

UN Working Group declares detention of journalist Shahriar Kabir arbitrary

November 22, 2025
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The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) has ruled that the imprisonment of veteran Bangladeshi journalist, war crimes researcher, filmmaker, and human rights defender Shahriar Kabir is arbitrary and in violation of international law.

In its Opinion No. 40/2025, adopted at the 103rd session in August 2025 and made public this week, the five-member expert panel demanded Kabir's immediate and unconditional release, compensation, and an independent investigation.



The 75-year-old Kabir, born November 20, 1950, has been detained since the night of September 17, 2024. Wheelchair-bound after multiple surgeries and suffering from kidney stones, the aftermath of a stroke, and other age-related illnesses, Kabir faces nine separate murder charges linked to the August 5 jihadist-army coup that toppled Sheikh Hasina's government.

The WGAD found the charges politically motivated, the warrantless midnight arrest unlawful, and the judicial process riddled with grave violations—including mob violence inside the courthouse, systematic denial of bail, and inadequate medical care.

The panel classified the detention under all four categories of arbitrariness it recognises:

- Category I – no legal basis
- Category II – reprisal for exercising freedom of expression and participation in public affairs

- Category III – total or partial non-observance of international fair-trial standards
- Category V – discrimination on the basis of political opinion and status as a human-rights defender

The Working Group referred the case to the Special Rapporteurs on torture, the right to health, and the rights of older persons.

Paulo Casaca, former Member of the European Parliament and founder and Executive Director of the Brussels-based South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF), welcomed the ruling while warning of the broader crisis.

“The UN Working Group on arbitrary detentions finally moved, condemning the Bangladesh dictatorship for the persecution of one of its main opponents,” Casaca said. “But there are tens of thousands of similar cases. The struggle for freedom must go on.”

Wider context and international reaction

Kabir’s case has become a litmus test for Bangladesh’s democratic credentials under the Jamaat-controlled interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus. Since August 2024, human rights monitors estimate that more than 500,000 politically motivated cases have been filed, with thousands of opposition figures, journalists, and activists detained on charges ranging from murder to “incitement.”

Reporters Without Borders added Kabir to its 2025 list of “victims of abuse,” and Amnesty International has repeatedly designated him a prisoner of conscience—a status he also held after earlier imprisonments.

In September 2024, more than 30 prominent international human rights defenders—including Casaca, Genocide Watch founder Gregory Stanton, and representatives of the Never Again Association (Poland)—sent an open letter to Chief Adviser Yunus demanding Kabir’s immediate release and medical treatment.

Amnesty International’s August 2025 report on Bangladesh highlighted his case and issued a four-point plan: urgent medical care, prosecution of those responsible for the courtroom mob attack, dropping of all charges, and consolidation of cases to ensure fairness.

As of Saturday, the Jamaat-controlled interim government has not issued an official response to the WGAD opinion. Sources close to the administration have privately dismissed it as “politically biased.” Shahriar Kabir remains held in Kashimpur Central Jail, where advocates say his health continues to deteriorate.

Rights groups and activists on social media marked the publication of the opinion with renewed calls under the hashtag #FreeShahriarKabir, describing the ruling as a rare but vital victory in an otherwise bleak landscape for freedom of expression in Bangladesh.

S. Sikder: “UN Working Group declares detention of journalist Shahriar Kabir arbitrary”. DailyRepublicbd.com, 22.11.2025.

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