Chattar atrocity represents a critical case of state-perpetrated violence against unarmed civilians in Bangladesh. This study has examined the incident through a combination of demographic analysis, legal evaluation, and review of existing documentation and concludes that the operation satisfies the legal threshold for crimes against humanity as defined by international law. The demographic analysis presented in this study suggests that the victims included individuals from diverse occupational backgrounds, not limited to madrasa students and teachers. This further underscores the civilian nature of the protest and the indiscriminate nature of the attack. Future efforts should prioritise access to suppressed state records, survivor testimonies, and forensic investigations to build a complete historical and legal account of the atrocity.

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Submitted 25th of June 2025
Accepted 2nd of September 2026