

OPEN LETTER AND ADVOCACY BRIEF

*To: Members of the Australian Parliament, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade,
and the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade*

*RE: Politically Motivated Detention of Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Masud Uddin Chowdhury
Former High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Australia (2008–2014)
A Humanitarian and Diplomatic Concern*

From: Concerned Members of the Bangladeshi-Australian Community

Date: March 2026

INTRODUCTION

We, the undersigned members of the Bangladeshi-Australian community, write to express our deep concern about the arrest and continued detention of Lt. Gen. (Retd.) Masud Uddin Chowdhury, who served as Bangladesh's High Commissioner to Australia from 2008 to 2014. He was arrested on March 24, 2026 from his residence in Dhaka.¹ He is 71 years old, in serious and documented ill health, and has been denied bail.

We are not asking Australia to interfere in Bangladesh's internal affairs. We are asking Australia to advocate for principles it has always stood for — due process, fair trial, humane treatment of prisoners, and the rejection of politically motivated detention.

HIS SERVICE TO AUSTRALIA

Lt. Gen. Chowdhury is not a stranger to Australia. For six years he was the face of Bangladesh in Canberra. His credentials were accepted by the Governor-General. He worked with officials across DFAT, the Department of Defence, and Australia's Indo-Pacific policy establishment. He served across three Australian governments — under Prime Ministers Rudd, Gillard, and Abbott.²

He was deeply engaged with the Bangladeshi-Australian community — attending community events, ANZAC Day commemorations, Australia Day receptions, and cultural functions.

His tenure was extended three times by successive Bangladesh governments — including the Awami League government whose own leaders had been detained during the 2007 anti-corruption campaign he oversaw.³ If his actions had been criminal, recalling him would have been the first order of business. Instead they kept him in Canberra for five more years.

THE 2007 POLITICAL TRANSITION — CONTEXT AND INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

By late 2006, Bangladesh was on the verge of civil war. Street violence between the two major parties had killed over 40 people. A disputed election was scheduled that the main opposition had announced it would boycott.⁴ International observers, including Australia's High Commissioner in Dhaka, **Douglas Foskett** (serving 2005–2008), recognised the election would lack legitimacy.

The international community was not a passive observer. Leaked US diplomatic cables, published by WikiLeaks, reveal that Western nations were actively coordinating their response:

A 2004 cable from the US Embassy in Dhaka stated:

"The United States has tremendous leverage over both the Bangladeshi military and civilian rulers because of Dhaka's increasing role in UN peacekeeping missions."

— US Embassy Dhaka, Cable 04DHAKA3164_a (2004).⁵

These cables also revealed the existence of the "Coffee Group" — an informal coordinating body of Western diplomats from the United States, United Kingdom, **Canada**, Germany, Japan, and the United Nations, who

met regularly in Dhaka to assess and guide the political situation.⁶ Australia, as a Five Eyes partner with its own High Commissioner on the ground, was part of this Western diplomatic community.

According to a leaked cable written by US Ambassador Patricia Butenis, Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed told a UN representative that he was under extreme pressure to intervene:

"Moeen claimed that he could not 'stick his neck out' and approach the president/chief adviser to beg off from any political role for the military without such benefit of proof of the dire consequences for the army."

— US Embassy Dhaka, Cable (January 2007), reported in *The Daily Star*.⁷

US Ambassador Butenis and the US defense attaché held direct meetings with Bangladesh's military leadership on January 7 and 9, 2007. Both the Army Chief and his Principal Staff Officer stated:

"There is no appetite among military officers or the rank and file for martial law, a coup or any other extra-constitutional action by the military."

— US Embassy Dhaka, Cable (January 2007), reported in *The Daily Star*.⁷

On January 11, 2007, the civilian President declared a constitutionally permitted State of Emergency. There was no coup. No martial law. The judiciary remained intact. Lt. Gen. Chowdhury ensured the military's role stayed disciplined and within constitutional bounds. He then led the National Coordination Committee on Combating Serious Crimes, which arrested corrupt officials from *both* major parties.^{1,3}

Former US diplomat Jon Danilowicz, who served in Dhaka during this period, has publicly acknowledged:

"There was a big mistake in US policy towards Bangladesh at that time... [American policy] gave undue weight to the opinions of senior generals."

— Jon Danilowicz, former US diplomat, quoted in *Jago News 24*.⁶

MEDICAL AND HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY

- **2020:** Severe COVID-19 — 16 days in ICU
- **2023:** Brain haemorrhage requiring complex brain surgery, lengthy recovery
- **2025:** Pneumonia — 12 days in ICU
- **Ongoing:** Diabetes, chronic lung disease, complications from multiple heart surgeries

Reports indicate he has been denied access to prescribed medications and specialist care. For a 71-year-old man with this history, detention without proper healthcare puts his life at immediate risk.

INTERNATIONAL LEGAL STANDARDS

Bangladesh is a signatory to the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 999 UNTS 171 (entered into force 23 March 1976), which guarantees fair trial (art 14), humane treatment in detention (art 10), and protection from arbitrary arrest (art 9). The *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (Nelson Mandela Rules), GA Res 70/175, UN Doc A/RES/70/175 (17 December 2015) r 24, require that prisoners receive medical care equivalent to community standards.

A DOCUMENTED PATTERN

DFAT's own Country Information Report on Bangladesh documents problems with arbitrary arrest and detention.⁸ Every change of government brings a new wave of retaliatory arrests. Lt. Gen. Chowdhury's case fits this pattern.

WHAT WE ARE ASKING

- **Advocate for fair trial and due process** — the basic protections Bangladesh must provide under the ICCPR

- **Press for bail on medical and humanitarian grounds** — his age, medical history, and absence of flight risk make continued detention indefensible
- **Demand immediate access to proper medical care** — denial of medications to a man with brain surgery history and chronic disease is life-threatening
- **Raise this through DFAT and the Australian High Commission in Dhaka** — he served in Canberra for six years and is known to Australian officials
- **Signal to Bangladesh** that Australia notes the detention of a former diplomat who served in its capital

We do not ask Australia to interfere in Bangladesh's judiciary. We ask Australia to stand for the principles it has always championed.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 'Lt Gen (ret'd) Masud, Key 1/11 Figure, Arrested in Dhaka', *The Business Standard* (online, 24 March 2026) <<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/former-army-officer-masud-uddin-chowdhury-arrested-1392781>>.
- ² 'Masud Uddin Chowdhury', *Wikipedia* (Web Page) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masud_Uddin_Chowdhury>.
- ³ Special Correspondent, 'Masud Uddin Chowdhury: 1/11, Power, Reward and Controversy', *Prothom Alo* (online, 25 March 2026) <<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/9icwbk9pv1>>.
- ⁴ '1/11 Changeover: How It Happened and Why', *Dhaka Tribune* (online, 11 January 2024) <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/302518/1-11-changeover-how-it-happened-and-why>>.
- ⁵ US Embassy Dhaka, Cable 04DHAKA3164_a (2004), published by WikiLeaks <https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/04DHAKA3164_a.html>.
- ⁶ 'Foreign Hands in Dhaka: Role of Diplomacy in Bangladeshi Politics', *Jago News 24* (online, 19 August 2025) <<https://www.jagonews24.com/en/politics/news/84939>>.
- ⁷ Staff Correspondent, 'UN Warned Army against Coup', *The Daily Star* (online, 6 September 2011), reporting on leaked US Embassy cables from January 2007 <<https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-201433>>.
- ⁸ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Cth), *DFAT Country Information Report: Bangladesh* (23 July 2025) <<https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/country-information-report-bangladesh.pdf>>.
- ⁹ Bangladesh-Australia Ministerial Dialogue, Dhaka (Joint Statement, 2023) <<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/bangladesh-australia-ministerial-dialogue-dhaka>>.
- ¹⁰ *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, opened for signature 16 December 1966, 999 UNTS 171 (entered into force 23 March 1976) arts 9, 10, 14.
- ¹¹ *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* (Nelson Mandela Rules), GA Res 70/175, UN Doc A/RES/70/175 (17 December 2015) r 24.

COMMUNITY SIGNATORIES

This brief is endorsed by members of the Bangladeshi-Australian community. Signatures have been collected online and are attached as a supplementary appendix.