



Asian Federation Against
Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD)

AFAD

Aligning Collective Consciousness Essential to Ending Disappearances in South and Southeast Asia

A cross-country study of Disinformation on
Enforced Disappearances in Bangladesh,
Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the
Philippines

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Executive Summary

I. Introduction: The Weaponization of Information in the Global South

Enforced disappearances have historically been defined by silence—the physical removal of a person followed by a refusal to acknowledge their whereabouts. However, across South and Southeast Asia, the mechanism of this crime has evolved. It is no longer enough for states to simply hide the body; they must now hide the truth. In the digital age, silence has been replaced by noise.

This report, **Aligning Collective Consciousness**, presents a cross-country analysis of the intersection between state violence and information disorder in the **Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Nepal**. It argues that disinformation regarding enforced disappearances is not merely "pollution" or accidental rumor, but a strategic tool of statecraft designed to sustain impunity.

Our findings reveal a disturbing shift in methodology. Perpetrators are moving away from simple denial toward complex narrative management. State actors effectively weaponize information to dehumanize victims before, during, and after their abduction by leveraging digital platforms, bureaucratic machinery, and anti-terror laws. This study identifies this phenomenon as the Crisis Management Model—a systematic attempt by the state to neutralize public outcry and strip victims of moral legitimacy, thereby transforming a human rights violation into a "necessary" national security measure.

In this landscape, the battle is no longer just for the physical freedom of the disappeared, but for the integrity of their memory. This report maps these typologies of deceit to equip human rights defenders with the diagnostic tools needed to reclaim the narrative.

II. Key Finding: The Crisis Management Model & The 5 Typologies of State Denial

The study identifies a recurring pattern of state behavior termed the **Crisis Management Model**. In the context of enforced disappearances, this is a systematic mechanism employed by perpetrators immediately following an abduction to neutralize public outcry and strip victims of moral legitimacy. Rather than operating chaotically, disinformation functions as a stabilizing tool for regimes, transforming a human rights violation into a "necessary" national security measure.

Our analysis reveals five distinct, often overlapping typologies of disinformation used to sustain this model:



1. **Denial of State Involvement:** State actors systematically reject custody by reframing enforced disappearances as private or voluntary acts. Narratives often claim the victim has "gone abroad," "abandoned their family," or migrated for work, effectively disclaiming state responsibility while acknowledging the individual's absence. This tactic shifts the burden of proof onto families and evades the legal obligation of *habeas corpus*.
2. **Criminalization and Political Othering:** This typology involves the pre-emptive or immediate labeling of victims as "terrorists," "insurgents," or "drug addicts" to strip them of public sympathy. In the Philippines, this manifests as "red-tagging," where activists are branded as enemies of the state to provide a national security veneer to extrajudicial actions. By framing the victim as a threat, the state legitimizes the disappearance as a defensive act.
3. **Victim Blaming and Moral Justification:** Disinformation campaigns frequently deploy attacks on the moral character of victims and their families to divert attention from the state's legal obligations. This often includes "gendered disinformation," such as sexualized slander against female advocates or claims that "bad mothers" or "unfaithful wives" are responsible for the disappearance, thereby dissolving state accountability through social stigma.
4. **Judicial and Bureaucratic Normalization:** Perpetrators utilize courts and administrative bodies to "legalize" custody gaps. This includes producing victims as "surrenderees" after periods of secret detention, filing retroactive charges to justify prior absence, or creating false records of release. These bureaucratic maneuvers absorb the violation into routine procedure, rendering the disappearance legally invisible.
5. **Delegitimization of Families and Advocates:** To isolate victims from support networks, the state frames families, human rights lawyers, and NGOs as "foreign agents," "fund-chasers," or terrorist sympathizers. Narratives suggest that advocacy efforts are politically motivated or fabricated to secure international funding, thereby eroding public trust in those seeking the truth.

III. Regional Evidence: Country-Specific Mechanisms of Deceit

The study reveals that while the objective of impunity is shared across the region, the mechanisms of disinformation are distinct, adapted to the specific political and technological contexts of each country.

Philippines: The Proactive vs. Crisis Model



The Philippines demonstrates a sophisticated dual-approach to narrative management. The Proactive Justification Model was employed in the case of indigenous defenders Dexter Capuyan and Bazoo De Jesus, where state forces utilized "red-tagging" and "wanted" posters to label victims as communist terrorists *months before* their abduction, effectively pre-validating the state's violence. Conversely, the Crisis Management Model was activated for Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano. When public outcry surged, the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) attempted to frame the women as "voluntary surrenderees" in a staged press conference—a narrative that collapsed when the victims publicly revealed on live television that they had been abducted by the military.

Bangladesh: The "House of Mirrors" and AI Weaponization

Bangladesh presents a centralized model of state denial anchored in the secret detention system known as *Aynaghar* ("House of Mirrors"). The study highlights a dangerous evolution in this context: the emerging use of Artificial Intelligence. In the case of indigenous leader Michael Chakma, disinformation campaigns utilized deepfake imagery and AI-generated content to depict him with firearms, retroactively justifying his years in secret detention by framing him as a militant rather than a victim.

Pakistan: Fifth Generation Warfare and Identity Conflation

State actors in Pakistan invoke "Fifth Generation Warfare" to delegitimize dissent, specifically targeting the Baloch Long March. The study documents the tactic of Identity Conflation, where digital evidence is manipulated to visually merge activists with terrorists. A notable instance involved the doctoring of images of Dr. Mahrang Baloch, where a missing person's poster she was holding was digitally replaced with the face of a known suicide bomber. This landscape is further complicated by geopolitical interference, such as the "Indian Chronicles" operation, which utilized fake media outlets to weaponize human rights narratives for foreign policy advantage.

Indonesia: Historical Revisionism and Information Flooding

In Indonesia, disinformation functions through Historical Revisionism, exemplified by the "Gemoy" campaign which utilized TikTok to sanitize the image of leaders implicated in the 1998 mass disappearances for a younger electorate. Simultaneously, in West Papua, the state employs Information Flooding, saturating social media with irrelevant content to obscure reports of military operations and short-term disappearances, effectively burying human rights violations under a deluge of noise.

Nepal: Institutional Denial and Bureaucratic Erasure

While active cases have declined, Nepal illustrates the long-term efficacy of **Institutional Denial**. The state continues to rely on bureaucratic erasure, reclassifying



conflict-era disappearances as "absconding" or "voluntary migration". Thus, the state successfully blocks families from accessing reparations and prevents the truth from entering the historical record by persistently denying the "period of disappearance" in official records.

IV. The Human Impact: Beyond the Statistics

The cost of this disinformation warfare extends far beyond the digital realm. The study finds that state-sponsored narratives inflict unique, compounding harms on the families of the disappeared:

- **Psychosocial Paralysis & "Permanent Stigma":** Disinformation disrupts the grieving process. By keeping the status of the victim ambiguous (e.g., "they are alive and hiding"), the state traps families in a cycle of false hope, preventing closure. Furthermore, labeling victims as terrorists or criminals isolates families from their communities, who fear guilt by association.
- **Gendered Harms:** The report highlights the specific weaponization of gender against female advocates and relatives. The "half-widow" narrative—often fueled by rumors of abandonment or infidelity—subjects wives of the disappeared to intense social policing and shame, compounding their trauma.
- **Legal & Economic Stasis:** When a disappearance is officially recorded as "voluntary migration" or "absconding," families are legally paralyzed. They cannot access the victim's bank accounts, claim insurance, or resolve inheritance matters, trapping them in economic precarity while the state evades its obligation to provide reparations.

V. Strategic Recommendations: Ways Forward

To dismantle the "Crisis Management Model," civil society must shift from reactive denial to proactive narrative assertion.

1. Operational Response: The "Biography of Innocence"

- **Rapid Response Unit:** Establish a dedicated unit to release verified "Biographies of Innocence" within 24–72 hours of an abduction. These pre-prepared narratives (photos, personal stories, community roles) humanize the victim *before* the state can brand them as terrorists.



- **Standardized Documentation:** Adopt the Disinformation Fact Sheet across the region to track narrative divergence alongside physical evidence, creating a dataset of state lies for future transitional justice mechanisms.

2. Legislative & Governance Reform

- **Harm-Based Regulation:** Advocate for a shift from "truth-based" regulation (which states abuse to silence dissent) to "harm-based" frameworks. Legislation should focus on the *intent* and harm of disinformation campaigns, specifically those that incite violence or obstruct justice in human rights cases.
- **Judicial Training:** Sensitize the judiciary to the "typologies of deceit" so that courts can recognize "fake surrenders" and retroactive charging as evidence of a cover-up, rather than legitimate procedure.

3. Community & Cultural Resilience

- **Offline Trust Networks:** In areas with limited internet access or high surveillance, equip trusted community pillars—religious leaders, teachers, and elders—with verification tools to counter rumors at the grassroots level.
- **Art as Advocacy:** Invest in multimedia storytelling (film, theater, art) that bypasses political polarization. Cultural narratives can generate empathy and pierce the "othering" created by state propaganda more effectively than legal reports alone.

VI. Conclusion

The era of "simple silence" is over. To find the disappeared in the 21st century, we must first find the truth amidst the noise. This report calls for a unified regional strategy that treats information integrity not as secondary to human rights work, but as the very ground upon which the fight for justice must now be waged.



Introduction

“Authoritarian regimes are increasingly inclined to consolidate power not by dismantling democratic institutions outright, but by reconfiguring them through the language of security... By recasting political dissent... as potential manifestations of terrorism ... ruling elites gain access to exceptional legal instruments— detention without charge, expansive surveillance, and emergency powers—that are otherwise illegitimate in democratic settings.”¹

The specter of enforced disappearances (ED) has been haunting South and Southeast Asia from the late 2010s to the early 2020s. It is a time of resurgence of autocratic governments across the globe² when States suppress political dissent while maintaining the appearance of national peace and security. Here, the phenomenon of disinformation has become a social disorder that plagues collective consciousness. Unlike extrajudicial killings, which produce visible evidence and immediate public scrutiny, enforced disappearances enable authorities to deny custodial involvement and sustain a façade of political stability.

From a legal perspective, an enforced disappearance constitutes a crime against humanity when carried out as part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilians.³ In the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance⁴ (ICPPED), enforced disappearance is defined as:

“the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty... followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment

¹ Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. (2025). *Second interim report: A structural diagnosis of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh (Reporting period: 15 December 2024–31 May 2025)*.

² Raymond, G. V. (2025). [Full article: An authoritarian security community in mainland Southeast Asia: regional dynamics in an actor-centred theory of transnational authoritarianism](#)

³ Article 7(2)(i) of the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. Adopted 17 July 1998, U.N. Doc. A/CONF.183/9.

⁴ Article 2 of the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*. Adopted 20 December 2006, GA Res 61/177; entered into force 23 December 2010.



of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person," a combination that "place[s] such a person outside the protection of the law."

The defining feature of enforced disappearances is the deliberate removal of an individual from legal reach. Once custody is denied, the legal safeguards that ordinarily operate such as arrest records, access to legal counsel, habeas corpus, no longer operate. For families, this absence produces both legal and social paralysis: without a body, no death can be registered, no mourning rituals can proceed, and no legal processes such as inheritance can begin. The lack of a physical body also creates a structural void for State denial. Governments routinely respond to petitions or complaints by asserting that the person is not in their custody, a statement made possible precisely because the disappearance has eliminated all traceable evidence.

In this space, disinformation becomes an integral part of how an ED is executed, justified, and denied. Competing false narratives emerge immediately after a person goes missing: claims that the individual voluntarily absconded, joined an armed group, abandoned their families, or fabricated their disappearance for political motives. These narratives often originate from State institutions, court records, security agencies, or affiliated actors, and are amplified through traditional and digital media. The effect is twofold: they sought to undermine the credibility of families and human rights organizations, and they shifted public attention away from the State's duty to account for the disappeared person.

Across the countries studied, disinformation performs a stabilizing function for governments facing allegations of enforced disappearance. It shapes perception of the victim before facts can be established, reframes the disappearance as a security matter rather than a rights violation, and normalizes state violence under the guise of national security. In several country studies, red-tagging, terrorism allegations, or criminal charges appear before or immediately after a disappearance, establishing a narrative framework that discourages international scrutiny and weakens public pressure for investigation.

The development of digital platforms between 2015 and 2025 has intensified these dynamics putting the integrity of information ecosystems at risk. Social media enabled decentralized dissemination of anonymous claims, government statements, and coordinated propaganda that framed the disappeared person as a political or security threat. Meanwhile, the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has shown potential dangers of propagandists fabricating images associating victims of EDs as criminals.

This study examines enforced disappearances through this wider information ecosystem, analyzing how disinformation pathways shape public understanding of ED cases, affect the behavior of authorities, and influence families' access to remedies. By mapping patterns across selected Asian countries, the study identifies the recurring



mechanisms by which disinformation interacts with disappearance and how these mechanisms sustain an oppressive system in which individuals and their families are removed not only from the protection of the law, but also from seeking accountability, as evidence is not accessible and purposely concealed by the State agents themselves.

This initiative was commissioned by the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances, a regional organization that works with partner non-governmental organizations across Asia to address the crime of EDs. The study examines the context of countries selected by AFAD—Bangladesh, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines—where enforced disappearance and its related narratives have taken different forms over time. While most of the cases examined concern cases occurring in the late 2010s and early 2020s, Nepal constitutes a distinct context as EDs there were concentrated during the 1996–2006 armed conflict, and the study addresses how the legacy of those cases continues to shape information, accountability, and public memory.

Research Objectives

This study examines enforced disappearances through the lens of information disorder, with a focus on how disinformation shapes public understanding, institutional responses, and access to remedies for the victims. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Map and analyze the trends, patterns, and typologies of disinformation on enforced disappearances in selected Asian countries; Include comparative country case studies.
2. Identify primary and secondary sources of disinformation, including state and non-state actors;
3. Examine the mediums and platforms through which disinformation is spread;
4. Analyze the impacts of disinformation on victim-families, human rights defenders, and the general public;
5. Provide recommendations for countering and mitigating the effects of disinformation including:

Research Questions

The study is structured around the following research questions:

1. What are the trends, and typologies of disinformation on enforced disappearances in the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal?
2. What are the primary and secondary sources of disinformation?



3. What are the mediums and platforms through which disinformation is spread?
4. What are the impacts of disinformation, on victim-families, human rights defenders, and the general public?
5. What are the recommendations for countering and mitigating the effects of disinformation?



Review of Related Literature

Through processes of dehumanization and othering, governments and authoritarian regimes construct targeted individuals as threats, criminals, or outsiders who fall outside the bounds of moral and legal protection.⁵ Within this narrative frame, enforced disappearance becomes easier to justify and obscure. Authorities deny state involvement or imply that whatever happened was a consequence of the victim's own actions. These strategies work alongside the physical act of disappearance to regulate political dissent, normalize abuse, and weaken public demands for accountability. In many cases, state and non-state actors use misleading or selectively framed information to portray victims as criminals or political threats. These narratives influence public perception and contribute to the normalization of impunity.

Meanwhile, the ongoing discourse on misinformation and disinformation research has concentrated primarily on interference in elections and hate speech, especially after major political events in the Global North.⁶ The conceptual tools developed in that field, particularly the Information Disorder Syndrome framework, provide a structured vocabulary for analyzing harmful information. However, their relevance to contexts of state violence, including enforced disappearance, has not been fully examined.

This literature review engages the misinformation and disinformation field as an analytical foundation for understanding ED. It traces the development of the Information Disorder Syndrome framework, examines its institutional and geopolitical origins, and assesses its key assumptions, including its emphasis on intent and democratic disruption. It then situates these debates within Global South media systems and authoritarian information practices before integrating sociopsychological theories of violence. Through this progression, the review argues that in contexts of enforced disappearance, information disorder does not merely distort public debate. It plays a role in framing victims as threats, legitimizing state action, and supporting processes of denial and legal erasure. The following sections develop this argument by examining how existing scholarship both clarifies and limits our understanding of disappearance as an informational as well as physical practice.

The Conceptual Architecture and Geopolitical Genesis of the Information Disorder Syndrome (IDS)

⁵ United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) (2023). *"The use of new technologies in cases of enforced disappearances: Its pros and cons."*

⁶ International Development Research Centre (IDRC) & Research ICT Africa (2023). "Resisting information disorder in the Global South."



The Information Disorder Syndrome framework (IDS), predominantly associated with the 2017 report by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan for the Council of Europe, provided a crucial methodological response to the burgeoning global crisis of information pollution.⁷ Developed in the wake of significant political shocks in the Global North, the framework sought to replace the ambiguous and often politically weaponized term "fake news" with a more rigorous taxonomy.

While highly successful in establishing a common language for researchers and policymakers, the framework's genesis and conceptual priorities inherently reflect the liberal democratic and legal traditions of its Western institutional origin, raising significant questions about its universal applicability.

Defining the Tripartite Model: Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation (M/D/M)

The core contribution of the IDS is its tripartite classification system, which differentiates types of harmful content based on two primary dimensions: falseness (whether the information is untrue or genuine) and intent to harm (whether the creator/sharer deliberately seeks to inflict damage).⁸

Table 1. The Tripartite Model. Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation

Typology	Definition
Misinformation	Defined as false information that is shared without the intention of causing harm. In medical research, this is sometimes categorized as Grade 1, a milder form of information disorder where the individual shares false information unknowingly.
Disinformation	Involves information that is false and deliberately created or knowingly shared to cause harm to a person, social group, organization, or country. This intentional deceit places it in the realm of Grade 2 or 3 severity in some academic classifications, where the intent might range from seeking political gain to outright malice.

⁷ Wardle C. and Derakhshan H., [Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making \(2017\)](#) (Council of Europe, 2017).

⁸ Kandel, N. (2020). Information disorder syndrome and its management. *Journal of Nepal Medical Association*, 58(224), 280–285. [Information Disorder Syndrome and its Management](#)



Malinformation	Distinct in that it is based on genuine information (i.e., it is not false), but it is shared to inflict harm, often by leveraging private information into the public sphere.
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This conceptualization has provided researchers and policymakers with an initial working theoretical instrument in the late 2010s. However, the framework’s utility in operationalizing responses, particularly in field contexts, is often challenged.

In complex, high-stakes environments such as UN-monitored conflict settings, operational actors often struggle to distinguish precisely between hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation. In practice, these categories are sometimes collapsed into umbrella terms such as “information pollution” or “infodemic,” reflecting the difficulty of applying conceptual distinctions in volatile contexts.⁹ This operational difficulty highlights a fundamental tension: while the IDS is a robust tool for academic taxonomy, its application in crisis response often reverts to prioritizing the cumulative impact of harmful speech, rather than meticulous categorization based on intent and source.

The Institutional and Geopolitical Roots of the 2017 Framework

The Council of Europe commissioned the 2017 Information Disorder which report frames mis-, dis-, and mal-information primarily in relation to their implications for democracy, elections, and public trust. The document emphasizes risks to democratic institutions and proposes policy responses aimed at strengthening media systems, improving platform governance, and protecting public discourse.¹⁰ The development of the framework by Wardle and Derakhshan was commissioned by the Council of Europe, an institution deeply rooted in promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law across the European continent. This European institutional platform inherently channeled the subsequent analysis through a specific lens of liberal democratic protection.

The immediate impetus for the framework was tied to political disruptions associated with recent electoral events. The report explicitly references the Brexit vote in the UK, Donald Trump’s victory in the United States, and Kenya’s annulled election as contexts in which concerns about information disorder intensified. Thus, the discussion

⁹ Wardle, C. (2024, June). [Report - A Conceptual Analysis of the Overlaps and Differences between Hate Speech, Misinformation and Disinformation \(June 2024\)](#) UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO) Office of the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide (OSAPG)/

¹⁰ Wardle C. and Derakhshan H., (2017, September) [Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making \(2017\)](#) (Council of Europe, 2017).



was framed primarily in terms of the implications of information disorder for democratic processes.

Consequently, much of the subsequent academic research, which surged after 2016, overwhelmingly associates information disorder with the rise of social media platforms and its power to sway public opinion, disrupt democratic processes, and deepen polarization.¹¹ The focus on protecting liberal democratic stability inadvertently minimizes or overlooks the long-standing, often existential harms caused by information manipulation in non-Western contexts—harms related to public health, ethnic violence, or systemic corruption—which existed well before the "2016 crisis" centered on platforms. The strong academic presence from the United States further reinforces this trend, directing research funding and methodological priorities toward technocratic, platform-centric interventions defined by North American and European experiences.¹²

Challenging the "Pollution" Metaphor and the Politics of Knowledge Production

The standard public discourse often frames disinformation as "polluting" or "infecting" an otherwise healthy information ecosystem. Critics argue that this pollution metaphor is problematic because it treats disinformation as a neutral, external toxin. By focusing on "information pollution at a global scale", the framework curiously disconnects information disorder from the broader politics of knowledge production and the systems of power that underpin it—specifically, who benefits from the polluted narratives and why.

When researchers treat information disorder merely as a technical problem or a "mysterious and ineffable toxin," they inherently ignore the content of the disinformation itself. A critical approach suggests that narratives are not successful randomly; they resonate precisely because they are congruent with and amplify existing societal inequalities. Much disinformation builds upon and reifies pre-existing ideologies, such as racial, misogynist, xenophobic, or anti-Semitic tropes. For example, the success of narratives like QAnon relies on combining current fears with centuries-old anti-Semitic tropes.

¹¹ Irwanto, I., Bahfiarti, T., Unde, A. A., & Sonni, A. F. (2025). [Information disorder's impact on adolescents: publication trends and recommendations](#) *Frontiers in Communication*, 10, Article 1495536.

¹² Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (Eds.). (2022). *Disinformation in the Global South*. Wiley Blackwell. [Disinformation in the Global South - Google Books](#)



Further, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales¹³ argue that the "information pollution" metaphor is ill-suited for the Global South, where media ecosystems have historically been characterized by state capture, colonial legacies, and low institutional trust rather than a recently disrupted ideal of democratic consensus. In these contexts, disinformation functions less as an external toxin introduced by foreign actors and more as a continuity of domestic statecraft and autocratic consolidation, where governments themselves are frequently the primary architects of false narratives designed to suppress dissent and maintain power. Furthermore, the infrastructure of disinformation in these regions is distinctively shaped by the "digital divide" and the dominance of "free basics" internet programs; this creates an environment where platforms like Facebook act as the entirety of the internet for many users, limiting their ability to verify information against external sources and trapping them in closed loops of fabrication.

Consequently, the impact of information disorder in the Global South often transcends the electoral interference focused on in the Global North, posing immediate existential threats to human rights and physical safety, including vigilante violence and ethnic conflict. The spread of these narratives is facilitated by unique cultural dynamics, such as "ascribed trust"—where reliance on family and peer networks supersedes trust in institutions—and cultural values regarding social harmony that discourage the correction of falsehoods shared by elders or community leaders. This reliance on intimate, encrypted channels like WhatsApp creates a "dark social" environment where disinformation campaigns can weaponize pre-existing societal cleavages to dehumanize victims and legitimize state violence while remaining largely shielded from public scrutiny and fact-checking interventions.

Systemic Power and Historical Continuity: Disinformation as a Tool of Inequality

The IDS's focus on the novel challenges posed by contemporary social technology tends to overlook the continuity of disinformation as a tool of systemic power. Critical disinformation studies emphasize that false and misleading narratives have always been spread by corporations, state actors, and politicians to achieve ideological goals, demonstrating that the problem is not new to social media.

The assumption that fragmented "truth" is a new crisis, resulting from polarization enabled by digital platforms, presupposes that the public once agreed upon "facts" and "knowledge". This assumption is often flawed, particularly when considering the history of the United States, where dominant systems of power, particularly whiteness, relied on unequal realities. Historically, the mainstream press played a role in maintaining inequality

¹³ Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (Eds.). (2022). *Disinformation in the Global South*. Wiley Blackwell. [Disinformation in the Global South - Google Books](#)



by propagating racist narratives—such as portraying Black people as criminals—to justify violence and reinforce structural hierarchies. Disinformation in this systemic view is recognized as a primary media strategy used to reproduce white supremacy and power at the expense of marginalized populations. This perspective highlights a critical flaw in the IDS: its prioritization of intent as a defining feature of harm.

The Priority of Intent as a Western Legal Construct

The classification of content hinges fundamentally on establishing *mens rea*—the deliberate intent to cause harm (D) versus the lack thereof (M). This focus on individual intent is arguably an imposition of a Western liberal legal construct onto a global phenomenon. In contexts where systemic harm is entrenched, such as the use of anti-poor stereotypes like the "welfare queen" to justify massive reductions in public benefits, the outcome is devastating regardless of whether the individual sharer of the stereotype intended malice.

By allowing systemic, harmful narratives that reinforce existing ideological structures to be categorized as benign "misinformation" because the current sharer lacked explicit malicious intent, the framework provides an avenue for avoiding accountability for structural damage. The political function of disinformation is thus ignored when the framework is rigidly applied, allowing the erosion of the informational foundations required for citizens to hold governments accountable, a critical vulnerability that authoritarian regimes actively exploit.

Authoritarian Information Warfare and Geopolitical Conflict

While the IDS was spurred by concerns over external interference in Western elections, it struggles to fully capture the strategic depth of information manipulation utilized by determined authoritarian regimes. States like Russia and China use digital influence operations not merely for discrete political gains, but as a sophisticated tool of statecraft.

Authoritarian operations go beyond simple propaganda; they are often designed to flood the information space with false or misleading narratives, aiming to engender public cynicism and uncertainty. This deliberate creation of informational chaos serves to crowd out independent voices, weaken social cohesion, and damage democratic institutions globally. China, for instance, has weaponized disinformation throughout the Asia-Pacific region to discredit political figures and drive wedges in alliances. Russia utilizes historical revisionism and manipulation of pivotal historical events (like post-WWI treaties) as tools for foreign interference, exploiting specific vulnerabilities within European societies to build



hostile narratives.¹⁴ These actions demonstrate that information disorder is a key driver in International Relations scholarship, shifting patterns of conflict and eroding the fundamental informational assumptions of existing international relations theories.

Cultural Determinants of Trust and Epistemology

The generalizability of current research is severely limited by a pronounced skew toward the Global North, overlooking unique manifestations of information disorder in non-Western contexts.¹⁵ Solutions developed under the IDS, such as media literacy strategies that focus on content characteristics (grammar, source reliability), often fail where cultural variables dictate the flow of information and the locus of trust.

Research on national culture, particularly the dimensions of Power Distance and Individualism, indicates that these factors determine how social trust is produced.¹⁶ For instance, a comparative study between Greek and Portuguese Instagram users revealed that cultural differences significantly affect how content is validated.¹⁷ Greeks, who exhibit a higher inclination toward social connections, show increased trust in content from friends (social endorsement) and place less importance on objective post characteristics (emotional language, poor grammar, or spelling) when identifying fake news compared to the Portuguese. In such high-context cultures, interventions predicated on forensic content analysis will be ineffective if they do not address the priority placed on peer validation and personal networks.

Within non-Western political systems, trust dynamics can change rapidly and are deeply generational. In mainland China, analysis indicates a significant decline in news media trust from older generations to the younger "Globalization Generation," accompanied by a weakening influence of political trust on media trust.¹⁸ Policy solutions derived from static Western trust models are therefore ill-equipped to address these

¹⁴ Information manipulation and historical revisionism: Russian disinformation and foreign interference through manipulated history-based narratives. - Open Research Europe, [Information manipulation and historical revisionism: Russian disinformation and foreign interference through manipulated history-based narratives.](#)

¹⁵ Scrutinizing the Gateway Relationship Between Gaming and Gambling Disorder: Scoping Review With a Focus on the Southeast Asian Region, <https://games.jmir.org/2025/1/e59740>

¹⁶ (PDF) Culture Differences and Trust - ResearchGate, [\(PDF\) Culture Differences and Trust](#)

¹⁷ Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Fake News: A Comparative Study of Instagram Users in Greece and Portugal - MDPI, <https://www.mdpi.com/2078-2489/16/1/41>

¹⁸ Generational Differences: The Levels and Determinants of News Media Trust in China, [Generational Differences: The Levels and Determinants of News Media Trust in China](#)



complex, dynamic shifts in information consumption and credibility in authoritarian societies.

The Global South Challenge: Fragile Trust and Exploited Vulnerabilities

In the Global South, information disorder is often leveraged against existing vulnerabilities, with far more tangible and immediate negative impacts on human welfare and security. Campaigns, especially those fueled by foreign illiberal regimes, grow faster amongst marginalized communities who already mistrust mainstream media.¹⁹ These external actors strategically mix false and sensationalized content with legitimate critiques of Western policy failures to cast doubt on democracy itself.

The consequence is existential harm, particularly in Least Developed Countries. For example, in Africa, deliberate disinformation campaigns frame climate change as a "Western concern," leading to widespread public mistrust in science and media institutions.²⁰ This delegitimization undermines vital local adaptation strategies, leaving communities critically unprepared for climate impacts like floods and droughts. The failure of the framework to account for such deeply contextual harms, particularly its lag in capturing the use of emerging platforms and the need for localized methodological toolkits, confirms the significant research generalizability deficit outside of the Global North.

The infrastructure of disinformation in the Global South is further shaped by structural and economic inequalities in digital access. In the Philippines, free Facebook access has been touted by the platform as a solution to solve lack of access to the internet. However, the same has backfired as it has allowed users to access Facebook without paying for "load" or mobile data, but opening external websites required paying for data (Palatino, 2017).²¹

Thus, Facebook users could read headlines and short captions for free, but they could not see full articles, images, or videos unless they paid data charges. For most users in the Philippines, this created a financial barrier to verification. A user could read a sensational or misleading headline at no cost, but confirming whether it was true required

¹⁹ Disinformation tactics in Africa - ISS African Futures, [Disinformation tactics in Africa - ISS African Futures](#)

²⁰ Countering climate disinformation in Africa through Media and Information Literacy, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/countering-climate-disinformation-africa-through-media-and-information-literacy>

²¹ Palatino, M. (2017, July 28). Philippines: On Facebook's free version, fake news is even harder to spot. Global Voices Advox. [Philippines: On Facebook's Free Version, Fake News is Even Harder to Spot · Global Voices Advox](#)



spending money. As a result, users have relied more heavily on Facebook contents without being able to check external sources.

These “truth” cost barrier further intersect with interpersonal or “ascribed” trust, where reliance on family and peer networks supersedes trust in institutions. When a headline or link is shared by a family member or trusted friend they may gain additional credibility. Disinformation campaigns on WhatsApp and other messaging apps were shown to be more effective, especially when shared by a family member or a close friend (Kuru et al., 2022).²² When a claim is forwarded by someone personally known and trusted, it may gain added legitimacy. In contexts where verifying information requires additional cost or effort, this trust within close networks can make it easier for false or misleading claims to spread.

For EDs, the combination of limited access to verification and interpersonal trust can reinforce state-aligned narratives. For instance in the Philippines, posts affirming that a disappeared activist was a member of the Communist Party may circulate on Facebook or messaging platforms. A user may be able to read the headline or short claim for free, but verifying the allegation, by checking independent reporting or official news, may require paid data access.

Theoretical Convergence: Information Disorder and the Mechanisms of State Violence

While the IDS framework provides the necessary structural lexicon to categorize information pollution—distinguishing between the agent (producer), the message (content), and the interpreter (audience)—it requires integration with sociopsychological theories of violence to fully explain how disinformation facilitates human rights abuses like enforced disappearances. In the context of state-sponsored violence, disinformation functions as more than a disruption of truth; it serves as a cognitive mechanism that alters the moral status of the victim to justify their elimination.

Recent scholarship on the psychology of mass violence challenges the traditional view that perpetrators strictly “dehumanize” victims by reducing them to mindless objects

²² Kuru, O., Campbell, S. W., Bayer, J. B., Baruh, L., & Ling, R. (2022). WhatsApp and the spread of disinformation in global contexts. In H. Wasserman & D. Madrid-Morales (Eds.), *Disinformation in the Global South*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003155440>



or animals. Landry et al.²³, in their analysis of propaganda preceding mass violence, argue that state narratives often attribute high levels of agency and intentionality to victims rather than stripping it away. This phenomenon, better described as demonization, aligns with the "attribution to terrorism" typology observed in the Asian context; by framing victims as "masterminds," "recruiters," or "spies," the state constructs a threat perception that provides a "palliative rationalization" for extrajudicial violence. This suggests that the Message element of the IDS, when weaponized by the state, is designed not to portray victims as passive non-humans, but as dangerous, high-agency political actors who must be neutralized to protect the collective.

This weaponization of the narrative is further elucidated by Rai et al.'s²⁴ distinction between instrumental and moral violence. Their research posits that perpetrators of collective violence often act not out of a lack of moral regard, but from a distorted sense of moral obligation to punish perceived wrongdoers. This connects directly to the "victim blaming" narratives documented in disinformation campaigns, where the disappeared are framed as "traitors," "bad parents," or "immoral" actors. In this framework, the Interpreter (the public) is manipulated into viewing the enforced disappearance not as a crime, but as a necessary act of moral justice, thereby securing public acquiescence or "hegemonic decoding" of the state's violence.

Furthermore, the operationalization of these narratives must be understood as an institutional process rather than a collection of individual biases. Maynard and Luft²⁵ argue that dehumanization is deeply embedded in ideological and institutional contexts, meaning that violence is rarely the result of atomized individuals reacting to rhetoric, but rather the result of collective action within formal organizations. Recent systemic reviews of information disorder further support this shift away from isolated, tech-centric perspectives. Ricard, Yañez, and Hora²⁶ propose a five-stage framework that reframes information disorder not merely as a crisis of digital literacy or individual cognition, but as a

²³ Landry, A. P., Orr, R. I., & Mere, K. (2022). Dehumanization and mass violence: A study of mental state language in Nazi propaganda (1927–1945). *PLoS ONE*, 17(11), e0274957. [Dehumanization and mass violence: A study of mental state language in Nazi propaganda \(1927–1945\) | PLOS One](#)

²⁴ Rai, T. S., Valdesolo, P., & Graham, J. (2017). Dehumanization increases instrumental violence, but not moral violence. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(32), 8511–8516

²⁵ Leader Maynard, J., & Luft, A. (2023). Humanizing dehumanization research. *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology*, 4, 100102.

²⁶ Ricard, J., Yañez, I., & Hora, L. (2025, April). *A Framework for Information Disorder: Modeling Mechanisms and Implications Based on a Systematic Literature Review*. arXiv. Retrieved from [A Framework for Information Disorder: Modeling Mechanisms and Implications Based on a Systematic Literature Review](#)



deeply embedded "socio-material phenomenon." Crucially, their model highlights how preexisting sociopolitical vulnerabilities are systematically exploited by motivated agents who wield institutional power. This validates the focus on the Agent within the IDS framework, specifically the role of "institutional validators"—courts, police, and state media—that standardize and bureaucratize denial narratives.

Ultimately, these mechanisms culminate in what Luban²⁷ describes as "politics gone cancerous," where the state turns its resources toward persecuting its own population based on group membership. Luban argues that Crimes Against Humanity are an assault on the human status of being a "political animal"—an individual who lives in a community. Disinformation acts as the primary tool for this assault; by denying custody and erasing the legal record of the victim, the state severs the political link between the citizen and the law, rendering the victim invisible and removing them from the protection of the "human status".

Thus, information disorder in this context is not merely a pollution of public discourse, but a mechanism through which legal erasure is carried out and sustained. It functions to normalize denial, to shift suspicion onto the victim, and to diffuse responsibility across institutions, media channels, and public commentary. In doing so, it reinforces the disappearance not only as a physical act, but as a political condition, one in which the individual is removed from the sphere of recognized rights and rendered unreachable by ordinary safeguards of law and accountability.

²⁷ Luban, D. (2004). A theory of crimes against humanity. *The Yale Journal of International Law*, 29(1), 85-167.



Methodology

This section provides a structured approach to identifying, collecting, and analyzing data to map the actors and narratives involved in spreading disinformation. It is based on the foundational concepts outlined in First Draft's "Understanding Information Disorder."

Sampling Strategy

The study focused on selected five countries: Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. These were chosen by AFAD based on regional relevance and the prevalence of disinformation linked to enforced disappearances and related human rights issues. Within each country, the researchers identified emblematic cases of enforced disappearances. The cases served as entry points for data scraping across both legacy media and social media platforms.

Data Collection

Keyword research based on the conceptual framework was conducted for the creation of a comprehensive list of keywords, phrases, hashtags, and known actors to monitor for desk research. Keywords and hashtags with terms related to the topic were noted to create a list of emerging narratives. Known actors were also noted including usernames, website URLs, and names of individuals or groups already known to be involved in disinformation campaigns.

Typology of Emerging Narratives

The dataset was refined throughout the research process, with emerging narratives evaluated against established initial typologies. These typologies included the Attribution to Terrorism or Criminality, wherein the disappeared individual is framed as an insurgent or criminal to justify state intervention, and Political Labeling or "Red-Tagging," which brands victims and advocates as enemies of the state to suppress dissent. Further categories included the Delegitimization of Families and Advocates, portraying them as politically motivated actors, and Counter-Narratives that suggest voluntary disappearance to divert attention from state culpability. The analysis also monitored for Victim Blaming, which attacks the moral character of the individual; State-Legitimizing Narratives propagated by government-aligned groups; and Flooding and Obfuscation, a tactic employed to saturate platforms with distracting content to obscure credible reports and confuse public discourse.



The list will be further refined through the research or merged depending on overlaps observed in the data. The following emerging narratives will then be compared to these initial typologies:

1. *Attribution to Terrorism or Criminality*
Framing the disappeared individual as a terrorist, insurgent, drug user, or criminal to justify state action and reduce public sympathy.
2. *Political Labeling / Red Tagging*
Branding victims, families, or advocates as communists, subversives, or enemies of the state to silence dissent.
3. *Delegitimization of Families and Advocates*
Spreading narratives that families, NGOs, or lawyers are liars, paid actors, or politically motivated.
4. *Counter-Narratives / Alternative Explanations*
Suggesting the disappeared person left voluntarily, joined a cult, or fled due to personal reasons, diverting attention from state responsibility.
5. *Victim Blaming and Character Assassination*
Attacking the moral character of victims (e.g., immoral, corrupt, irresponsible) to justify their disappearance.
6. *State-Legitimizing Narratives*
Content from state-aligned groups, pseudo-experts, or GONGOs portraying disappearances as lawful, necessary, or in defense of peace and order.
7. *Flooding and Obfuscation*
Saturating platforms with irrelevant, distracting, or contradictory content to bury credible reports and confuse public discourse

Validation and Interviews with Human Rights Organizations

Verification was carried out through focus group discussions with AFAD and its regional partner organizations. These sessions brought together researchers to collectively review digital findings, assess narratives, and draw on their direct knowledge of cases and local contexts. The following questions were used as the interview guide:

1. What are the most prevalent false narratives related to enforced disappearances in your country's context?
2. Which platforms are most commonly used to spread disinformation regarding enforced disappearances?



3. Who are the key actors (influencers, groups, imposter sites) you've observed amplifying these false narratives?
4. What specific tactics (e.g., manipulated media, impersonation) are used to mislead audiences about enforced disappearances?
5. How do these disinformation campaigns impact the families of the disappeared and their advocates?
6. What are the main challenges in fact-checking and debunking disinformation related to enforced disappearances in your context?
7. What are the traumas that surface during fact-checking efforts when supporting affected communities?
8. What resources or support do your organizations need to more effectively counter disinformation?
9. Are there any cross-country patterns or transnational networks of disinformation spread that you have observed?
10. What recommendations do you have for early detection systems and advocacy strategies to counter these narratives?

Claims identified online were then fact-checked against publicly available records, with priority given to official and authoritative sources. These included United Nations documents, findings of international and national human rights bodies, court decisions, and reports from established and credible news outlets. Media sources were used primarily to trace how narratives circulated publicly, while official records were relied upon to verify facts, timelines, and legal outcomes. Where possible, online narratives were compared with documented incidents to determine whether they aligned with, distorted, or contradicted verified accounts.

Pilot Case Study: Philippines

A pilot case study was first conducted in the Philippines, leveraging the researchers' familiarity with the country's issues on information integrity. Data scraping from social media and news platforms, mapping key actors and source and analysis of dominant narratives and their evolution were conducted in this phase. The findings from the Philippines were used as a guide to structure the succeeding case studies in Pakistan, Nepal, Indonesia and Bangladesh.



Country Report: Philippines

I. Philippines: Political Context on Human Rights

The Philippines developed its human rights framework following the 1986 People Power Revolution, which ultimately ended the 20-year rule of Pres. Ferdinand Marcos Sr. Under Marcos' presidency, the national police and the military carried out enforced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings with impunity. Thousands of people, including activists, journalists, and ordinary citizens, were arrested or taken without warrants, and many were never found.²⁸

After the fall of the dictatorship, the Filipinos demanded "Never Again to Martial Law" and called for human rights protections to prevent the resurgence of state-sponsored killings and abductions. Thus, President Aquino, Marcos' successor established the Presidential Committee on Human Rights (PCHR) in 1986 to investigate human rights violations under the Marcos regime. PCHR served as the direct forerunner of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR).²⁹ In 2007, the Philippines pledged to the international community to accede to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED). However, until today, no progress has been made to formally ratify ICPPED.

In 2012, the Philippines became the first country in Asia to criminalize enforced disappearances through the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act. Human rights groups welcomed the law's passage as an acknowledgment of the country's dark history of forced abductions, state-sponsored killings, and secret detentions since the Marcos Sr. dictatorship.³⁰ Yet more than a decade later, state-enforced disappearances continue with zero convictions,³¹ with civil society organizations recording new cases involving political activists and environmental defenders.

²⁸ Amnesty International. (2022, April 25). Five things to know about martial law in the Philippines. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/04/five-things-to-know-about-martial-law-in-the-philippines/>

²⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs. (2025, March 6). [Philippines Presents 4th Human Rights Plan as Blueprint for Country-Led Partnerships at Human Rights Council1990.I](#)

³⁰ Human Rights Watch. (2012, October 17). Philippines: Aquino should sign landmark disappearances law. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/10/17/philippines-aquino-should-sign-landmark-disappearances-law>

³¹ Center for Environmental Concerns – Philippines. (2025, August 29). [Justice long overdue: Surface all Desaparecidos](#)



Despite legal progress, the Philippines remains caught in a cycle where violence against dissenters is denied and justified through disinformation and red-tagging narratives. Successive governments have rebranded old practices under campaigns such as the “war on drugs,” “counter-insurgency,” and “anti-terrorism,” claiming to protect peace and order while silencing critics.³²

Environmental defenders opposing extractive and reclamation projects face growing threats as corporate and state interests converge. For the past decade, Global Witness has identified the Philippines as the deadliest country in Asia for land and environmental defenders.³³ In the Cordillera, indigenous advocates Dexter Capuyan and Gene Roz Jamil “Bazoo” de Jesus were disappeared after opposing mega dams and mining. In Central Luzon, Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano, community organizers against Manila Bay reclamation, were abducted after challenging projects such as the New Manila International Airport.³⁴ While disappearances are linked to state actors, they are often driven by private interests profiting from these businesses, showing how economic interests and state protection are intertwined to sustain impunity.³⁵

Red-tagging has been the State’s most pervasive tool for justifying violence. Red-tagging is labeling activists, journalists, and land and environmental defenders as “communists” to discredit their advocacies. UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan has identified red-tagging as a severe and ongoing threat to civil society, documenting over 450 incidents in early 2024, of which 61 percent involved government actors.³⁶ Before going missing, victims are often branded as terrorists or rebels, as in the case of Dexter Capuyan, whose face appeared on “wanted” posters for rebellion. Families who seek help from

³² Ocampo, S. C. (2023, September 2). Enforced disappearances, persecution: a long story | The Freeman. The Philippine Star.

³³ Global Witness. (2024, September 10). Missing voices: The violent erasure of land and environmental defenders | Global Witness

³⁴ Global Witness. (2023, September 14). Two Filipino environmental advocates violently abducted after opposing controversial airport project | Global Witness

³⁵ Center for Environmental Concerns – Philippines. (2025, August 29). Justice long overdue: Surface all Desaparecidos [Statement]. Justice long overdue: Surface all Desaparecidos

³⁶ Khan, I. (2025, June 4). Visit to the Philippines : report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Irene Khan (A/HRC/56/55/Add.1). United Nations Human Rights Council.



authorities frequently encounter hostility or denial, with police claiming that their relatives have simply gone to the mountains to “join the revolution.”³⁷

The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Deduro v. Vinoya* affirmed that red-tagging itself is life-threatening. Deduro, a human rights and environmental activist, was publicly identified by military officials as part of the Communist Party of the Philippines–New People’s Army hierarchy and later appeared on posters labeling him a terrorist. The Court held that a petitioner should not be expected to await abduction or death before courts can grant protection, recognizing that such labeling creates real and imminent danger.³⁸

From 2023 to 2024, the Philippines led Asia in alleged abductions of human rights defenders, with 15 documented cases among 24 countries.³⁹ Disinformation sets the stage for violence: state-aligned media, sponsored content creators, and law enforcement platforms depict victims as criminals or drug users and frame abductions as legitimate counterinsurgency. Such narratives normalize abuse and deter families from seeking help during the critical early hours. Mapping how these stories are created and spread is essential to breaking the cycle of denial and sustaining truth in the face of impunity.

II. **Philippines: Notable Cases of EDs and Disinformation**

The following section presents recent emblematic cases of enforced disappearance in the Philippines. Each case is analyzed through verified reports detailing the circumstances of the disappearance, legal developments, and the current status of the victims. Beyond factual timelines, this section also maps the disinformation ecosystem surrounding each case, tracing narratives from official and semi-official sources, including police social media accounts and other state-aligned platforms.

A. Dexter Capuyan and Gene Roz Jamil “Bazoo” De Jesus

Verified Reports

Dexter Capuyan and Gene Roz Jamil “Bazoo” de Jesus were advocates for Indigenous Peoples’ rights in the Cordillera region of the Philippines. As a community organizer, Dexter Capuyan championed the protection of ancestral lands as part of the campaigns of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance, which included organizing communities against large-scale

³⁷ Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND), Personal Interview (2025, October 16).

³⁸ G.R. No. 254753, July 4, 2023. Philippine Supreme Court. GR 254753 Siegfred D. Deduro Vs. Maj. Gen. Eric C. Vinoya, in his capacity as Commanding Officer of the 3rd Infantry Division, Philippine Army

³⁹ Palalimpa, R. (2025, July 2019). Inquirer, PH tops Asia in rights defender abductions–report



mining operations, geothermal projects, and mega-dams that threaten displacement and environmental damage.⁴⁰ Bazoo de Jesus served as the Information and Networking Officer for the Philippine Task Force for Indigenous Peoples' Rights. His work promoted the youth participation in these initiatives.⁴¹

On April 28, 2023, both were abducted in Taytay, Rizal. Witnesses saw armed men, identifying themselves as Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG), block their tricycle with two white vehicles and forcibly take them. Their families searched police stations, military camps, hospitals, and government offices, but authorities denied custody. The AFP claimed to have no leads, and several agencies refused to sign official inquiry forms under the Anti-Enforced Disappearance Act.⁴²

Legal Developments

The families first filed a Petition for Writ of Habeas Corpus to compel the state to surface Dexter and Bazoo. In September 2023, the Court of Appeals denied the petition, ruling that there was no proof the two were in government custody. The AFP later cited this dismissal as proof that the state had no involvement in the disappearance.⁴³

Undeterred, the families pursued a Writ of Amparo, a legal remedy to protect life, liberty, and security. On August 12, 2025, the Court of Appeals granted the petition, declaring the two as victims of enforced disappearance. The court found "deliberate efforts to conceal key evidence" by the PNP. Despite this ruling, the families continue to demand that Dexter and Bazoo be surfaced.⁴⁴

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

The campaign to discredit Dexter Capuyan began even before his enforced disappearance. After their abduction, the State continued a multi-stage disinformation

⁴⁰ FEU Advocate. (2023, May 6). *Vanished under Marcos Jr.: Heightening Enforced Disappearances Reflect State's Sharp Eye on Progressives*. [FEU Advocate - Vanished under Marcos Jr.: Heightening enforced disappearances reflect state's sharpeye on progressives](#)

⁴¹ Commission on Human Rights [CHR]. (2023). *Statement on the Two Missing Activists in Taytay, Rizal*.

⁴² Republic of the Philippines, Court of Appeals, Twelfth Division. (2023, September 13). In the matter of the petition for the writ of habeas corpus in favor of Gene Roz Jamil Centeno de Jesus and Dexter Capuyan (CA-G.R. SP No. 179438).

⁴³ 80th Infantry Battalion. (2023, September 25). *WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS SA DIUMANONG ILLEGAL DETENTION NINA CAPUYAN AT DE JESUS, IBINASURA!* Facebook.

⁴⁴ Licas News. (2025, August 12). *CA grants Writ of Amparo to missing indigenous rights advocates*.

campaign conducted by state institutions, military units, and affiliated online actors. This effort was designed to delegitimize the victims, normalize suspicion, and deflect accountability from the state. Key actors in spreading this disinformation included the security sector, pro-government online influencers, and state-owned media.

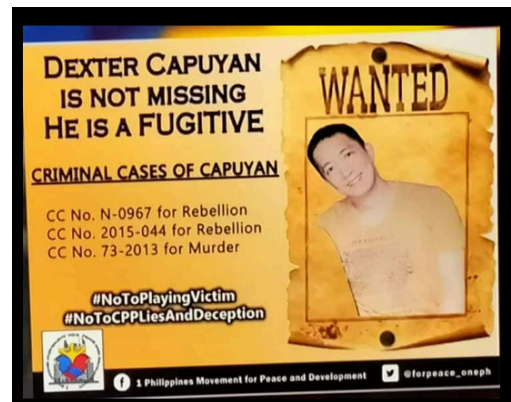
Before his disappearance, Dexter was publicly labeled as a criminal and a member of “Communist Terrorist Groups (CTG)” with a head bounty by the PNP. While the said cases may formally exist, it is crucial to note the documented history of legal cases being fabricated or weaponized against activists to serve as pretexts for arrest and political harassment. The PNP published that he has a pending warrant of arrest, as shown below:⁴⁵

COMMUNIST TERRORIST GROUP PERSONALITIES WITH REWARD COVERED BY DND-DILG JOINT ORDERS ON REWARD			
REGION	COR	ALIAS	Aiko
NAME	CAPUYAN, Dexter	REWARD	1,850,000.00
JOR NO.	14-2012	OFFENSE/S	Murder (2 counts); Frustrated Murder
POSITION	VCO, KLG MONTES	ISSUING COURT	RTC 1st Judicial Region, Br 35, Bontoc, Mt Province
CC NO.	1750; 1748; 1756		



After their disappearance on April 28, 2023, multiple police stations and the AFP denied knowledge or custody as published in the Philippine News Agency.⁴⁶

Thereafter, a Facebook influencer with 9.7k followers published posts declaring that Capuyan was a “fugitive, not missing,” and accused those who condemn the disappearance as “defending criminals.”⁴⁷



⁴⁵ Philippine National Police. (2024, February). *Communist Terrorist Groups posted by the PNP* [PDF]. <https://spd.ncrpo.pnp.ph/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CTG-with-Reward.pdf>

⁴⁶ Philippine News Agency. (2023, July 16). *PNP denies custody of 2 Cordillera activists*. <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1205720disappearance>

⁴⁷ Serrano, P. F. (2023, May 28). *Linggong linggo itong mga taga-suporta ng kriminal na grupo ng mga teroristang cpp-npa-ndf...* [Facebook post]. *Facebook*.



After Bazoo went missing, his mother went to several police stations to ask for help. In Taytay, where he was last seen, the police told his mother that her son was “probably an addict” and that it usually happens to the children of overseas workers.⁴⁸

In July 2023, the PNP and AFP reiterated that they were not holding Dexter and Bazoo. However, AFP spokesperson Col. Medel Aguilar quickly claimed that military intelligence linked Dexter to the New People’s Army.⁴⁹

In September 2023, the 80th Infantry Battalion publicly announced the denial of the writ of habeas corpus for the missing activists, rejecting illegal detention claims against AFP and PNP officials. The post framed Capuyan as wanted and called the disappearance a “disinformation” campaign by the CPP-NPA-NDF to discredit the military, and urged vigilance against recruitment.⁵⁰

Thereafter, some of the original Facebook posts and web pages, such as the “CTG with Reward” list, were later made inaccessible or deleted, though being flagged by search engines.

State bodies, military groups, and other platforms worked together to criminalize the missing individuals, promote suspicion, and frame allies who spoke out as merely defending criminals. This coordinated effort ultimately deflected accountability for the disappearance, as detailed in the table below:

⁴⁸ Chua, A. (2025, August 2). [Ang nanay ni Bazoo: Walang malayo o malapit sa nagmamahal](#) Rappler.

⁴⁹ Calayag, M. A. (2023, July 17). [AFP, PNP deny holding 2 missing Cordillera activists](#) | Inquirer News

⁵⁰ 80th Infantry Battalion. (2023, September 25). [TINGNAN | WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS SA DIUMANONG ILLEGAL DETENTION NINA CAPUYAN AT DE JESUS, IBINASURA!](#) [Status update]. Facebook.

Table 2. Timeline of Disinformation - Capuyan and De Jesus (Philippines)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
Pre-disappearance red-tagging (2022)	PNP–NCRPO; Camarines Sur Police Provincial Office; DILG Joint Order on Rewards	State	Primary – initiates stigmatizing frame prior to disappearance	Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared	Preconditions public perception to accept disappearance as a legitimate counter-insurgency action	Digital “Wanted” posters circulated by the PNP
Abduction and immediate denial of custody (April 2023)	PNP–CIDG; Taytay Police Station; Malolos Police Station	State	Primary – first point of custody denial and narrative formation	Denial of state involvement	Creates procedural delay and obstructs immediate search	Affidavits of families detailing refusals of police/military camps to sign inquiry forms
Official denials and media amplification (May–July 2023)	PNP Public Information Office; Philippine News Agency (PNA)	State	Primary – formalizes denial through official statements and filings	Denial of state involvement	Constructs the appearance of lawful state conduct and non-custody	Official counter-affidavits filed by the PNP and AFP in writ of amparo proceedings



Online reframing: victim-blaming narratives (May 2023)	Pro-government influencer; tagged accounts linked to NTF-ELCAC; 1 Philippines Movement for Peace and Development	Non-state (state-aligned)	Secondary – amplifies and moralizes existing state narratives	Victim-blaming and moral justification	Reframes disappearance as personal fault or “flight from justice”	Posts echoing and embellishing official PNP and AFP statements
Stigmatization of Bazoo as a drug user (mid-2023)	Local police officers consulted by the family	State	Primary – introduces character-based justification at point of inquiry	Victim-blaming and moral justification	Undermines credibility of the victim and discourages empathy or urgency	Statement of the victim’s mother recounting police remarks
Reinforcement of legitimacy through military messaging (September 2023)	AFP 80th Infantry Battalion; AFP Civil Relations Service	State	Primary – reasserts security framing following judicial developments	Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared	Frames judicial outcomes as confirmation of state innocence and casts advocates as subversive	Official transcript of AFP press briefing restating alleged intelligence links



Digital evasion and content removal (2024)	PNP–NCRPO website administrators; pro-government social media pages	State and non-state (state-aligned)	Secondary – removes traceability and sustains prior denial	Denial through administrative refusal and procedural erasure	Erases traceability of prior framing and obstructs retrospective accountability	Authenticated screenshots and archived web pages of removed posts
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The State has consistently denied involvement in the disappearance of Dexter and Bazoo but insisted that they were “communist terrorists.” Months before their abduction, official police pages circulated posters labeling Dexter as a “Communist Terrorist” with pending criminal cases. This red-tagging campaign served two purposes: first, it pre-emptively discredited the victims, portraying them as fugitives rather than rights defenders; second, it normalized state violence by framing their eventual disappearance as part of counterinsurgency efforts.

When the abduction occurred, the military quickly denied any involvement, but the AFP spokesperson immediately claimed that Dexter was linked to the New People’s Army, without facing any repercussions for the public accusation. These prior posts and statements provided the State justification and shaped public perception that the victims “deserved” pursuit. Additionally, dismissing Bazoo as probably a “drug addict” gave the police a reason not to actively search for him.

The case of Dexter and Bazoo demonstrates that “red-tagging” is a ticking time bomb. Activists should have clear legal recourse to challenge harassment or politically motivated lawsuits. This includes SLAPP cases, or Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, which are legal actions filed to intimidate, silence, or punish individuals for speaking out on matters of public interest, often without strong merit. SLAPP protections could allow victims of red-tagging to quickly challenge these suits and prevent intimidation. Red-tagging should also carry direct consequences for those responsible, ensuring accountability for state actors and preventing harassment from escalating into enforced disappearance.

B. Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano

Verified Reports

Jonila Castro, a community organizer with the Alliance for the Defense of Livelihood, Housing, and Environment in Manila Bay (Akap Ka Manila Bay), and Jhed Tamano, program coordinator of the Community and Church Program for Manila Bay of the Ecumenical Bishops Forum, were investigating large-scale projects contributing to flooding in the Manila Bay area in 2022. Both were outspoken environmental and land defenders, particularly opposing the USD \$15 billion New Manila International Airport. Since its approval in 2019, the project has displaced hundreds of families, destroyed climate-critical habitats, and devastated local wildlife, as highlighted by Global Witness. While San Miguel Corporation leads the project, corporate influence extends internationally, with Dutch



companies such as dredging giant Royal Boskalis Westminster N.V. contracted for €1.5 billion to build the first phase, insured by the Dutch state through Atradius DSB.⁵¹

On September 2, 2023, Castro and Tamano were reported missing while conducting field investigations and preparing relief operations in Lati, Orion, Bataan. Seventeen days later, on September 19, they appeared at a press conference organized by the Philippine government's National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). Authorities attempted to frame them as rebels who had "surrendered," but the activists publicly rejected this narrative. During the event, Castro stated, "The truth is, we were abducted by the military," and stated that the military was being used to push the airport project, which has been causing the loss of livelihood for local fisherfolk. Both described being forced into a van, threatened, and coerced into signing affidavits claiming they had surrendered.⁵²

Following their release, the NTF-ELCAC continued to target Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano through public statements and legal actions. The task force repeatedly labeled Jonila as a "hardcore NPA" member⁵³ and described their fundraising activities as scams, aiming to discredit both activists and undermine public support for their work. In addition, several cases were filed against the two for allegedly "embarrassing" the military, including the defamation charges.⁵⁴

Legal Developments

On February 15, 2024, the Supreme Court granted protective writs filed by Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano. The writ of amparo provides protection for individuals facing extralegal threats, while the writ of habeas data safeguards a person's right to informational privacy.⁵⁵

Following their press conference, the Department of Justice (DOJ) filed charges of grave oral defamation against Castro and Tamano, based on a complaint from the military.

⁵¹ Global Witness. (2023, September 8). [Two Filipino environmental advocates violently abducted after opposing controversial airport project.](#)

⁵² Buan, L. (2024, January 29). Rappler. [Activists in gutsy press conference indicted for 'embarrassing AFP'](#),

⁵³ NTF-ELCAC, (2023, September 21) [Jonila Castro, a hardcore NPA member – NTF ELCAC](#) NTF-ELCAC, (2023, September 18) [NSC warns public on elaborate hoax, money scams of Leftist groups](#)

⁵⁴ Buan, L. (2024, January 29). Rappler. [Activists in gutsy press conference indicted for 'embarrassing AFP'](#),

⁵⁵ Supreme Court of the Philippines. (2024, February 15). [SC Grants Writs of Amparo, Habeas Data in Favor of Environmental Advocates – Supreme Court of the Philippines](#)



National Security Council Assistant Director General Jonathan Malaya dismissed their claims of abduction as “an elaborate hoax and scam” by the leftist movement. A Municipal Trial Court in Plaridel, Bulacan, later dismissed the defamation charges, finding that their statements were factual accounts of their ordeal rather than malicious.⁵⁶

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) summarized the sequence of events and media coverage surrounding the case of Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano, as outlined below.⁵⁷

From September 2 to 14, 2023, while the activists were reported missing in Bataan, state actors denied any involvement in their disappearance. The 7th Infantry Division stated that “from September 2 to date, there was no record nor complaint filed by the parents...regarding the alleged incident,”⁵⁸ while the National Security Council challenged human rights group Karapatan to provide proof linking the government to the abduction.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the Orion police refused to file a blotter requested by the mother to record her disappearance.⁶⁰ These initial statements constituted denial of state involvement.

On September 15, 2023, the narrative escalated with the NTF-ELCAC and NSC holding a press conference that claimed that the two had voluntarily surrendered to the military to escape their comrades. Brief video clips of the activists were presented as “proof,” along with statements that they signed affidavits in front of public attorneys and Commission on Human Rights officials.⁶¹

⁵⁶ De Villa, K. (2025, June 7). [Court junks AFP's defamation case vs abducted activists](#). INQUIRER.net.

⁵⁷ CMFR Staff. (2023, October 3). [Pressed at a Presser: NTF-Elcac caught of a f guard by activists in own presscon](#) | CMFR Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility.

⁵⁸ GMA News (2023, September 7) [Army's 7ID: No complaint, record on 'abduction' of 2 activists in Orion, Bataan](#) | GMA News Online.

⁵⁹ Recuenco, A. (2023, September 7). [Manila Bulletin - Where's your proof? Officials hit militant groups over case of missing activists in Bataan](#)

⁶⁰ Gozum, I. (2023, September 9) Rappler. [A mother's appeal: Ibalik 'nyo na ang anak ko](#).

⁶¹ Rita, J. (2023, September 15). GMA News, [2 missing environment activists in gov't custody —NTF-ELCAC](#) | GMA News Online



On September 19, Castro and Tamano were presented at a press conference organized by the NTF-ELCAC and 70th Infantry Battalion. Seated beside military officials, they publicly stated that they had been abducted and coerced into signing affidavits. This event, intended by state actors to present that narrative that they were rebel-surrendees, inadvertently became a moment of counter-disinformation.

Following their resurfacing, the disinformation campaign entered a legal and post-release phase. The Department of Justice, with support from NSC and military actors, filed perjury and grave oral defamation charges against Castro and Tamano. NSC officials threatened to release personal information, weaponizing malinformation to intimidate the activists.

Simultaneously, the NTF-ELCAC and state-aligned media launched a smear campaign, labeling Jonila Castro as a “hard-core NPA combatant” and discrediting the activists’ community and fundraising work as “scams,” while also filing administrative cases for allegedly embarrassing the military.

The coordinated use of preemptive narratives, manipulated events, falsified context, legal harassment, and public smears created a clear disinformation pathway designed to delegitimize the activists and control the public’s perception of the case as summarized:

Table 3. Timeline of Disinformation - Tamano and Castro (Philippines)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
Denial of state involvement (Sep 2-14, 2023)	NSC; 7th Infantry Division; Orion police; media citing official statements	State	Primary - denies custody; blocks documentation	Denial of state involvement	Delays investigation; weakens early accountability	Military statement denying records; NSC challenge to NGOs; refusal to record blotter
“Voluntary surrender” narrative introduced (Sep 15, 2023)	NTF-ELCAC; NSC; 70th Infantry Battalion; PNP	State	Primary - introduces alternative explanation	Denial through voluntary departure or family abandonment	Reframes disappearance as self-initiated	Press briefing claiming surrender; selective video clips
Media repetition of surrender claim (Sep 15-18, 2023)	Mainstream news outlets; state-aligned media; online platforms	Non-state (media)	Secondary - relays official claim without verification	Denial through voluntary departure or family abandonment	Normalizes surrender narrative; reduces scrutiny	News reports merely reproducing official statements



Staged press event (Sep 19, 2023)	NTF-ELCAC; 70th Infantry Battalion	State	Primary – stages public presentation to sustain framing	Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared	Legitimizes security action; casts victims as insurgents	Press conference presenting activists as surrenderees
Post-release legal action and smear campaign (Sep 2023–present)	DOJ; NSC; Philippine Army; NTF-ELCAC; media	State and non-state	Primary – reasserts criminal framing	Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared; Delegitimization of families and human rights actors	Discredits testimony; deters advocacy	Perjury and defamation charges; public branding of Castro as “hard-core NPA”



In the days following their reported disappearance on September 2, 2023, military and police officials repeatedly denied any state involvement. Media coverage largely echoed these official statements without interrogating the claims, missing the broader context of enforced disappearances and systemic red-tagging of environmental and human rights defenders.

The narrative shifted sharply on September 15, when NTF-ELCAC presented Tamano and Castro as “voluntary surrenderees,” showing selective video clips and asserting that they had signed affidavits before public attorneys and the Commission on Human Rights. These gave a veneer of credibility to a false account. At the September 19 press conference, the activists directly refuted this narrative, revealing they had been abducted and coerced into signing affidavits under duress.

The media’s role was critical as it largely regurgitated official statements without scrutiny, many outlets allowed the false narrative to gain traction, as criticized by Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility. Exceptions included reporters who questioned the absence of affidavits, highlighted inconsistencies in the staged evidence, and noted discrepancies between the state’s claims and what the activists reported. Public vigilance, amplified through social media, helped maintain pressure that was crucial to the activists’ safety and the eventual exposure of state manipulation.

Thereafter, the state intensified smear campaigns, with state-aligned media portraying the two activists as communist combatants. Legal harassment followed, with perjury and grave oral defamation charges filed to intimidate and silence them.

The Tamano-Castro case exposes the tangled web of state denial, staged narratives, and judicial retaliation, revealing how money and power are wielded to manipulate truth. As Jonila Castro emphasized, the military has been co-opted as a tool to serve private and business interests, advancing the New Manila International Airport project at the expense of local communities and fragile ecosystems. This case is a reminder that enforced disappearances are not abstract tragedies against “state enemies”, they are strategic acts that protect profit and power, and silence those who dare to defend the land and the environment.

III. Philippines: A Conversation with Local Human Rights Defenders

This section shares important findings from an interview with members of the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND), one of the partner NGOs of AFAD in the Philippines. FIND is a nationwide mass organization of families, relatives, friends, and colleagues of disappeared victims and surfaced desaparecidos that advocates human rights and participative empowerment.

A. Psychological and Social Impacts on Families and Advocates



FIND staff described the emotional damage caused by disinformation campaigns. Families felt fear and anxiety when they encountered denial from officials or false stories online. In high-risk areas like Negros and Mindanao, some relatives have stopped speaking out or joining community activities because of threats and surveillance.

Disinformation also extends to official documents that contain false details. Death certificates sometimes conceal the real cause or circumstances of disappearance, making families feel helpless. The families also shared denials of refusal by the police to issue a certification of disappearance, citing that the disappeared might have “just left home”. Some relatives say (“there is nothing we can do”), reflecting the despair created by bureaucratic manipulation. Families have also been accused of inventing cases to gain sympathy or funds.

This disinformation also appears in official documents and bureaucratic processes. Some death certificates list false causes of death, while police often refuse to issue certifications confirming a disappearance, suggesting that the person “just left home.” Families and FIND members have also been accused of fabricating stories for funding or sympathy.

FIND staff themselves have faced harassment, including one case where the Northern Mindanao Chapter head was followed into a women’s restroom by a man claiming to be military, warning her to stop searching for a missing person. The threats have continued for over a decade after a soldier was imprisoned for the disappearance.

B. Platforms and Actors Behind Disinformation

Disinformation operates across multiple platforms, including online media, government agencies, and bureaucratic systems. FIND noted that the exclusion of enforced disappearance from the Philippine Human Rights Action Plan reflects deliberate institutional erasure, which was justified by citing the country’s non-ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances. Police and military offices often deny information or intimidate families, claiming ignorance of the Anti-Enforced Disappearance Act.

Media outlets such as SMNI, along with online platforms like TikTok, spread narratives portraying victims as rebels or criminals. These stories are amplified by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), framing disappearances as part of security operations. At the local level, police sometimes refuse to certify that a person is missing, saying they probably just left home or “joined the revolution”.

Institutional disinformation is reinforced by selective cooperation among government offices. FIND cited the Presidential Human Rights Committee Secretariat for



blocking recommendations and avoiding meaningful dialogue. Some officials dismiss cases by linking victims to trafficking or recruitment, while even agencies like the Commission on Human Rights sometimes treat enforced disappearance as a lesser priority. Beyond national borders, pro-government NGOs echo these narratives, accusing FIND of fabricating cases to receive funding.

C. Bureaucratic Delays

Bureaucratic delays are also a major obstacle for families of the disappeared. Local police often refuse to issue certificates of disappearance, leaving relatives without official recognition of their missing loved ones. The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) sometimes denies assistance, citing that they could not accompany the family beyond office hours.

These delays are particularly damaging because the first hours after a disappearance are critical for locating the person. By the time legal acknowledgement is granted by courts, sometimes years later, it is often too late to take meaningful action, leaving families with paper victory.

D. Challenges in Fact-Checking and Advocacy

FIND's network of family members and volunteers across the country documents disappearance cases. Despite their dedication, verifying facts remains difficult. Access to official data is often denied. Limited funding, staff shortages, and bureaucratic inefficiency further restrict field verification. The CHR's slow processes and limited operating hours also delay urgent responses.

Public awareness remains a major barrier. Many Filipinos are unfamiliar with the term "enforced disappearance" or confuse it with kidnapping. Public opinion on enforced disappearance remains low, especially among youth, who sometimes find the topic too distant or frightening to engage with.

E. Counterstrategies and Emerging Pathways

FIND continues to pursue dialogue with government agencies to strengthen coordination and recognition of cases. A proposed referral system aims to connect the CHR, police, and armed forces for more consistent responses. The organization also plans to publish policy recommendations and explore tools for early alerts and fact-checking, though resource constraints limit progress.

The interview shows that disinformation about enforced disappearances in the Philippines operates on multiple levels: through direct threats and rumors, bureaucratic erasure, and institutional neglect. Its cumulative effect is the silencing of victims' families and the erosion of public understanding of state accountability. Countering these



narratives requires structural reforms, sustained funding, and psychosocial support for those bearing the burden of truth-telling.

IV. **Philippines: Summary of Key Findings**

Red-tagging is the main tool the State uses to suppress dissent, often targeting activists before anything happens to mark them as “threats.” Two clear models of state disinformation emerge from the cases of human rights and environmental defenders in the Philippines. These models help explain how the State manipulates public perception, justifies coercive actions, and attempts to silence dissent.

1. Proactive Justification Model – Dexter Capuyan and Bazoo De Jesus

In this model, disinformation occurs **before the disappearance**. Months prior to their abduction, Dexter Capuyan and Bazoo De Jesus were publicly labeled as “Communist Terrorists” and associated with criminal activity through official police pages and state-aligned media. Bazoo was further dismissed as a potential “drug addict,” undermining the legitimacy of his advocacy. This preemptive red-tagging served two purposes: first, it discredited the victims, portraying them as dangerous and undeserving of sympathy; second, it normalized state violence, framing any subsequent abduction as a legitimate counterinsurgency measure. By shaping public opinion in advance, the State created a justification framework that made the disappearance appear lawful or inevitable.

2. Crisis Management Model – Jed Tamano and Jonila Castro

This model occurs after the State loses control of the narrative. Tamano and Castro were reported missing on September 2, 2023, while working in Bataan. Initially, the AFP and NSC denied any involvement and challenged human rights groups to provide proof. On September 15, NTF-ELCAC and NSC staged a press briefing claiming the activists had “voluntarily surrendered,” presenting videos and affidavits as evidence. At the September 19 press conference, the activists publicly rejected this narrative, revealing they had been abducted and coerced into signing affidavits. After the press conference, the State escalated its disinformation by branding them as hardcore NPA combatants and accusing them of involvement in scams, while filing perjury and grave oral defamation charges. This demonstrates how the Crisis Management Model combines staged public messaging and legal harassment to discredit victims, intimidate defenders, and reclaim control over the narrative.

Consistent public pressure played a vital role in keeping Tamano and Castro alive, as mass mobilization demanded accountability from the government. The media also shapes the narrative: CMFR highlighted that many outlets simply repeated official statements without context, missing broader patterns of red-tagging and enforced disappearances. Outlets that scrutinized inconsistencies or questioned the evidence demonstrated how independent reporting can counter state disinformation and influence public opinion.



Disinformation operates in layers: pre-emptive labeling, staged narratives, legal harassment, and media amplification. Economic and private interests often intersect with these strategies. As Jonila Castro emphasized, the military can be used to protect business projects such as the New Manila International Airport, showing that enforced disappearances and disinformation are not only tools of political control but also mechanisms that serve private and economic agendas.

V. **Philippines: Ways Forward**

EDs in the Philippines often occur with coordinated narrative control and the normalization of red-tagging to justify the disappearance of the victims. While legal safeguards exist in law, it is often undermined by denial of custody and disinformation that reframes victims as legitimate targets. The recommendations below respond to these disinformation dynamics by focusing on prevention, early intervention, and accountability, grounded in the political realities that shape how enforced disappearances occur and persist in the Philippines.

A. Centering families in narratives of enforced disappearance

EDs are commonly framed in the Philippines through counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism narratives that cast victims as threats to public order, with red-tagging operating as the familiar shorthand that converts activism into alleged criminality. Campaign strategies should avoid contesting these security claims head-on, as doing so often traps advocacy within polarized debates that favor the State. Public messaging should instead redirect attention to concrete and relatable failures of governance, including the denial of custody, refusal to accept reports, obstruction of searches, and the burden placed on families who are forced to look for their loved ones alone.

A campaign grounded in family harm and procedural injustice resonates strongly in the Philippine context, where concepts of family, responsibility, and fairness carry more weight in public discourse than abstract ideological debates. Highlighting how mothers, spouses, and children are ignored, misled, or intimidated reframes enforced disappearance as a violation of ordinary social and moral expectations rather than a security dispute.

B. Treating red-tagging as an early-warning indicator and trigger for protection

In the Philippines, red-tagging is commonly used to discredit political dissent and invalidate the causes being raised by communities. It is frequently directed at peasant organizers, labor union leaders and community members opposing government or corporate projects such as mining, reclamation, and large infrastructure developments. Through press statements, and coordinated online posts issued by police, military units, or government agencies, red-tagging reframes legitimate organizing as a security threat and weakens public support for these causes.



Thus, civil society groups should document red-tagging as soon as it appears, since these are often deleted or altered once abductions take place. When red-tagging occurs, security measures for human rights defenders should be immediately strengthened, including reviewing movement patterns and using secure communication channels. Red-tagging incidents should also be formally reported to the Commission on Human Rights to create an official record and prompt protective action.

C. Rapid verification and evidence preservation immediately after ED

When a disappearance is reported, NGOs, lawyers, and family groups must immediately activate a shared response protocol to condemn the act and mobilize the public. This response should report the victim's last known location and provide a clear timeline to stop state denials from taking root.

If possible, a quick response team could be deployed to the site to gather CCTV footage from nearby homes and businesses. Since digital records are often overwritten or deleted within days, being physically present at the scene is the only way to secure footage of the abduction, the vehicles involved, and the perpetrators. This on-the-ground coordination prevents delays and stops state actors from erasing evidence later. Establishing these facts early is the best way to challenge state narratives that the victim simply "joined the revolution" or "voluntarily surrendered."

D. Closing the implementation gap in the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act

More than a decade after the passage of the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act, the absence of convictions in the Philippines reflects weak enforcement rather than deficiencies in the law itself. Advocacy efforts should focus on concrete acts of non-compliance that occur at the level of frontline institutions. These include refusals by police or military units to acknowledge custody, delays or outright refusal to accept missing persons reports, failure to sign inquiry forms required under the law, and denial of certifications of disappearance needed by families to pursue remedies. In some cases, families have also been turned away by the Commission on Human Rights on the ground that requests for assistance were made beyond office hours, despite the urgent nature of disappearance cases. Civil society groups should press prosecutorial and oversight bodies to treat refusal, delay, and non-assistance as substantive failures that obstruct the search for the disappeared, particularly during the critical early period when intervention matters most.

E. Linking enforced disappearance to private interests

Enforced disappearances in the Philippines frequently occur in areas where communities oppose mining, reclamation, energy projects, and large infrastructure developments. Many of those targeted are peasant leaders, fisherfolk organizers,



Indigenous advocates, and environmental defenders who challenge projects that threaten land, livelihood, and access to natural resources.

Advocacy efforts should therefore document enforced disappearances alongside the specific development projects being resisted, including the companies involved, government approvals granted, and the role of police or military units operating in the area. Where projects involve foreign contractors and financiers, these links should also be identified. Situating enforced disappearance within these development conflicts makes clear that disappearances are not isolated security incidents but part of a broader pattern in which state power is used to suppress opposition and secure economic projects, allowing impunity to persist.



Country Report: Bangladesh

I. Bangladesh: Political Context on Human Rights

For sixteen years, until her removal in August 2024, Sheikh Hasina consolidated power by silencing political dissent. During this period, enforced disappearance became an institutional tool of state control.⁶² Under the guise of national security, state agents abducted individuals, held them incommunicado in Aynagar, the so-called ‘mirror house,’ and other secret detention cells, and either killed them or later produced them as newly arrested in criminal or terrorism cases.

In 2009, international pressure to end state-sponsored killings pushed the Bangladesh Government to change its tactics. During repeated Universal Periodic Review cycles, States and UN bodies called on Bangladesh to address extrajudicial killings. In response, the Government scaled back visible killings but expanded the use of enforced disappearance as a method of repression. This allowed security agents to operate with less evidence and away from public criticism.⁶³

With no dead body to grieve or present as evidence, it became easier for the State to deny involvement. The absence of the body or “corpus” left families in prolonged limbo and allowed authorities to deny any involvement. Enforced disappearance became the State’s preferred method because it concealed the killings and supported narratives that blamed the victims, including claims that they had absconded, joined extremist groups, or gone into hiding.⁶⁴

Public frustration with Hasina’s government reached a breaking point in mid-2024. Students protested against a government hiring policy that many believed unfairly favored individuals connected to the ruling party. The police responded with a violent crackdown on the protestors, and an estimated 300 people were killed, thousands were injured, and more than 10,000 were arrested during the crackdown. The unrest quickly escalated into nationwide protests driven by public frustration over the government’s repression. By early August, the Government led by Hasina had collapsed and lost political and military support.

⁶² Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. (2025, May 31). *Second interim report: Reporting period 15 December 2024–31 May 2025*. Government of Bangladesh.

⁶³ Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. (2024, December 14). *First interim report: Reporting period 27 August–12 December 2024*. Government of Bangladesh.

⁶⁴ Id.



On August 5, 2024, Hasina was forced to resign and left Bangladesh after sixteen years in power.⁶⁵

An interim government was then formed, led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus. As part of its response to long-standing human rights concerns, the interim administration created the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. The Commission has received nearly 1,800 complaints of enforced disappearances. Because many families were too afraid to report cases at the time, the Commission estimates that the actual number may be two to three times higher.⁶⁶ The investigations of the Commission show that the system of disappearances was a centralized strategy adopted by Hasina's government. For example, the detention centers or the "house of mirrors" identified in different parts of the country share similar layouts. Meanwhile, victims of EDs were reportedly transferred across different security agencies, suggesting a centralized structure following an unwritten state policy.⁶⁷

Hasina's regime justified enforced disappearances by presenting them as counterterrorism efforts. Through press briefings, charge sheets, and state-sponsored or aligned media, victims were pre-emptively labelled as extremists or destabilizing actors, shaping who counted as a "threat."

Once a disappearance occurred, misinformation became the tool through which autocratic legalism functioned. In this system, legal institutions remain in place but operate as rubber stamps, supplying paperwork that retroactively legitimizes unlawful acts. Falsified arrest dates, coerced confessions, templated charge sheets, and staged "arrests" created a lawful façade over illegal actions. Manipulated records erased periods of secret detention and replaced them with an official timeline to show that the victim was legally arrested. Media outlets, often aligned with or pressured by state agencies, amplified these accounts without question, turning illegal detention into something that appeared to be routine counterterrorism work.

With the establishment of the interim government and the creation of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, human rights organizations expressed a sense of hope that the abuses of the Hasina era would no longer remain buried. For the first time in years, victims' families were able to speak publicly without immediate retaliation. Several interviewees described the moment as an opportunity to "finally

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch. (2024, August 6). *Bangladesh: Prime minister resigns amid mass protests*. [Bangladesh: Prime Minister Hasina Resigns amid Mass Protests | Human Rights Watch](#)

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch. (2024, August 29). *Bangladesh: Government sets disappearances inquiry*. [Bangladesh: Government Sets up Disappearances Inquiry | Human Rights Watch](#)

⁶⁷ Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. (2025, May 31). *Second interim report: Reporting period 15 December 2024–31 May 2025*. Government of Bangladesh.



address the dark past” and to break the cycle of denial that had shaped public understanding of enforced disappearances for more than a decade.

Authoritarian regimes control information and rely on false narratives to obscure human rights violations. For more than a decade, enforced disappearances were used under Hasina’s regime to silence and control those who spoke out. The fall of that regime has created an opening for the legal system to begin addressing these abuses. The establishment of the Commission of Inquiry provides a space for victims and families to come forward, to have their cases examined collectively, and to confront a system sustained by secrecy and denial. While the work remains unfinished, the Commission affirms a simple but important principle: enforced disappearance is not beyond the reach of law, and even deeply entrenched practices of repression can be challenged when people insist on accountability.

II. **Bangladesh: Notable Cases of EDs and Disinformation**

The following section presents a recent emblematic case of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh. The case is analyzed through verified reports detailing the circumstances of the disappearance, legal developments, and the current status of the victim. Beyond the factual timeline, this section also traces the disinformation ecosystem surrounding the disappearance, drawing from fringe media content, partisan social media posts, and state-adjacent narratives reproduced across online platforms.

A. Michael Chakma

Verified Reports

Michael Chakma is a staunch advocate for indigenous rights from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. He leads the United People’s Democratic Front (UPDF), a political organization campaigning for indigenous land rights and demilitarization in the region. Before he went missing, he was organizing an event to commemorate the Rana Plaza anniversary, an incident that killed more than a thousand textile workers, including indigenous peoples. When he failed to arrive and became unreachable, his colleagues searched police stations, hospitals, military camps, and government offices, all of which denied custody.⁶⁸

Chakma resurfaced in August 2024 as Hasina’s administration collapsed. According to the Commission, he was one of only three detainees released from Aynaghor during that transition. He was left bound in a remote forest and forced to search for his way home after years of isolation.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Amnesty International. (2019). *Bangladesh: Indigenous rights activist missing (Urgent Action: ASA 13/0318/2019)*.

⁶⁹ pp. 115-116, Second Interim Report.



The state-appointed Inquiry Commission later confirmed that Chakma had been forcibly disappeared and held inside the DGFI-run Joint Interrogation Centre, known as Aynaghor. The Commission's Second Interim Report identifies him among those detained there and describes the facility as a site where victims were regularly tortured and detained.⁷⁰ Testimony from a DGFI officer further clarified that senior intelligence officials were fully aware of Chakma's presence inside the facility and monitored aspects of his confinement.⁷¹

Legal Developments

After resurfacing, he testified before the Commission, which used his account to clarify how DGFI operated the Joint Interrogation Centre during the years he was held. The Second Interim Report notes that the pattern of disappearances in that period occurred under the direct authority of senior intelligence officials, and that these operations took place with their knowledge and approval. Chakma's testimony was part of the evidence that supported the arrest warrants issued by the International Crimes Tribunal against high-ranking military and intelligence officials linked to enforced disappearances.⁷²

Chakma was then convicted in October 2025 for an alleged extortion that occurred in 2007. The supposed trial occurred during the time that he was secretly detained.⁷³ Questions about the fairness of the case came from a public post in [X.com](#) of the Director of the Rights & Risks Analysis Group (RRAG), an independent New Delhi-based human rights think-tank.⁷⁴ It stated that Chakma had never been summoned, was not present when charges were prosecuted, and was not able to cross-examine prosecution witnesses.

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

The campaign to discredit Michael Chakma only began after his testimony before the Commission circulated publicly. There is no traceable smear effort against him in the period immediately following his disappearance or prior to his release; press reports and civil society statements from 2019 to 2024 simply described him as missing and called for his resurfacing.

⁷⁰ Second Interim Report, p. 43.

⁷¹ p. 101, Second Interim Report.

⁷² pp. 101-102, 109, Second Interim Report.

⁷³ The Business Standard. (2025, October 8). [UPDF leader Michael Chakma sentenced to 8 years imprisonment in extortion case | The Business Standard](#)

⁷⁴ Chakma, S. [@ChakmaSuhas]. (2025, January 8). The press statement, "Bangladesh: Türk sees important steps towards accountability for disappearances..." does not go far enough... X. [Suhas Chakma on X](#)

The shift came in early October 2025, at the same time that senior officers implicated in enforced disappearances were being arrested.⁷⁵ The first wave of disinformation emerged just after the International Crimes Tribunal issued arrest warrants for high-ranking military officials and days before several were taken into custody. As his testimony gained wider attention and the political environment grew more volatile, narratives targeting him escalated in volume and intensity.

The first propaganda was published on October 8, 2025. A BD-Digest article claimed that Chakma's family fabricated the disappearance and that he was hiding to increase the illegal weapons of his organization. It linked him to killings from 2007, suggested he was involved in the 2018 Naniarchar attacks, and claimed that UPDF operated with a "large stockpile of modern weapons" acquired through drug trafficking.⁷⁶ These allegations offered no reference to court rulings or official records.'

Michael Chakma, Mastermind Behind 'Abduction Drama,' Reappears From Hiding as Hills Grow Restive and Arms Stockpiles Increase

en.bdigest.com/michael-chakma-mastermind-behind-abduction-drama-reappears-from-hiding-as-hills-grow-restive-and-arms-stockpiles-increase/

October 8, 2025



The next day, on **October 10, 2025**, media outlets reported that a Bangladeshi court convicted him in absentia for an extortion that allegedly happened in 2007.⁷⁷ The conviction gave state-aligned media a formal court ruling they could reference to reinforce the earlier criminalization narratives, even though the Second Interim Report had already identified the recurring use of fabricated or recycled cases against resurfaced victims.⁷⁸ An advocacy group, including the Rights & Risks Analysis Group (RRAG), publicly questioned the fairness of the proceedings, citing that Chakma was not able to participate in the court hearings to present his defense.

⁷⁵ Hasnat, S. (2025, October 12). [Bangladesh Detains Army Officers Accused of Crimes Under Previous Regime - The New York Times](#)

⁷⁶ BD Digest. (2025, October 8). [Michael Chakma, Mastermind Behind 'Abduction Drama,' Reappears From Hiding as Hills Grow Restive and Arms Stockpiles Increase - BDDiGEST](#)

⁷⁷ The Business Standard. (2025, October 8). [UPDF leader Michael Chakma sentenced to 8 years imprisonment in extortion case | The Business Standard](#)

⁷⁸ p. 49, Second Interim Report.

On **October 23, 2025**, the disinformation escalated into extremist-tagging. A post in a public Facebook group aligned with the Awami League, claimed that “intelligence sources” identified Chakma as one of the masterminds in plotting to kill student-protesters, attacking police and destabilizing the government.⁷⁹

In **November 2025**, the Bay of Bengal Post posted a video titled *Michael Chakma: The Untouchable Kingpin of the Chittagong Hill Tracts*. The video revived the criminal allegations circulated earlier and paired them with AI-generated images that placed Chakma surrounded by rifles. The video presented him as an ongoing threat to regional stability and claimed he operated militant networks. It also claimed that he just re-surfaced with other “real prisoners”. The video narrated:



“Michael Chakma, the political victim, allegedly abducted by state agents and turned into a symbol of oppression. He used this claim for five years to boost his political influence while staying underground. X x x

Then, in August 2024, at a moment of maximum political turmoil as real prisoners were being freed, he reappeared, claiming to be one of them. But the myth of the political prisoner collapses under the weight of one undeniable fact. Michael Chakma is a convicted violent criminal.



His story of victimhood isn't just questionable, the evidence suggests it was a deliberate fabrication. Before his disappearances in 2011, he was arrested with two illegal firearms and ammunition. More recently, a court sentenced him to eight years of imprisonment in a separate arms case of 2007.”

Across these stages, the disinformation directed at Michael Chakma followed a clear trajectory: denial of enforced disappearance was replaced by criminalization once he resurfaced, followed by extremist-tagging and finally fake images designed to visually present him as a militant. The timing is significant as the propaganda only appeared **after** his testimony was cited in the Commission’s Second Interim Report, as summarized below:

⁷⁹ Awami League 1949 Group. (2025, October). *Michael Chakma: From “Missing Activist” to mastermind of Jamaat’s deadly plot?* [Facebook post]. Facebook. <https://web.facebook.com/groups/awamileague.1949group/posts/1814918159075801>

Table 4. Timeline of Disinformation - Michael Chakma (Bangladesh)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
Retrospective denial and criminalization (8 Oct 2025)	BD-Digest	Non-state (media)	Secondary – reframes disappearance using existing security narrative	Denial of state involvement combined with criminalization of the victim	Disclaims state responsibility and recasts disappearance as self-initiated evasion linked to militancy	Article alleging he fabricated his disappearance to gather weapons
Weaponization of court convictions (10 Oct 2025)	Rangamati Court; TBS News; state-aligned media	State (court); Non-state (media)	Secondary – validates criminal framing through judicial outcome and repetition	Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance	Uses conviction to legitimize criminal labeling and weaken credibility of disappearance claims	Reports of conviction in absentia for a 2007 extortion case
Extremist-tagging (23 Oct 2025)	Awami League public Facebook group	Non-state (party-affiliated)	Secondary – amplifies ideological labeling without evidence	Criminalization of the victim	Portrays Chakma as a security threat, justifying hostility or surveillance	Posts citing unnamed “intelligence sources” linking him to a



						Jamaat-backed plot
Synthetic imagery and militant rebranding (Nov 2025)	Bay of Bengal Post (YouTube)	Non-state (content producer)	Secondary - intensifies stigma through fabricated visuals	Victim-blaming and moral justification combined with criminalization of the victim	Retroactively justifies disappearance and discredits abuse claims	AI-generated images depicting him with rifles; video branding the disappearance as "fabricated"



The propaganda against Chakma followed a pattern: denial of his disappearance, revival of old or unverified criminal claims, extremist labelling, and eventually AI-generated images crafted to depict him as a militant figure. Although the proceedings occurred without his participation, the judgment supplied a formal court ruling that outlets could cite as established fact. Once a court ruling existed, however procedurally irregular, it became the anchor for subsequent false narratives, giving earlier allegations a tint of credibility.

This pattern mirrors what the Commission has previously documented: resurfaced victims frequently confronted recycled or newly manufactured cases immediately after release from secret detention, to legalize their confinement.⁸⁰ The synchronized false narratives after October illustrate how a court decision can be instrumentalized to anchor disinformation to a claimed “fact”.

Notably, none of these narratives appeared before October 2025. They emerged only after the Commission’s findings became public and his testimony began circulating in international media. This shows that there was a centralized effort to counter his testimony by flooding the information space with alternative claims. It sought to negate his testimony in the public space by recasting him as a fugitive who surfaced for political advantage.

B. Shafiqul Islam Kajol

Verified Reports

Shafiqul Islam Kajol is a Bangladeshi journalist and photojournalist who worked with *Manabzamin* and other media outlets. The night before his disappearance, a complaint under the Digital Security Act (DSA) was filed against him and others by parliamentary members accusing them of publishing false and defamatory content.⁸¹ Kajol went missing on the evening of 10 March 2020 after leaving his office in Dhaka. When he became unreachable, his family searched in hospitals and filed missing reports at Chawkbazar police station, which denied having him in custody.⁸²

After his disappearance, Monorom Polok, Kajol’s 21-year-old son, launched an online campaign titled **“Where Is Kajol?”** to draw attention to his father’s disappearance. Kajol’s son produced and shared a series of photo projects on social media. In one project, *“Where Is My Father?”*, he digitally altered images from family photo albums by removing

⁸⁰ p. 49, Second Interim Report.

⁸¹ The Daily Star. (2021, November 9). [Kajol's DSA Plight: Charges in 3 cases framed in 1 day | The Daily Star.](#)

⁸² Human Rights Watch. (2020, March 13). [Bangladesh: Urgently Locate Missing Journalist | Human Rights Watch](#)



Kajol from the frames, using the visual absence to convey the impact of his disappearance on their family life.⁸³

Kajol described that he was tortured and threatened with death during his interrogation about what he knew regarding then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.⁸⁴ After 53 days of secret detention, Kajol resurfaced on May 3, 2020, near the Benapole border, where Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) further detained him on charges of trespassing. He was apprehended while allegedly crossing into Bangladesh from India and was subsequently handed over to Benapole Port Police. A court granted bail on the trespassing charge but ordered his continued detention, citing pending cases under the Digital Security Act and other laws as grounds for continued detention.⁸⁵

Legal Developments

Following his re-incarceration in May 2020, Kajol remained in detention for several months while multiple cases under the Digital Security Act (DSA) proceeded against him. Although he was granted bail in the border trespassing case, police pleaded for his continued detention, citing the pending DSA cases filed in Dhaka.⁸⁶

In December 2020, the High Court granted Kajol bail in the Digital Security Act cases, leading to his release from Dhaka Central Jail on December 25, 2020. Despite his release, criminal proceedings against him continued. On November 8, 2021, the Dhaka Cyber Tribunal framed charges against Kajol in three separate DSA cases, formally initiating trial. The charges related to allegations that he had circulated or published content deemed false or defamatory, including through online platforms.⁸⁷

On 1 June 2022, the High Court issued a stay on trial proceedings in all three Digital Security Act cases, temporarily halting the Cyber Tribunal process. As of the latest publicly

⁸³ Caravan Magazine. (2020, July 25). [Jailed Bangladeshi journalist Shafiqul Kajol's son on his disappearance and arrest | The Caravan](#).

⁸⁴ The Straits Times. (2024). ['Disappeared' victims emerge in Bangladesh, seek justice despite hurdles | The Straits Times](#)

⁸⁵ Dhaka Tribune. (2020, May 4). [Found in Benapole, missing journalist Kajol accused of illegal intrusion](#)

⁸⁶ Committee to Protect Journalists. (2020, May 4). [Missing Bangladeshi journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol arrested after being found near Indian border](#)

⁸⁷ The Daily Star. (2021, November 9). [Kajol's DSA Plight: Charges in 3 cases framed in 1 day | The Daily Star](#)



available reporting, the stay remained in effect and no final conviction or acquittal had been recorded.⁸⁸

In September 2023, Kajol left the country and travelled to London for asylum protections. His asylum application remains under review. Kajol stated that he wishes to return to Bangladesh only if security can be guaranteed and that he intends to pursue legal action against those responsible for his enforced disappearance.⁸⁹ (The Straits Times, 2024).

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

In Kajol's case, disinformation did not take the form of portraying him as a political destabilizer or extremist. Instead, state narratives relied on criminal cases filed immediately before his disappearance to recast what followed as an attempt to evade the law. His later appearance at the border was used to suggest that he had been trying to cross into India to escape those newly filed charges. This framing shifted attention away from the disappearance itself. Rather than denying that he went missing, it redirected focus from the fact of his disappearance to the claim that he was fleeing prosecution.

Just one day before Kajol disappeared, multiple cases were filed against him under the Digital Security Act. These accused him of publishing indecent, defamatory, and false content on Facebook, including posts involving ruling party leaders, ministers, lawmakers, and women leaders of the ruling political party. Investigators later alleged that his purpose was to damage reputations and extort money, citing Facebook posts, private messages, and the sharing of vulgar images.

After Kajol went missing on 10 March 2020, his family filed a missing person report. During the weeks that followed, police publicly denied holding him in custody and offered no explanation for his whereabouts.

When Kajol resurfaced in early May 2020, authorities described his return as a "recovery" and "rescue" at the Benapole border and immediately charged him with illegal entry from India. He was produced before a court and sent to jail. This sequence made it appear as though Kajol had been avoiding the law, even though charges filed only a day earlier could not explain how he vanished, crossed an international border, or remained

⁸⁸ Business Insider Bangladesh. (2022, June 1). HC stays 3 DSA cases' trial against journalist Kajol for 2 months.
<https://www.businessinsiderbd.com/bangladesh/news/23210/hc-stays-3-dsa-cases-trial-against-journalist-kajol-for-2-months>HC stays 3 DSA cases trial against journalist Kajol for 2 months

⁸⁹ The Straits Times. (2024). Disappeared victims emerge in Bangladesh, seek justice despite hurdles.
<https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/disappeared-victims-emerge-in-bangladesh-seek-justice-despite-hurdles>

out of contact for nearly two months. A translated news article reports that he was “rescued” by the border police.



Missing journalist Kajal rescued from Benapole (BGB)
Updated at 12:03:38 PM, Sunday, May 3, 2020

Benapole (Jessore) Representative: Shafiqul Islam Kajal, a photojournalist and editor of the daily Pakshakal, who went missing from Dhaka, has been found. He was rescued by Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) members from the Benapole-Raghunathpur border on Saturday (May 2) night.

Havildar Asher Ali, in-charge of Raghunathpur camp of 49 BGB Battalion, told Banglanews that BGB members saw a person returning illegally from India during a night patrol.

Later, BGB members arrested him, filed a case under the Illegal Entry Act and handed him over to Benapole Port Police Station.

Following his reappearance, Kajol was again detained in connection with the Digital Security Act cases filed just before he disappeared. Court orders authorizing his custody gave the detention a “legitimization”, even as his disappearance remained unexamined.⁹⁰

The following table maps the timeline focusing on how criminal complaints filed immediately before his disappearance, denials of custody, and later law-enforcement framing combined to shift public attention away from the disappearance itself:

⁹⁰ Dhaka Tribune. (2020, May 4). Found in Benapole, missing journalist Kajol.
<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/208752/found-in-benapole-missing-journalist-kajol>

Table 5. Timeline of Disinformation - Shafiqul Islam Kajol (Bangladesh)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
9 March 2020 — DSA charges filed	Political complainants; law enforcement; approving court	State	Primary – initiates criminal framing prior to disappearance	Criminalization of the victim	Establishes a legal frame treating the journalist as an accused person rather than a missing individual	<i>The Daily Star</i> reporting on DSA cases filed against Kajol immediately before his disappearance
March–April 2020 — Police denial of custody	Bangladesh police	State	Primary – denies arrest or custody	Denial of state involvement	Disclaims state responsibility and delays recognition of enforced disappearance	CPJ reporting on police denials and lack of explanation
2–3 May 2020 — “Recovered” at Benapole border	Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB); local media	State; Non-state (media)	Primary (BGB) / Secondary (media) – reframes disappearance	Victim-blaming and moral justification	Shifts focus from disappearance to alleged illegal conduct	<i>Vision News Today</i> coverage describing Kajol’s “recovery” at Benapole



			as personal misconduct		and personal responsibility	
May 2020 — Continued detention on DSA cases	Courts; Benapole Port Police Station; prosecution	State	Secondary - validates earlier framing through procedure	Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance	Erases period of secret detention and sustains focus on criminal allegations	Court orders upholding continued detention based on existing DSA cases



Kajol's case shows how the criminal justice system operated to legitimize an enforced disappearance from its outset and to sustain that legitimacy over time. The filing of multiple Digital Security Act cases on the eve of his disappearance supplied an immediate legal frame through which what followed could be reinterpreted as evasion of the law rather than unlawful detention. The Commission identifies this as a recurring pattern: criminal cases, frequently under the DSA or the Anti-Terrorism Law and other various criminal laws, were filed immediately before or shortly after a disappearance and later relied upon to justify custody once the victim resurfaced.⁹¹

When Kajol resurfaced after 53 days of secret detention at the Benapole border, the earlier filing of criminal cases enabled a legal justification from disappearance to ordinary criminal process. Authorities characterized his reappearance as a "recovery" or "rescue" and immediately invoked both a border-trespass charge and the pending DSA cases filed in Dhaka.

The Commission finds that once charges are pending, courts frequently authorize continued detention by reference to those cases alone, without examining how the accused came into custody or whether there had been prior unlawful detention.⁹²

Although Kajol was granted bail in the trespass case, the court ordered his continued detention on the basis of the DSA cases, giving formal legal continuity to a period of custody that began with an enforced disappearance. The Commission finds that arrest records were routinely manipulated, with victims "reintroduced into the legal system under fabricated charges" and shown as having been "arrested the previous day," effectively replacing periods of secret detention with an official arrest timeline.⁹³ (Second Interim Report, pp. 49–51,

In Kajol's case, police denial, pre-emptive charging, and subsequent court orders worked together to rewrite the chronology of detention, rendering the disappearance procedurally invisible while leaving it substantively unexamined.

III. **Bangladesh: A Conversation with Local Human Rights Defenders**

This section is based on a conversation with a representative of Odhikar, a human rights organization that has documented enforced disappearances and other abuses in Bangladesh. The discussion focused on false narratives promoted during the Hasina government, their effects on victims' families and human rights organizations, and how these narratives continue to circulate online after the political change of August 2024.

⁹¹ pp. 24-25, First Interim Report; pp. 70-72, Second Interim Report.

⁹² pp. 66-68, Second Interim Report.

⁹³ pp. 49-51, Second Interim Report:.



A. Psychological and social impacts on families and advocates

The defender described how enforced disappearances during Sheikh Hasina's rule were consistently denied by the government. Officials publicly claimed that there were no enforced disappearances and said that people had "voluntarily fled the country," "got married," or left their families. These statements were directed at families, including wives of the disappeared.

The defender explained that such comments were deeply damaging. Women whose husbands disappeared were told that their husbands had left them and were questioned about why they continued to wait. These remarks contributed to fear, humiliation, and silence among families.

Victims were also portrayed as criminals or militants. According to the defender, people who disappeared were labelled anti-government, terrorists, or Islamic militants, particularly because many came from opposition parties or religious groups. However, when Odhikar later spoke to families and survivors, "we found that these people... were just going to the mosque five times a day."

When some individuals returned after enforced disappearance, their return was used to deny that any disappearance had taken place. As the defender put it, the government would say, "you see that there is no disappearance, the persons they have returned." This erased the period during which people were secretly detained.

Human rights defenders were also affected. After Odhikar reported on extrajudicial killings in 2013, its office was raided, senior figures were arrested, and the organization was deregistered. The defender said the government told the public not to believe Odhikar and claimed its information was fake, branding the organization as anti-government.

B. Women and silence after disappearance

The defender spoke specifically about the position of women after enforced disappearances. Wives of disappeared men were treated dismissively and told that their husbands had left them. These statements discouraged women from continuing to speak or seek answers. The defender noted that women often stopped speaking out because of fear and social pressure. Being told repeatedly that their husbands had abandoned them made it harder to maintain claims of disappearance and contributed to isolation.

In the current period, women who do speak or whose family members speak publicly are also affected by online harassment. According to the defender, families and survivors are now "getting trolled from the media... online media", which adds another layer of pressure and discourages participation.

C. Platforms and actors behind disinformation



Disinformation now spreads mainly through Facebook and YouTube, which are widely used in Bangladesh. During Hasina's rule, denial came directly from the government and ministers. After the change in government, similar narratives continue online. Many of the people spreading denial online were loyal to the former government. These actors claim that enforced disappearances never happened and that secret detention centers do not exist. The defender said that comments now claim that detention sites such as Aynaghar were "created by Yunus" and that the stories are fabricated.

Survivors and families who speak publicly are targeted online. The defender said that many surfaced victims are now giving interviews, but they are subjected to trolling and hostile comments on social media platforms.

The defender described a recurring claim that a person could not have forcibly disappeared because he appeared physically healthy after resurfacing. Comments dismissed the account by saying he was "fat" or looked well, using his body as proof that detention had not occurred. This framing avoided the disappearance itself and reduced credibility to appearance, serving mainly to ridicule the victim and deter others from speaking.

Disinformation has also targeted institutions. The defender noted that there are ongoing online campaigns against the Inquiry Commission on Enforced Disappearances and against the International Crimes Tribunal, particularly as these bodies begin their work.

D. Institutional denial and pressure on organizations

The defender described denial as a core feature of state practice during Hasina's government. Officials consistently said that there were no enforced disappearances and accused victims of leaving voluntarily or being criminals. This denial extended to human rights organizations. Odhikar was monitored from 2013 onward, its office was raided, its leaders were jailed, and it was eventually deregistered. The government publicly discredited the organization and told people not to trust its reports.

Although the political situation has changed, the defender suggested that disinformation has not stopped but has shifted form. Instead of coming directly from the state, it is now carried by online actors who continue to deny past abuses.

E. Outlook after the August 2024 Protests

The defender described the period after August 5, 2024 as a moment when silence has begun to break. Survivors of enforced disappearance and family members, who had remained quiet for years, have started speaking publicly. According to the defender, this change is linked to the fall of the Hasina government and the formation of an interim administration, which created space for people to come forward without the immediate fear that had shaped earlier years.



At the same time, the defender made clear that speaking now comes with new risks. Survivors and families who give interviews or testify publicly are facing online harassment and trolling, particularly on Facebook and YouTube. Disinformation campaigns targeting the Inquiry Commission on Enforced Disappearances and the International Crimes Tribunal have intensified as these bodies begin their work. The defender suggested that this pressure may discourage some victims from participating fully unless protections and support are strengthened.

Looking ahead, the defender pointed to the importance of continuing documentation and public testimony. The registration of more than 1,800 cases by the Inquiry Commission was described as a sign that many families are finally willing to report what happened. However, the defender stressed that disinformation has not ended; it has shifted from direct government denial to online narratives that question victims and accountability processes.

There has been greater visibility for enforced disappearance cases and more willingness among victims to speak, but also sustained efforts to deny past abuses and discredit those seeking justice. How this period unfolds will depend on whether survivors and families are able to continue speaking without intimidation, and whether institutions can withstand the pressure of online denial and misinformation while carrying out their mandates.

IV. **Bangladesh: Summary of Key Findings**

A. Media Treatment of Victims and Reputational Damages on the Victims

Law enforcement agencies frequently arranged press briefings at the point of resurfacing, where individuals were presented as arrested and described as criminals or terrorists.⁹⁴ For victims, this media exposure is “double-edged”. Public acknowledgement reduced the immediate risk of extrajudicial killing, but it also ensured that reputational harm occurred before any judicial scrutiny. Names, photographs, and alleged offences were broadcast widely, often without reference to the preceding period of secret detention and without any opportunity for the victim to respond.⁹⁵ Reporting of the enforced disappearance itself was routinely omitted by state-aligned media and replaced by a false narrative that the person is a criminal or a national threat.

The Commission’s findings on media treatment are reflected clearly in the cases of Michael Chakma and Shafiqul Islam Kajol, where resurfacing was accompanied by

⁹⁴ pp. 63-64, Second Interim Report.

⁹⁵ pp. 64-65, Second Interim Report.



immediate narrative control. In both cases, law enforcement agencies arranged or enabled media coverage at the point when custody was acknowledged. Victims were presented as criminals or security threats, not as individuals who had been missing for extended periods. The disappearance itself was largely absent from reporting, replaced by allegations of terrorism, criminal conspiracy, or flight from justice.

Media accounts mirrored police statements closely, repeating the same allegations with little variation and omitting families' prior complaints, police reports, and habeas corpus efforts.⁹⁶ As a result, reporting replaced the question of *where the person had been* with a story about *why the person was allegedly guilty*.

The consequences of this media treatment extended far beyond the immediate news cycle for both victims and their families. Even after charges were stayed, dismissed, or questioned, the initial portrayal continued to circulate online and in official databases. Families and survivors described long-term harm linked to this public record, including social stigma, employment barriers, and being treated as ongoing security risks. For victims attempting to leave the country after release, terrorism-related allegations published during resurfacing created lasting mobility constraints. Embassies and immigration authorities continued to rely on publicly available media reports and court records, resulting in visa denials and blocked travel even after acquittal or case collapse. In this way, disinformation surrounding enforced disappearances did not end with release; it followed victims into every attempt to rebuild their lives.⁹⁷

B. Weaponization of the Criminal Justice System

Victims were routinely placed into newly filed or revived cases, often under counterterrorism or digital security laws, with arrest dates recorded in ways that erased the period of secret detention.⁹⁸ These legal records produced their own authoritative version of events. Statements obtained under pressure were presented as confessions, and charge sheets followed familiar templates across cases.⁹⁹ Once such documents existed, they displaced families' claims of abduction and functioned as proof that the individual had simply been lawfully arrested. For Kajol, for example, his "recovery" in the border was framed as trespassing and then his detention was continued under the claims of an existing case.

⁹⁶ *Id.*

⁹⁷ *Id.*

⁹⁸ pp. 66-70, Second Interim Report.

⁹⁹ pp. 71-75, Second Interim Report.



Victim testimonies collected by the Commission further illustrate this “judicial apathy” in practice. Survivors reported being produced before judge magistrates while still under the control of the same officers who had tortured them, with no opportunity to speak freely. In many instances, magistrates appeared rushed or disengaged, asking few or no questions before remanding victims back into custody. Several victims stated that the contents of the recorded confessional statements bore no resemblance to anything they had said, suggesting not only coercion but, in some cases, outright fabrication.¹⁰⁰

The Commission finds that the courts’ involvement in enforced disappearance cases followed a consistent pattern rather than isolated cases. It notes a “remarkable uniformity in the judicial treatment of victims.”¹⁰¹ Judges, the Commission observes, were often remiss in recording the victim’s statements, often failing to conduct meaningful verification and instead “merely record[ing] what was provided by the law enforcement agencies”.¹⁰²

Victims were then “routinely returned to the custody of the same law enforcers for further remand,” a practice that “perpetuat[ed] their sufferings and den[jied] them justice”.¹⁰³ As a result, proceedings advanced on the assumption of lawful arrest, while the disappearance that preceded court production was left unexamined.

The Commission also highlights the lasting effects of this process on victims’ lives. Even after acquittal or release on bail, terrorism and security-related charges remained part of official and public records, continuing to affect employment, travel, and access to documentation.¹⁰⁴ Victims reported being unable to leave the country or facing visa denials because foreign authorities relied on media reports and court records, even when the victim had been acquitted.¹⁰⁵ In this way, the criminal justice process did not merely legitimize enforced disappearance at the time it occurred; it extended its consequences indefinitely, long after the disappearance itself had ended.

C. Distinct and Gendered Harms for Women

Enforced disappearances produced distinct gendered harms for women. Although women constituted a small proportion of recorded victims, the Commission observes that

¹⁰⁰ pp. 66-78, Second Interim Report.

¹⁰¹ p. 67, Second Interim Report.

¹⁰² p. 25, First Interim Report.

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ pp. 83-99, Second Interim Report.

¹⁰⁵ p. 63, Second Interim Report.



most enforced disappearances targeted men, with comparatively few women subjected to enforced disappearance.¹⁰⁶ Where women were detained, the harm they experienced was shaped by gendered humiliation and social stigma rather than only physical coercion.

Sexualized forms of torture, while present, have been more difficult to document due to the reluctance of victims to disclose such experiences. The Commission notes that many women survivors refused to speak after release, limiting the availability of detailed testimony. Despite this, the Second Interim Report documents credible and repeated instances in which torture targeted the genitals, indicating the use of sexualized violence even where survivors did not describe it in full.¹⁰⁷

Despite their smaller numbers, both the Commission and Odhikar record that **women survivors overwhelmingly chose to remain silent after release**. In the Odhikar interview, the interviewee stated plainly: “No female ED victims are talking,” explaining that women who returned from disappearance refused to speak even to human rights organizations, and in one case, a son said that his mother “will not talk” about her detention. This silence was attributed to severe trauma, fear, and social stigma rather than to the absence of abuse.

For women family members, particularly wives of disappeared men, gendered harm operated through official denial narratives. Odhikar recounts that officials repeatedly told wives that their husbands had simply abandoned them. As described in the interview, authorities told “half widows” that “your husband has left you, so why are you waiting for him,” and suggested that the men had “got married” or left voluntarily.

V. **Bangladesh: Ways Forward**

Under the previous regime in Bangladesh, enforced disappearance became a routine practice, justified through counterterrorism language and carried out through coordinated security operations. The political transition in August 2024 opened space for victims and families to speak and for accountability to begin, but it also shifted how denial operates. Instead of outright rejection, former regime networks now focus on discrediting survivors, families, and inquiry processes. The ways forward below address this moment and identify how advocates can help ensure that this opening leads to protection for victims of enforced disappearance rather than another cycle of silence.

A. Treat survivor testimony as a point of heightened risk for the victims

Public testimony has repeatedly triggered renewed harm against resurfaced victims. When survivors speak to the media or cooperate with inquiry bodies, security-linked actors

¹⁰⁶ pp. 27–28, First Interim Report.

¹⁰⁷ p. 137, Second Interim Report.



and propaganda networks often respond by reviving old criminal cases, initiating new investigations, or amplifying online harassment that questions the survivor's credibility. Pro-government commentators and coordinated social media accounts frequently portray testimony as fabrication or political opportunism, shifting attention away from secret detention and denial of custody.

CSOs must therefore place protection at the center of any testimony-related process. Legal teams should prepare survivors and families for retaliatory cases, digital security measures should be in place before testimony becomes public, and consent protocols must allow survivors to control the scope of disclosure.

B. Support female survivors of enforced disappearances

Women affected by enforced disappearance often remain absent from formal records because speaking carries social stigma. Women survivors often chose to stay silent particularly when disclosure may expose sexual violence. Fear of renewed trauma continues to limit their participation in the truth-finding commission, even after the political transition.

Thus, civil society actors must address these barriers as part of documentation itself. Psychosocial care, livelihood assistance, and options for confidential or indirect participation should be built into investigative and reporting processes from the outset.

C. Help families document and respond to online harassment

When families or survivors speak publicly, they often become targets of coordinated trolling, ridicule, and character attacks on platforms like Facebook and YouTube. CSOs can assist in reporting abusive content to social media platforms. Further, CSOs can help families systematically record these attacks by collecting screenshots, URLs, timestamps, and account names before content disappears. This documentation preserves evidence of intimidation, supports future legal or platform complaints, and helps families feel that harassment is being taken seriously rather than dismissed as "just online."

D. Maintain independent, long-term oversight of the inquiry process

Civil society organizations must sustain independent oversight to ensure that accountability of the Commission does not end with fact-finding. This work includes monitoring whether investigations progress from identifying patterns of enforced disappearance to naming responsible units and individual perpetrators, including those in command positions. It also involves tracking whether inquiry findings result in concrete outcomes such as referrals for prosecution, rather than administrative closure or quiet shelving once public attention declines.



At the same time, CSOs can support families and survivors as they engage with the inquiry process. This support can take the form of assistance in preparing testimony, understanding procedural steps, and following up on the status of cases over time. Combining long-term monitoring with case-level accompaniment helps prevent transition mechanisms from becoming symbolic exercises.



Country Report: Nepal

I. Nepal: Political Context on Human Rights

Enforced disappearance is no longer a feature of daily life in Nepal.¹⁰⁸ The absence of new cases today, however, does not erase the period when it was. The State and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) were in active conflict between 1996 to 2006. During this time, the government itself carried out systematic killings and enforced disappearances against its own people to crackdown the Maoist movement. The number of enforced disappearances skyrocketed and human rights monitors recorded one of the highest numbers of disappearances worldwide.¹⁰⁹

While the active conflict has ceased, for many survivors and families of the disappeared, this past has not yet closed. Majority of the victims and their families remain without formal recognition and until today, no one has been convicted on for these crimes.¹¹⁰ The International Committee of the Red Cross documented more than 3,400 persons missing in connection with the conflict.¹¹¹ Many of the disappeared were family breadwinners, leaving households without their primary source of support. Even today, more than 1,300 persons who disappeared during the conflict remain missing.¹¹²

At the time of the conflict, unlawful killings and enforced disappearances were geographically concentrated at the Maoist strong holds including in Rukum, Rolpa, Jajarkot, Salyan in the Mid-Western Region, Gorkha in the Western Region and Sindhuli in the Central Region. The majority of the victims were young men from minority groups, many of them were breadwinners and their loss resulted in the families grappling for survival.¹¹³

Human Rights Watch reported that the disappearances in Nepal were performed openly by regular army units, the police, and the Armed Police Force. This was a departure from the method in other countries where disappearances were conducted secretly and

¹⁰⁸ Personal interview with Advocacy Forum-Nepal on December 18, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ pp. 1-2, Human Rights Watch. (2005). Clear culpability: "Disappearances" by security forces in Nepal.

¹¹⁰ Personal interview with Advocacy Forum-Nepal on December 18, 2025.

¹¹¹ P. 110, United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2012). *Conflict-related violations of international human rights and international humanitarian law in Nepal*.

¹¹² International Committee of the Red Cross. (2018, October 3). [Nepal: International Day for Universal Access to Information Marked in Kathmandu - The ICRC in New Delhi](#)

¹¹³ International Committee of the Red Cross. (2009). [Families of missing persons in Nepal: A study of their needs](#)



done by intelligence or security services to allow denial of state involvement. Arrests and abductions in Nepal were carried out openly and with impunity, using official police vehicles and personnel in uniform. In many cases, families were able to identify not only the specific army barracks, camps, or police posts involved, but also, at times, the individual soldiers or officers responsible.¹¹⁴

Blatant state denial was used to normalize and obscure enforced disappearance and arrests were commonly followed by denials of custody. The victims were transferred from police stations to military camps and unofficial places of detention without custody records. From there, they were held incommunicado without contact to their families. Families who approached police stations and the military camps were routinely told that no arrest had occurred, even when witnesses had observed the apprehension.¹¹⁵

In July 2004, families of the disappeared organized a hunger strike to call for justice. As a response, the **Committee for the Investigation of Alleged Disappearances of Persons by the State was created to investigate the systematic disappearances.**¹¹⁶ Its first report was released on August 2004 which examined only 36 disappearance cases, which the families deemed as “disappointing” prompting them to continue their hunger strike. Thereafter, it released a follow up report stating that 30 individuals had been released, 17 remained in government detention, and 7 had been killed in alleged “encounters” with security forces. These findings did not lead to criminal accountability, despite the overwhelming evidence claimed by the families of the involvement of state forces.¹¹⁷

Following the end of the armed conflict, the Nepal government signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2006. It included a state’s promise to continue investigating human rights violations, including enforced disappearances. Pursuant to the CPA, two transitional justice bodies were established by law: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP). Their mandates included investigating serious violations committed between 1996

¹¹⁴ pp. 25-27, Human Rights Watch. (2005). Clear culpability: “Disappearances” by security forces in Nepal.

¹¹⁵ pp. 32-33, 40, Human Rights Watch. (2005). **Clear culpability: “Disappearances” by security forces in Nepal.**

¹¹⁶ p. 71, *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ p. 71, *ibid.*



and 2006 and to determine the fate of the disappeared and to seek accountability against the perpetrators.¹¹⁸

Despite the creation of transitional justice bodies after the conflict, families of the disappeared in Nepal have seen little progress toward justice. Both bodies have not completed credible investigations into enforced disappearances from the conflict era, and no meaningful prosecution of perpetrators has followed.¹¹⁹ Despite receiving thousands of complaints, the investigations have proceeded slowly and often encouraged victims to accept reparations rather than determining criminal accountability against perpetrators.¹²⁰

In 2024, Nepal amended its transitional justice law presenting the reform as a long-delayed effort to respond to international criticism. It expanded the formal categorization of human rights violations, adjusted procedural rules on tenure, and case handling, and retained enforced disappearance as a serious violation subject to investigation and prosecution.¹²¹

However, CSOs emphasized that the amendments still contain structural limits on accountability against the perpetrators. It continues to prioritize reconciliation and administrative resolution, with prosecutions dependent on discretionary recommendations vulnerable to political influence, and retains narrow, conflict-era definitions of enforced disappearance that frame the violation as temporally closed. As a result, NGOs argue that the gap between truth-seeking, reparations, and criminal responsibility largely remains intact, despite the appearance of institutional progress.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Personal interview with Advocacy Forum-Nepal on December 18, 2025.

¹¹⁹ Human Rights Watch. (2021, August 30). Nepal: Stop stalling enforced disappearance inquiries. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/30/nepal-stop-stalling-enforced-disappearance-inquiries>

¹²⁰ Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, & International Commission of Jurists. (2024). Nepal: New transitional justice law a flawed step forward. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/08/nepal-new-transitional-justice-law-a-flawed-step-forward/>

¹²¹ International Commission of Jurists. (2024, November). [A Brief Review of Nepal's Transitional Justice \(TI\) Law Donors and Supporters Must Be Vigilant To Ensure Compliance](#)

¹²² International Commission of Jurists. (2024, November). [A Brief Review of Nepal's Transitional Justice \(TI\) Law Donors and Supporters Must Be Vigilant To Ensure Compliance](#)



Denial, the refusal to recognize resurfaced cases as enforced disappearances, and the continued reliance on narrow official definitions of victimhood continue to shape how enforced disappearance is publicly understood in Nepal. During the conflict, disappearances were routinely narrated as lawful arrests, releases, or deaths in alleged “cross-fire encounters,” narratives that persist in contemporary discourse.

In September 2025, Gen Z-led protests has renewed political pressure and call for state accountability. While these protests did not focus on conflict-era enforced disappearances, it has reopened discussion of the failure of the government to address the harms done during the conflict.¹²³ While Nepal has closed the chapter of active enforced disappearances, it has not fully moved on from this history in the absence of accountability beyond compensation. Acknowledgment remains partial, and the truth about past disappearances largely unresolved. Without a process that establishes the fate of the disappeared, establishes responsibility against the perpetrators, enforced disappearance continues as a dark legacy Nepal has to address.

II. **Nepal: Notable Cases of EDs and Disinformation**

There are no verified cases of ongoing enforced disappearance in Nepal during the period covered by this study. As a result, the analysis necessarily draws on emblematic cases from the 1996–2006 armed conflict. These cases are not treated as historical artefacts alone. The narratives surrounding them, including denial, misrepresentation, and institutional silence, have continued to shape how truth and accountability are still contested in the present. The persistence of unresolved disappearances means that disinformation related to these cases remains active, particularly in how responsibility is obscured and how families’ demands for truth are deferred.

A. Rajendra Prasad Dhakal

Verified Reports

Rajendra Prasad Dhakal was a human rights lawyer serving as the chairperson of the Gorkha district branch of the Forum for the Protection of Human Rights (FOPHUR). He was active during the height of the armed conflict. Prior to his disappearance, he had previously been illegally detained by police in 1996.

On January 8, 1999, while he was in a political awareness program in Jamdi village when he was arrested by a patrolling police team. Two school teachers were arrested with

¹²³ Adhikari, B. (2026, January 21). *Nepal's Gen Z movement and constitutional crisis*. ConstitutionNet.



him and they were all taken to the Belchautara Area Police Office. The two teachers were eventually released but Rajendra was separated from them.

His brother searched for him in police stations and military camps including district police offices in Tanahun, Nawalparasi, Pokhara, and the Armed Police Battalion in Pokhara. Authorities denied having held him. Officers stationed at the Gorkha District Police Office, claimed that he was in custody but they refused family access. Up to this day, his whereabouts remain unknown.¹²⁴

Legal Developments

On January 21, 1999, his family demanded his resurfacing before the Supreme Court through a writ of habeas corpus. The affidavits of the two teachers who were arrested with him confirmed that he had been detained on 8 January 1999. Throughout the habeas corpus hearings, the government and security forces merely denied that he had been arrested.¹²⁵

His case later formed part of a consolidated group of habeas corpus petitions concerning individuals allegedly arrested by security forces and forcibly disappeared. During the hearings, testimony from former detainees, findings of national human rights institutions, and independent investigations indicated that Mr. Dhakal had been taken into state custody despite persistent official denials. In August 2006, the Supreme Court established a Detainee Investigation Task Force (DITF) to examine multiple disappearance cases, including his

The DITF concluded that Rajendra was arrested by the police under the command of an area police inspector and forcibly disappeared. In June 2007, the Supreme Court of Nepal endorsed these findings and ordered the Government to criminalize enforced disappearance, prosecute those responsible, and provide compensation to victims' families. Apart from interim compensation of NPR 150,000 paid (or around 1000 USD) to his wife in August 2007, these orders have not been implemented, and no criminal prosecution has been completed or authoritative determination of his fate made public.

In January 2012, TRIAL international reported Mr. Dhakal's disappearance to the United Nations Human Rights Committee. On March 2017, the UN Committee found that Nepal violated several provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, including the right to life, the prohibition of torture, the right to liberty, and the right to recognition in relation to his case. It also found that his wife and daughter were subjected

¹²⁴ TRIAL International. (2017). Enforced disappearance of Rajendra Prasad Dhakal in January 1999. <https://trialinternational.org/latest-post/enforced-disappearance-of-rajendra-prasad-dhakal-in-january-1999/>

¹²⁵ Supreme Court of Nepal. (2007). Rajendra Prasad Dhakal v. Nepal Government, Home Ministry and Others (Writ No. 3775; habeas corpus).



to inhuman and degrading treatment due to the prolonged uncertainty on his whereabouts or if he has been killed. The UN body also directed Nepal to investigate the disappearance, prosecute the perpetrators, provide reparations, and take measures to prevent recurrence of enforced disappearances.¹²⁶

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

In Dhakal's case, the dominant state narrative rested on **outright denial of arrest and custody**. Nepali authorities consistently maintained that he had never been taken into custody, despite testimonies of those who were apprehended with him. The State's position avoided engagement with the disappearance itself and reframed the issue as a dispute over whether an arrest had occurred and shifted the burden onto the family that he was indeed forcibly taken. His case reflects a distinct disinformation pathway: silence maintained over time. The refusal to acknowledge custody, the absence of records, and the lack of any official account beyond denial allowed the disappearance to be a contested fact.

A second pathway emerged despite legal and institutional recognition which was **formal acknowledgment without attribution of responsibility**. Although Dhakal's enforced disappearance was formally acknowledged by the Supreme Court and later by the UN Human Rights Committee, the implementation was limited to interim monetary compensation. The court's finding did not translate into the identification of perpetrators, criminal proceedings, or a determination of his fate.

While interim reparations provided limited relief to the family, the absence of criminal accountability, despite the identification of the police unit involved, prevented the establishment of truth and responsibility. In the post-recognition phase, the earlier dynamic persisted in a different form. The disappearance was no longer denied, but it was treated as resolved through payment, without criminal findings that could ground accountability for those responsible. The lack of prosecutions and the failure to establish individual or command responsibility left the violation formally acknowledged but substantively unresolved.

¹²⁶ Id.



Table 6. Timeline of Disinformation - Rajendra Prasad Dhakal (Nepal)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
Arrest and immediate aftermath (Jan 1999)	Nepal Police; local security forces	State	Primary - denies arrest at point of custody	Denial of state involvement	Removes the individual from legal protection, blocks habeas corpus at inception, and shifts burden to the family	Authorities denied arrest despite affidavits from teachers and witnesses confirming Dhakal's apprehension
Habeas corpus proceedings (1999–2006)	Government respondents; security agencies	State	Primary - sustains denial through formal pleadings	Denial of state involvement	Normalizes denial as official position, delays fact-finding, and exhausts judicial remedies	Repeated custody denials across pleadings despite similar patterns in parallel cases



<p>Detainee Investigation Task Force inquiry (2006)</p>	<p>DITF; former detainees; human rights bodies</p>	<p>State</p>	<p>Secondary - acknowledges facts without assigning liability</p>	<p>Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance</p>	<p>Recognizes arrest while insulating perpetrators from criminal accountability</p>	<p>DITF found Dhakal was arrested by a police unit and disappeared the same day, with no criminal follow-up</p>
<p>Supreme Court endorsement (2007)</p>	<p>Supreme Court; Government of Nepal</p>	<p>State</p>	<p>Secondary - validates findings through remedial substitution</p>	<p>Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance</p>	<p>Treats the violation as resolved through remedies rather than prosecution</p>	<p>Court endorsed DITF conclusions and ordered relief without directing prosecution</p>
<p>Post-recognition phase (2007-present)</p>	<p>Executive agencies; transitional justice mechanisms</p>	<p>State</p>	<p>Secondary - frames closure through compensation and delay</p>	<p>Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance</p>	<p>Presents acknowledgment and payment as sufficient resolution while deferring accountability</p>	<p>Formal recognition without effective investigation or prosecution</p>



B. Maina Sunuwar

Verified Reports

Maina Sunuwar was a 15-year-old schoolgirl from Kharelthok village, Kavrepalanchowk District, Nepal. She lived with her family in an area affected by counter-insurgency operations during the armed conflict. On the morning of February 17, 2004, Nepali soldiers arrived at their home looking for her mother, Devi Sunuwar. When her mother was not present, the soldiers took Maina instead and brought her into military custody.¹²⁷ Maina's father was instructed by the soldiers to bring her mother in the Lamidanda Barracks in Kavre.¹²⁸

After her arrest, Maina was taken to the Birendra Peace Operations Training Centre in Panchkhal. According to the Nepal Army's own Court of Inquiry report, Maina was subjected to severe torture during interrogation, including repeated simulated drowning in a large pot of water and intense electric shocks. The torture continued for more than an hour. She later became critically ill, began vomiting and foaming at the mouth, and died in custody on the same day she was taken from her home. Following her death, army personnel attempted to conceal the crime. Her body was shot post-mortem and buried inside the military training center. A false report was prepared claiming that she had been killed while trying to escape from custody. The Court of Inquiry concluded that her death resulted directly from torture during interrogation.¹²⁹

Her family members, teachers, and villagers demanded for her release but the security forces repeatedly denied that she had been arrested or detained. Her remains were recovered in April 2004, after sustained pressure from her family and national and international human rights organizations.¹³⁰

Legal Developments

¹²⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2006). The torture and death in custody of Maina Sunuwar: Summary of concerns. OHCHR Nepal.

¹²⁸ Advocacy Forum. (2011, January). Maina Sunuwar.
<https://advocacyforum.org/emblematic-cases/2011/01/maina-sunuwar.php>

¹²⁹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2006). The torture and death in custody of Maina Sunuwar: Summary of concerns. OHCHR Nepal.

¹³⁰ Advocacy Forum Nepal. (2018). Press release. Disappeared in Asia.
<https://disappeared-asia.org/whats-happening/11-press-releases/403-press-release-advocacy-forum-nepal-2>



In 2004, following the mounting public pressure to give justice to Maina Sunuwar, the Nepal Army initially addressed the case through internal military mechanisms. The Nepal Army designated the Court of Inquiry to investigate which acknowledged that she died from torture during the interrogation. Despite these findings, the court-martial charged three army officers only with disciplinary and procedural violations, including the use of improper interrogation techniques and failure to follow procedures in disposing of the body. No charges for torture, enforced disappearance, or homicide were meted at that stage.

The court-martial sentenced the three officers to six months' imprisonment, temporary bans on promotion, and monetary compensation to the victim's family. Specifically, the two captains involved were each ordered to pay NPR 25,000, while the commanding colonel was ordered to pay NPR 50,000. The custodial sentences were considered served through prior confinement to barracks, and the officers did not serve additional prison time.¹³¹

Dissatisfied with the outcome of the military proceedings, Devi Sunuwar, Maina Sunuwar's mother, pursued accountability through the ordinary criminal justice system. After prolonged delays and resistance, including non-cooperation by the Nepal Army, the Supreme Court of Nepal issued mandamus orders directing police authorities to complete the criminal investigation and affirming that civilian courts had jurisdiction over the killing of civilians by the army during the armed conflict.¹³²

In April 2017, the Kavrepalanchowk District Court convicted three former Nepali soldiers for the disappearance, torture and killing of Maina. There were imposed with prison sentences, making it the first civilian conviction against Nepal Army soldiers for a conflict-era killing.¹³³

In response, the Nepal Army filed a writ petition before the Nepal Supreme Court to challenge the convictions of the district court. The Army argued that only the court-martial has jurisdiction over the death of Sunuwar. They cited that the civilian court violated the principle of double jeopardy because of the earlier decision of the court-martial which already imposed punishments. Further, they argued that the death occurred during the

¹³¹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (2006). The torture and death in custody of Maina Sunuwar: Summary of concerns. OHCHR Nepal.

¹³² Advocacy Forum Nepal. (2018). Press release. Disappeared in Asia.
<https://disappeared-asia.org/whats-happening/11-press-releases/403-press-release-advocacy-forum-nepal-2>

¹³³ Advocacy Forum. (2011, January). Maina Sunuwar.
<https://advocacyforum.org/emblematic-cases/2011/01/maina-sunuwar.php>



conflict and should be addressed through transitional justice mechanisms such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As of today, the killing of Maina remains pending before the Supreme Court due to the Army's appeal. The official statements of the Nepal Army continue to portray the case as one that resulted during the conflict and should solely resolved through transitional justice mechanisms. Meanwhile, Maina's family continues to pursue enforcement of civilian court rulings.¹³⁴

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

In the Maina Sunuwar case, disinformation occurred as a sequence of shifting narratives rather than a single act of denial. Immediately after her arrest, security forces denied that she had taken Maina into custody, despite consistent efforts by her family, teachers, and villagers to locate her in police stations and army barracks. This initial denial erased the custodial chain at the moment when legal intervention was most possible and placed the burden of proof on the family to establish that an arrest had even occurred.

As evidence of her detention became harder to suppress, official narratives shifted rather than disappeared. Maina's mother was told at one point that her daughter had not disappeared but had been killed in an "anti-terrorist operation." This framing redirected attention away from custodial responsibility and recast the death of a civilian child as a security-related incident. It functioned to justify the killing without producing evidence and to implicitly associate the victim with armed activity, despite her status as a schoolgirl.

Following Maina's death, the disinformation took documentary form. Army personnel prepared an internal account claiming that she had been shot while attempting to escape. This narrative was later rejected by the Army's own Court of Inquiry, which concluded that her death resulted from torture during interrogation. Even so, the escape narrative served its purpose at the time by generating an official record that could be invoked to delay or deflect external investigation.

When outright denial and fabrication were no longer sustainable, the harm was minimized through legal reframing. The military court-martial acknowledged that Maina had died in custody but treated the conduct as a matter of improper interrogation techniques and procedural failures, rather than torture or killing. By reducing the violation to disciplinary lapses and imposing limited punishment and compensation, the military justice process produced a sense of institutional closure without addressing criminal responsibility.

¹³⁴ The Annapurna Express. (2025, February 24). Nepali Army cites TRC in Maina Sunuwar case. <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/story/52466/>



After civilian courts later convicted army officers for Maina's killing, disinformation did not reappear as factual denial but as institutional displacement. The Nepal Army argued that the case should be handled through transitional justice mechanisms such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, despite existing judicial findings. This reframing shifted the case from a concluded criminal matter into an open-ended process, weakening the finality of court decisions and delaying enforcement. Across these phases, the case illustrates how disinformation in enforced disappearance contexts adapts over time, moving from denial to minimization to procedural deflection, while maintaining the same effect of insulating perpetrators and prolonging uncertainty for victims' families.

These disinformation series are summarized below:

Table 7. Timeline of Disinformation - Maina Sunuwar (Nepal)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
Immediate post-arrest (Feb 2004)	Nepal Army personnel; local police; army barracks	State	Primary - denies arrest and custody at point of seizure	Denial of state involvement through custodial denial	Erases custodial chain and blocks early judicial intervention	Witnesses report soldiers took Maina from her home; authorities denied any arrest
Early search period (Feb-Mar 2004)	Army personnel at Panchkhal barracks	State	Primary - advances security-based explanation	Denial through claims of militant or rebel affiliation	Recasts disappearance as a lawful security operation and implicitly justifies the killing	Mother told Maina was "killed in an anti-terrorist operation"
Post-death internal reporting (2004)	Nepal Army command; internal reports reviewed by OHCHR	State	Primary - fabricates exculpatory account for official record	Denial of state involvement by claiming casualty of conflict	Shields perpetrators and delays external investigation	Internal report claimed escape attempt; later rejected by Army Court of Inquiry



Military justice phase (2005)	Nepal Army court-martial	State	Secondary reframes atrocity as disciplinary breach	-	Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance (procedural downgrading)	Limits liability and signals institutional closure	Charges reduced to improper interrogation and body disposal
Post-conviction phase (2017-2025)	Nepal Army leadership; public statements;	State: former state agents	Secondary deflects enforcement through jurisdictional claims	-	Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance (jurisdictional deflection)	Undermines civilian convictions and shifts responsibility	Statements urging resolution through transitional bodies



III. **Nepal: A Conversation with Local Human Rights Defenders**

This section is based on a conversation with a Nepali human rights defender who has worked on enforced disappearance cases arising from the 1996–2006 armed conflict. The discussion sheds light on the forms, sources, and effects of disinformation related to enforced disappearances in Nepal, particularly as practiced through institutional denial, criminalization, and legal reclassification. It also highlights how these narratives have shaped the experiences of families and advocates and continue to affect accountability debates despite the absence of new cases today.

A. Psychological and social impacts on families and advocates

The conversation opened with a clarification that Nepal does not currently experience enforced disappearances. “There are no recent cases of enforced disappearance at the moment,” a statement that was immediately bounded by its historical context: “There is a conflict from 1996 that ended in 2006 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. During that time, so many people were forcibly disappeared.” This framing underscored a recurring pattern in the Nepal context, where temporal distinctions are used to signal closure while past violations remain unresolved.

During the conflict, arrests were routinely followed by institutional denial, forming a core disinformation pattern. Even where witnesses observed arrests, families encountered uniform denials when searching for their relatives. “Witnesses say he or she was arrested from this place, but when you go to detention centers or police stations, they always deny their involvement.” This denial functioned not only as a response to families but as a sustained institutional practice that prevented confirmation of custody or fate. The resulting uncertainty extended well beyond the moment of disappearance and continues to shape families’ lives long after the conflict formally ended.

For human rights advocates, the absence of official documentation remains a central obstacle to countering denial narratives. “We don’t get any sort of record from the Nepal Army,” leaving families and advocates dependent on fragmentary testimony rather than verifiable institutional records. This lack of records reinforces disinformation by omission, where silence and non-disclosure substitute for overt falsehoods.

B. Criminalization and silencing through security narratives

A second recurring typology of disinformation involved the criminalization of disappeared persons through security narratives. Enforced disappearances were frequently justified by portraying those arrested as security threats rather than civilians. “They say they were arrested not because they were common people, but because they were terrorists.” This narrative was reinforced by the use of counterinsurgency laws during the conflict. “Maoist was declared as a terrorist, and they used the Terrorist Control Act.”



Once such labels were applied, disappearance was normalized as a security response rather than recognized as a rights violation. The interview explicitly linked this practice to patterns observed elsewhere: “Yes. It is similar. Once they accuse someone of being Maoist, they treat him as an enemy.” This form of disinformation narrowed public sympathy and discouraged families from continuing to seek answers, as accusation itself became sufficient to justify abuse and denial.

C. Fabrication, reclassification, and erasure of disappearance

The conversation also described fabrication and reclassification as mechanisms through which disappearance was denied or obscured. In some cases, authorities claimed that disappeared individuals were killed during armed encounters. *“They would say this number of terrorists were killed in a fire exchange,”* even when such claims were contradicted locally. *“Villagers said there was no fight, there was no fire exchange in that place.”* These staged narratives replaced disappearance with officially sanctioned accounts of combat deaths.

In other instances, ordinary civilians were transformed into combatants after arrest. *“Sometimes they arrested ordinary people, made them wear Maoist uniforms, and then showed them as combatants.”* Accusations could rest on minimal grounds. The defender shared that *“They raided my room and found Marxist books. On that basis, they accused me of being Maoist.”* Alongside these practices, legal categories were blurred in ways that weakened accountability. *“Missing and disappearance are totally different, but in some cases people use it interchangeably.”* This conflation shifted attention away from state custody and denial, recasting disappearance as an ambiguous or private loss rather than a crime involving state responsibility.

D. Institutional denial and limits of transitional justice bodies

After the conflict, Nepal established formal mechanisms to address past violations. *“We have commissions—one is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and we also have a commission dedicated for enforced disappearances.”* These bodies constitute an official medium through which acknowledgment is expressed, yet the interview highlighted the limits of this institutional response. Thousands of complaints have been registered, but *“the commission has recorded around 3,000 cases of complaints, but not a single case has been investigated.”*

Political interference emerged as a central constraint. *“The commissions were formed based on political patronage and political interference,”* undermining their credibility and effectiveness. As a result, participation declined. *“Victims and civil society are boycotting the process,”* and *“there is no cooperation between the commissions and the victims.”* The repetition of failed bodies has reinforced this pattern of distrust. *“This is the third commission. The previous two commissions failed to deliver their mandate.”* In this



context, institutional acknowledgment without investigation functions as a limited and contested response to past disinformation.

E. Narrow legal recognition and unresolved legacies

Although enforced disappearance is now criminalized, legal recognition for victims remains narrow. The law recognizes only those who remain missing. “Those people who were disappeared in the conflict and are still disappeared are categorized as disappeared.” By contrast, “there are many people who were disappeared for a certain period of time and later surfaced, but they are not categorized as victims of enforced disappearance.” This distinction erases the period of secret detention itself. “The present law does not recognize the period of disappearance,” despite the reality that “when you talk about enforced disappearance, it involves multiple crimes,” including unlawful arrest, incommunicado detention, and torture.

The absence of new cases today has not resolved these harms. While “the state now acknowledges that there were acts of enforced disappearance during the conflict,” the fate of many individuals remains unknown, and responsibility has not been established. In this sense, enforced disappearance in Nepal persists not as a current practice, but as an unresolved violation, sustained through institutional denial, legal exclusions, and the continued uncertainty faced by families and advocates.

F. Platforms and actors behind disinformation

The absence of active cases of EDs has contributed to the issue fading from public and digital discourse, particularly among younger generations. The interview noted that enforced disappearances are no longer part of the collective memory of the youth, who did not experience the conflict period and encounter little discussion of these violations in contemporary discourse. As a result, disappearance is not widely debated or contested on mainstream online platforms, not because it has been resolved, but because it has been effectively displaced from public consciousness.

Instead of circulating through social media or coordinated online campaigns, disinformation in the Nepal context operates primarily through institutional and legal platforms. The interview identified state security institutions, particularly the Nepal Army, as key actors that continue to deny arrest, custody, or records related to disappearance cases. Legal frameworks used during the conflict, including counterinsurgency laws that labeled individuals as terrorists, remain central to how disappearances are retrospectively justified.

Transitional justice bodies and formal legal processes also function as sites of distortion, where acknowledgment exists in principle but is limited by narrow legal definitions and the absence of investigation. In this setting, disinformation is sustained less



by online amplification than by bureaucratic silence, legal reclassification, and institutional non-disclosure, allowing enforced disappearance to persist as an unresolved issue that rarely surfaces in contemporary digital spaces.

G. Reparations and monetary compensation for victims

The interview discussed reparations primarily in the form of monetary compensation provided by the state to families of those who were forcibly disappeared during the conflict. The interview stated that the government provided “around ten lakhs rupees to each victim family,” clarified as “almost ten thousand US dollars.” This payment was described in the interview as a form of acknowledgment that crimes were committed during the conflict.

In addition to monetary compensation, the interview referred to educational support for children of the disappeared. This support was described as being limited to two children per family and restricted to those under the age of eighteen. The interview noted that families with more than two children, or with dependents beyond this age limit, do not receive additional educational assistance under the existing scheme.

IV. Nepal: Summary of Key Findings

A. Institutional denial as the core disinformation mechanism

In Nepal, enforced disappearance was sustained primarily through institutional denial rather than media narrative management. Arrests by police and army units were routinely followed by blanket denials of custody, even when witnesses, co-detainees, and human rights bodies confirmed detention. This denial was consistent across agencies and persisted over time, functioning as an official position rather than an isolated response.

Denial displaced the disappearance itself as the central issue. Habeas corpus proceedings focused on whether an arrest had occurred at all, rather than on the fate or whereabouts of the person. In cases such as Rajendra Prasad Dhakal, repeated state denials shifted the burden onto families to prove custody, despite affidavits and corroborated testimony. The disappearance was thus reframed as an evidentiary dispute, allowing it to remain legally unresolved.

B. Judicial recognition without criminal accountability

Where denial could no longer be maintained, a second pattern emerged: **acknowledgment without accountability**. The Supreme Court accepted findings that individuals had been arrested and forcibly disappeared by state agents and issued directives on investigation, criminalization, and reparations. These findings established the fact of enforced disappearance.



However, recognition did not lead to prosecutions or findings of individual or command responsibility. Identified police units and military actors were not held criminally liable, and no authoritative determination of fate was made public. The legal process produced acknowledgment without consequence, leaving the violation formally recognized but substantively unresolved.

C. Long-term harm to families and erosion of public memory

Families of the disappeared continue to bear the consequences of unresolved disappearance. More than a thousand persons remain unaccounted for, leaving relatives in prolonged uncertainty. The absence of truth has compounded psychological harm, economic insecurity, and legal limbo, particularly for households that lost primary breadwinners.

Disinformation in Nepal has operated through silence and delay. With no sustained accountability process, enforced disappearance has faded from public consciousness, especially among younger generations. Interview testimony confirms that enforced disappearance is no longer part of the collective memory of the youth, weakening social pressure for truth and allowing the issue to be indefinitely deferred.

D. Compensation and reparations as relief, not resolution

Compensation has been the most visible state response to enforced disappearance. Families received one-time payments and, in some cases, limited educational assistance for children. These measures provided necessary short-term support and were not rejected by families, many of whom depended on them for basic survival.

However, compensation functioned as a substitute for accountability rather than a complement to it. After payments were issued, investigations stalled and cases lost institutional priority. Reparations were not linked to truth-seeking, prosecution, or determination of responsibility. Educational support was limited and uneven, and no comprehensive psychosocial or memorial measures followed.

As a result, compensation operated as administrative closure. While the disappearance was implicitly acknowledged through payment, the violation was reframed as an economic loss rather than an ongoing crime. In Nepal, reparations alleviated hardship but did not resolve enforced disappearance and should not be treated as closure in the absence of truth and accountability.

V. Nepal: Ways Forward

In Nepal, the absence of active enforced disappearance cases has contributed to a gradual erosion of public memory. For younger generations in particular, enforced



disappearance is often understood as a closed chapter of the armed conflict, with victims framed as unfortunate but inevitable casualties of war rather than as victims of unresolved crimes.

This erosion of memory has weakened political incentives to establish criminal responsibility and has enabled transitional justice bodies to prioritize compensation over investigation and prosecution. Nepal's experience shows that while monetary compensation is necessary for survival, it does not address the structural harms caused by enforced disappearance, including the absence of truth and accountability for perpetrators. Against this backdrop, the following ways forward focus on treating enforced disappearance as an unresolved human rights violation rather than a closed part of history:

Consolidated Efforts to Archive Evidence

Civil society organizations in Nepal, including the Advocacy Forum of Nepal, have long documented cases of enforced disappearance. The Supreme Court of Nepal has also dealt with these cases through consolidated habeas corpus proceedings, where multiple disappearance cases were heard together. These proceedings, as well as the work of the Detainee Investigation Task Force, confirmed patterns of arrest and denial of custody. At the same time, many families have filed complaints with the transitional justice bodies. Despite this, there has been little progress in investigating cases or establishing criminal responsibility.

Civil society-led archiving can help address this gap by organizing existing information in a more deliberate way. Instead of keeping records only by victim, materials can also be organized into a wiki-style database, which can cluster data points on disappearances grouped by the police or army units involved, detention sites, time periods, command structures etc. Testimonies, affidavits, court findings, and investigation reports can also be read together to show repeated involvement of the same units and officers.

Further, testimonies from survivors and people who later resurfaced can also be highlighted. While they are not legally treated as victims of EDs in Nepal, they can help identify detention sites, units involved, and what happened to others who never returned. Experience from Bangladesh shows that survivor testimonies have been used to point to responsibility, especially the chain of command among soldiers and police officers.

Memorialization of the disappeared

One concrete approach is the creation of a public memorial, such as a permanent statue or installation, that records the names of persons who were subjected to enforced disappearance. Such a memorial would operate not only as a site of remembrance but also as a public record. Inscribing names, dates of arrest, and places of last known custody



makes visible the scale of enforced disappearance and counters narratives that frame these cases as isolated, inevitable, or resolved.

A name-based memorial emphasizes that, despite formal acknowledgment, the fate of many individuals remains unknown and accountability unresolved. This approach is particularly relevant for younger generations, for whom enforced disappearance is rarely encountered outside reports or textbooks. A public, accessible memorial tied to documented cases can situate disappearance within everyday civic space without requiring prior legal knowledge.

Sustained support for families and defenders

Nepal stands out among the countries examined for providing monetary compensation to families of the disappeared. This support has provided necessary economic relief and should not be discounted. However, compensation must not and should never be framed as closure for the families.

Enforced disappearance causes ongoing harm that payment alone cannot resolve, including the absence of truth, criminal accountability, and certainty about the fate of the disappeared. As shown in cases such as Dhakal and Sunuwar, families often remain engaged in legal processes for decades, facing delays, resistance, and partial compliance. Treating compensation as an endpoint risks foreclosing these efforts and shifting attention away from unresolved obligations.

Sustained support must therefore prioritize long-term legal assistance, together with psychosocial and institutional support, to enable families and human rights defenders to pursue accountability over their protracted journey for justice.

Continued legal and policy advocacy on enforced disappearance

The 2024 amendments to Nepal's transitional justice law retain several specific shortcomings for victims of enforced disappearance. The law continues to recognize primarily those who remain missing, leaving many cases of secret detention followed by release outside full legal protection. It does not require cases where disappearance has already been established through court or commission findings to proceed automatically to criminal investigation or prosecution. Compensation and reconciliation remain available without prior determination of responsibility, and there are no enforceable timelines or consequences for prolonged inaction by the commissions. The law also fails to clearly address command or institutional responsibility, limiting accountability to individual acts.

Civil society organizations should continue focused legal and policy advocacy on these points, treating the amended law as provisional rather than final. Advocacy should



press for expanded victim recognition, mandatory investigation and prosecution once state custody is established, limits on compensation-based closure, and safeguards against indefinite delay. Documenting how these gaps affect disappearance cases in practice remains essential to challenging claims of progress and sustaining pressure for accountability.

Country Report: Pakistan

I. Pakistan: Political Context on Human Rights

Following the general elections of February 2024, the political environment in Pakistan has been defined by a coalition government led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), operating amidst persistent allegations of electoral irregularities and the disenfranchisement of the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).¹³⁵ In this context, the state has increasingly utilized legislative instruments to consolidate control and curb civil liberties. Notably, the enactment of the *Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act 2024*¹³⁶ has granted authorities in the federal capital extensive powers to prohibit public gatherings, a move that international observers argue effectively suspends the right to peaceful protest. Furthermore, the 2025 amendments to the *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA)* have expanded the definition of "fake news," granting the government broad discretion to regulate online content and silence dissent under the guise of national security.¹³⁷

Enforced Disappearances and State Accountability

The instances of EDs in Pakistan remains a systemic issue, particularly in the provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Human rights organizations continue to document the detention of activists, students, and journalists by security forces without due process. Institutional mechanisms for accountability appear to be faltering, often characterized by state denialism. A historical precedent for this pattern is the case of Masood Ahmed Janjua, a seminal figure in the missing persons issue. As reported by *The Express Tribune* in 2013 and 2014¹³⁸, the state attempted to close the investigation into his disappearance by claiming, through a statement by a former intelligence official, that he had been killed by Al-Qaeda in South Waziristan. The Supreme Court of Pakistan ultimately rejected this claim due to a complete lack of physical evidence, such as a body or grave, highlighting the state's tendency to attribute disappearances to militant activity to evade responsibility.

Digital Warfare and Disinformation Campaigns

¹³⁵ *Amnesty International*, "Pakistan: Human Rights Crisis," 2024/2025 Reports.

¹³⁶ *Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act, 2024* (Pakistan).

¹³⁷ *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016* (Pakistan).

¹³⁸ *The Express Tribune*. (2013, September 12). *Enforced disappearance: Masood Janjua killed in Waziristan, SC told*.



A disturbing trend observed throughout 2024 and 2025 is the weaponization of digital media and disinformation to delegitimize human rights defenders, a tactic often described by state analysts as "Fifth Generation Warfare." This strategy involves the systematic defamation of activists to conflate civil rights advocacy with terrorism. A primary target of this campaign has been the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) and its leader, Dr. Mahrang Baloch.

According to investigative reports by *The Diplomat* and verification by independent fact-checkers such as AFP, state-aligned actors circulated manipulated media to discredit the Baloch Long March.¹³⁹ In a widely documented instance, a photograph of Dr. Mahrang Baloch taken at the Islamabad Press Club—originally showing her holding a poster of a missing person named Murad Khan—was digitally altered to depict her holding a photograph of Rafiq Bizenjo, a known suicide bomber affiliated with the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). This manipulation was designed to visually equate peaceful activism with militancy.

Furthermore, parallel disinformation campaigns have targeted the financial integrity of the movement. Throughout late 2024, unsubstantiated reports circulated by pro-state media outlets alleged that "suspicious sums" had been traced to Dr. Baloch's accounts by the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), framing her as a "foreign-funded agent." These allegations, which included claims of receipt of funds from hostile foreign intelligence agencies, have not been supported by any public evidence or legal filings, yet serve to construct a pretext for legal action under terror-financing laws.

II. **Pakistan: Notable Cases of EDs and Disinformation**

A. The Baloch Long March (2023–2024)

The state's response to the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC), a women-led movement protesting enforced disappearances, highlights the use of manipulated media and terrorist labeling. Led by figures like Dr. Mahrang Baloch and Sammi Deen Baloch, families of the disappeared, marched to Islamabad to demand the return of their loved ones.

Verified Reports

The Baloch Long March was precipitated by the extrajudicial killing of Balaach Mola Bakhsh in November 2023. According to verified reports by *Al Jazeera* and *The Diplomat*, Bakhsh was detained by the Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) on October 29, 2023, and presented in court on November 21, only to be killed two days later in what authorities termed a "militant encounter." His family and legal counsel maintain he was killed in

¹³⁹ Soch Fact Check & Agence France-Presse (AFP). (2024). *Digital verification reports on manipulated media*.



custody. In response, the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) initiated a march from Turbat on December 6, 2023, traversing over 1,600 kilometers to Islamabad. Upon their arrival at the capital's entry points on December 20, 2023, the Islamabad Capital Territory Police deployed excessive force, utilizing water cannons and tear gas against peaceful demonstrators. *Amnesty International* documented the mass arrest of over 200 participants, including women, children, and elderly individuals. The subsequent sit-in outside the National Press Club continued into January 2024, characterized by the state's refusal to engage in substantive dialogue regarding the core demand: the criminalization of enforced disappearances.

Legal Developments

The legal trajectory of the Baloch Long March was precipitated by a breakdown in the rule of law regarding the extrajudicial killing of Balaach Mola Bakhsh in November 2023. Bakhsh was killed while in the custody of the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) in Turbat, Balochistan. Following his death, a local sessions court ordered the police to register a First Information Report (FIR) against the CTD officials involved. However, the police initially defied this court order, illustrating the impunity enjoyed by security agencies. It required subsequent intervention from the High Court to finally compel the registration of the FIR, a procedural delay that fueled the initial mobilization of the march toward Islamabad.

Upon the march's arrival in Islamabad in December 2023, the state utilized the Maintenance of Public Order (MPO) ordinance to justify the mass detention of over 290 protesters, including women and children. The Islamabad Police attempted to forcibly "deport" these citizens back to Balochistan, treating them as foreign nationals rather than citizens exercising constitutional rights. This provoked the intervention of the Islamabad High Court (IHC), led by Chief Justice Aamer Farooq. The Court questioned the legality of the arrests and the deportation attempts, ordering the release of the detainees and affirming their right to peaceful assembly in the federal capital. Despite these judicial orders, authorities engaged in "revolving door" detentions, where protesters released in one case were immediately re-arrested under fresh charges.

In the aftermath of the Long March, the state moved to codify restrictions on future assemblies through the hasty enactment of the Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Act 2024 in September 2024. This legislation, passed without substantive debate, requires organizers to seek permission from the District Magistrate seven days in advance of any gathering. It grants the government broad powers to designate "Red Zones" where no assembly is permitted and increases prison sentences for "unlawful assembly" from six months to up to ten years for repeat offenders. Human rights monitors, including Amnesty International, view this Act as a direct legislative response to the Long March, designed to provide a legal framework for banning similar spontaneous grassroots movements in the future.

As of late 2025, the legal harassment of the march's leadership has intensified. Key figures such as Dr. Mahrang Baloch and Sammi Deen Baloch have been placed on the Exit Control List (ECL) and the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act, effectively subjecting them to heavy surveillance and travel bans. In March 2025, following new sit-ins in Quetta and Karachi, authorities registered fresh cases against the leadership under anti-terrorism laws, marking a shift from managing protests to criminalizing the leadership structure itself.

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

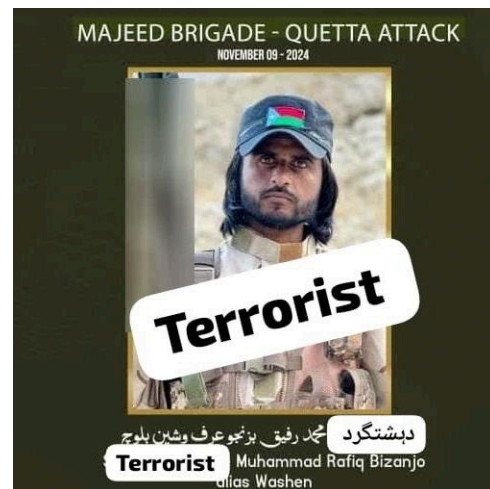


The state-aligned narrative employed against the march utilized specific "Fifth Generation Warfare" tactics to delegitimize the movement. This disinformation can be categorized into three distinct typologies.

First is *Identity Conflation*, where civil rights activists are visually and narratively equated with armed militants. A primary example, verified by *AFP Fact Check*, involved a doctored image of Dr. Mahrang Baloch in which her poster of a missing person was digitally replaced with the face of a known suicide bomber, aiming to frame the movement as a front for terrorism.¹⁴⁰

Second is *Financial Delegitimization*, characterized by fabricated reports of "suspicious wealth." Pro-state media circulated false claims that the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) had traced illegal foreign funds to the organizers, though no evidence was ever presented in court.

Third is *Gendered Character Assassination*, which specifically targeted the women leaders of the march. Social media campaigns scrutinized their attire and possession of technology (such as iPads) to portray them as disconnected "elites" funded by Western agencies, attempting to sever their emotional connection with the working-class populace they represent.



¹⁴⁰ Defence Index [@Defence_Index]. (2024, November 8). [Image attached to post]. X. https://x.com/Defence_Index/status/1855541554322031044/photo/1

Table 8. Timeline of Disinformation - Baloch Long March (Pakistan)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
Dec 2023 – Jan 2024	Pro-state social media networks; “Fifth Generation Warfare” accounts	Non-state (state-aligned digital networks)	Secondary – fabricates and circulates manipulated visuals to intensify criminal framing	Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared; Victim-blaming and moral justification (visual fabrication)	Conflates peaceful civil rights advocacy with militancy to justify repression	Doctored image of Dr. Mahrang Baloch at Islamabad Press Club replacing a missing person’s poster with the face of a suicide bomber; debunked by <i>The Diplomat</i> and AFP Fact Check



<p>Dec 2023 – ongoing</p>	<p>Caretaker PM Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar; Geo News; social media influencers</p>	<p>State; Non-state (media/influencers)</p>	<p>Primary (state) / Secondary (media) – introduces and amplifies foreign-funding narrative</p>	<p>Delegitimization of families and human rights actors (bad-faith and proxy framing)</p>	<p>Undermines the grassroots legitimacy of the movement by portraying it as foreign-directed</p>	<p>Claims that FBR traced “suspicious sums” to leaders; circulation of deepfake audio alleging a demand for “20 crore” to organize protests</p>
<p>Nov 2023 – Feb 2024</p>	<p>Anonymous social media trolls; state-aligned digital networks</p>	<p>Non-state (state-aligned)</p>	<p>Secondary – moralizes and personalizes attacks through gendered stigma</p>	<p>Victim-blaming and moral justification; Delegitimization of families and human rights actors</p>	<p>Erodes trust between leadership and working-class supporters by portraying leaders as elite and detached</p>	<p>Viral posts scrutinizing Dr. Baloch’s iPad and travel, falsely claiming luxury purchases with foreign funds</p>



Jan 2024	Snow News HD; social media platforms	Non-state (media)	Secondary fabricates associative links escalate criminal framing	- to	Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared (false linkage)	Creates pretext for applying anti-terrorism laws to peaceful organizers	Manipulated audio alleging contact with Brahamdagh Bugti; claims that walkie-talkies used at events were military-grade devices
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B. Masood Ahmed Janjua

Verified Reports

The enforced disappearance of Masood Ahmed Janjua serves as the foundational case for the missing persons movement in Pakistan. On July 30, 2005, Janjua, a businessman and educator from Rawalpindi, was traveling on a bus to Peshawar accompanied by his friend, Faisal Faraz, an engineer from Lahore. Both men vanished during this journey. Credible witness testimony emerged later from Dr. Imran Munir, a medical doctor who had been detained and subsequently released. Dr. Munir testified under oath that he had seen and interacted with Masood Janjua in a secret detention facility operated by state intelligence agencies, confirming that Janjua was alive in custody well after his initial disappearance. Despite this direct eyewitness account, the state has consistently denied holding him.

Legal Developments

The legal trajectory of this case is defined by the activism of Amina Masood Janjua, who established the *Defence of Human Rights (DHR)* organization in response to her husband's abduction. In October 2006, the Supreme Court of Pakistan took suo moto notice of the case. The litigation reached a critical juncture in 2013 when the state attempted to legally terminate the inquiry. During proceedings before a bench led by Justice Jawwad S. Khawaja, the Additional Attorney General, representing the state, submitted a statement from Maj-Gen (ret'd) Nusrat Naeem. This statement alleged that Janjua had been killed in South Waziristan by Al-Qaeda operatives. The court, however, rejected this claim. The judges noted the complete absence of physical evidence—specifically the lack of a body or a grave—and viewed the statement as an attempt by the state to absolve itself of responsibility without providing verifiable proof of death.

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

The state's management of the Masood Ahmed Janjua case has evolved through four distinct phases of disinformation designed to evade accountability. Initially, from 2005 to 2007, the primary tactic was *Denial and Obfuscation*, where intelligence agencies refused to acknowledge custody, directly contradicting sworn testimony from witnesses who observed Janjua in secret detention. This strategy shifted in 2013 to *Fabricated Closure*, as the state attempted to legally terminate Supreme Court proceedings by falsely attributing his death to Al-Qaeda militants without providing physical evidence such as a body.

Concurrent with these legal maneuvers, a narrative of *Vilification* was deployed to frame Janjua as a "double agent" or national security threat, aiming to diminish public sympathy. In the current phase, the state utilizes *Administrative Erasure*, effectively burying



the investigation within the powerless Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED) to prevent judicial oversight and maintain indefinite impunity.



Table 9. Timeline of Disinformation - Masood Ahmed Janjua (Pakistan)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
July 2005 – 2007	Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI); Federal Interior Ministry; police	State	Primary – denies custody and blocks case registration	Denial of state involvement through custodial denial and administrative refusal	Prevents FIR registration, removes the case from judicial scrutiny, and sustains legality façade	Police refusal to register FIR; later contradicted by sworn testimony of released detainee Dr. Imran Munir placing Janjua in secret detention
Sept 2013 – 2014	Office of the Additional Attorney General; Maj-Gen (retd) Nusrat Naeem	State	Secondary – fabricates closure through court submissions	Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance (false attribution of death)	Terminates Supreme Court inquiry by shifting blame to non-state actors	Submission claiming Janjua was killed by Al-Qaeda in South Waziristan; rejected by Supreme Court due to absence



						of body or grave
2013 – ongoing	Unverified intelligence “leaks”; defense analysts; media commentators	State; Non-state (media/analysts)	Secondary – amplifies stigmatizing security narratives	Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared	Undermines public sympathy and justifies suspension of due process	Circulation of “double agent” claims (CIA / Al-Qaeda); narratives referenced in state pleadings without material evidence
2018 – present	Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED); state bureaucracy	State	Secondary – freezes accountability through administrative transfer	Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance (procedural erasure)	Removes the case from effective judicial oversight and delays resolution indefinitely	Case transferred from Supreme Court to COIED; remains unresolved, noted by UN WGEID as a delaying tactic



III. **Pakistan: A Conversation with a Direct Family of the Victim**

The respondent, Aisha, is the daughter of Masood Ahmed Janjua himself, and was interviewed as the representative of DHR. She described enforced disappearances in Pakistan not as a relic of the past but as a "continuous crime" that remains active and pervasive. While the official Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has registered approximately 10,000 cases, DHR contends that this figure significantly underrepresents the actual magnitude of the crisis, which has impacted thousands of families across the country. The practice is reportedly most acute in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and Balochistan, regions bordering Afghanistan and Iran, respectively, where the state justifies these actions under the guise of counter-terrorism and national security operations.

A. State-Sponsored Disinformation and False Narratives

The interview highlights a systematic campaign of disinformation orchestrated by state authorities to delegitimize victims and their advocates. A prevalent narrative employed by the state involves the "identity conflation" of missing persons with terrorists; authorities frequently allege, without judicial proof, that the disappeared have voluntarily crossed borders to join insurgent groups in Afghanistan or are affiliated with banned organizations such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). This narrative is disseminated through both online and offline channels. Online, state-aligned social media accounts and well-funded "vloggers" circulate content—often on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube—that brands victims as "anti-state" or ethnically biased against Punjabis. Offline, these narratives are reinforced in legal settings, where state representatives routinely inform courts that the missing individual "must have done something" to warrant their detention, thereby engaging in victim-blaming to deflect accountability.

B. Institutional Complicity and Impunity

DHR stands that there was significant institutional complicity in the perpetuation of these abuses. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, mandated to investigate these crimes, is described as being "hand-in-glove" with perpetrators, providing cover for state agencies rather than delivering justice. During hearings, families are reportedly harassed and interrogated about their loved ones' private data, such as laptop contents, rather than being provided with information on their whereabouts. A definitive example of institutional obfuscation is the case of Janjua.

C. Gendered Dimensions and Social Stigma



According to Aisha, the impact of enforced disappearances in Pakistan is deeply gendered. While the direct victims are predominantly male, the burden of seeking justice falls disproportionately on female relatives, who face severe social and institutional misogyny, as with the case with her mother and herself. Women advocating for their disappeared relatives are subjected to character assassination and labeled as "foreign agents" or "Western allies" to undermine their credibility. The respondent noted instances where judicial officials made derogatory remarks regarding the appearance of female petitioners, further illustrating the lack of gender sensitivity within state institutions. Furthermore, families face profound social ostracization; the labeling of a missing relative as a "terrorist" creates a stigma that persists even if the individual is eventually released or acquitted.

D. Civil Society Response and Advocacy Strategies

In response to these challenges, civil society organizations have adopted multi-faceted advocacy strategies. DHR employs rigorous documentation protocols to fact-check the backgrounds of victims and debunk state narratives linking them to militancy. The movement has also shifted towards "art and activism," utilizing documentaries and short films to humanize victims and counter the depersonalized political narratives imposed by the state. Despite facing surveillance, placement on "no-fly lists," and threats of physical harm, human rights defenders continue to mobilize, viewing their struggle as part of a broader regional effort across Asia to end the practice of enforced disappearances.

IV. Pakistan: Summary of Key Findings

A. Prevalent Disinformation Narratives and State Tactics

The primary finding in Pakistan is the systematic use of the "terrorist" and "anti-state" labels to justify enforced disappearances and legitimize state violence. Victims from specific ethnic regions are routinely framed through insurgency narratives: individuals from Balochistan are labeled as supporters of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), while those from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) are branded as supporters of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This "Crisis Management Model" of disinformation relies on dehumanization to strip victims of public sympathy, often asserting that missing persons have voluntarily fled to Afghanistan for "Jihad" or were killed in combat operations. Furthermore, the state employs "blasphemy allegations"—a charge that carries a potential death sentence and incites vigilante violence—to silence secular activists and bloggers, as seen in the 2017 coordinated smear campaign against five activists including Salman Haider and Ahmad Waqass Goraya.

Institutionalization of Denial and Impunity State institutions actively facilitate disinformation and denial. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED) is widely characterized by human rights groups and the UN as a "mechanism for denial"



that disposes of cases by claiming they do not fit the definition of enforced disappearance, effectively whitewashing state involvement. While the Islamabad High Court has criticized enforced disappearances as an "undeclared tacit policy of the state," the judiciary struggles to enforce accountability against the powerful military and intelligence apparatus. Rather than criminalizing the practice, the state has introduced legislation, such as the Anti-Terrorism (Balochistan Amendment) Act of 2025, which provides "legal cover" for arbitrary detentions, allowing security forces to hold individuals for months without charge.

B. Geopolitical Weaponization

A unique finding in the Pakistan context is the existence of a massive, 15-year foreign disinformation operation known as the "Indian Chronicles," orchestrated by the New Delhi-based Srivastava Group. This operation weaponized the real issue of human rights abuses in Pakistan to achieve Indian geopolitical goals, such as isolating Pakistan diplomatically at the UN and EU. The network resurrected defunct UN-accredited "zombie NGOs" and created over 750 fake media outlets to "launder" anti-Pakistan propaganda through the Indian news agency ANI, creating an echo chamber that validated these narratives for international policymakers. This dynamic results in victims and human rights defenders becoming "collateral" damage in a larger information war between India and Pakistan.

C. Digital Manipulation and Gendered Disinformation

The state utilizes a sophisticated digital apparatus, including the military's media wing (ISPR) and paid social media influencers, to propagate narratives of national defense and discredit dissent. In the case of the Baloch Long March (2023–2024), pro-state accounts circulated photoshopped images of protest leader Dr. Mahrang Baloch to falsely depict her holding a photo of a suicide bomber. Disinformation in Pakistan also exhibits a strong gendered dimension; female family members of the disappeared are targeted with sexualized slander to deter their advocacy, and officials have been documented making derogatory remarks to wives of the disappeared, such as questioning why they seek their husbands' return if they are "beautiful enough to remarry".

D. Impact on Victims and Counter-Strategies

The impact of these campaigns is "permanent stigma" and social isolation for families; even when victims are released, they often face re-victimization through fake charges (e.g., terror financing) and placement on surveillance watch lists (Fourth Schedule). To counter these narratives, organizations like the Defence of Human Rights (DHR) employ strict documentation to factually refute terrorist labels (e.g., proving a victim is an IT engineer, not a militant) and are increasingly turning to art and documentary film to humanize victims and bypass political polarization.



V. **Pakistan: Ways Forward**

A. **Strategic Narrative Shift: Adopting a Humanitarian Framework**

To effectively counter state-sponsored security narratives that routinely conflate victims of enforced disappearance with insurgents or terrorists, it is recommended that civil society organizations transition from a purely political discourse to a humanitarian framework. This approach prioritizes the fundamental rights of the family and the violation of due process, thereby circumventing polarized debates regarding national security and "anti-state" activities. Furthermore, advocacy efforts should focus on displacing the dehumanizing "terrorist" label by disseminating the "human story" of the victims—emphasizing their roles as sons, fathers, and husbands—to generate empathy that transcends the deep-seated ethnic and political divides currently exploited by state actors.

B. **Operational Tactics: Professionalization of Documentation and Verification**

In response to the "Crisis Management Model" utilized by the state to deny accountability, human rights defenders must professionalize data collection and verification protocols. It is essential to implement strict documentation measures that verify a victim's professional, religious, and political background immediately following their abduction. Such pre-emptive verification enables advocates to factually and instantly refute state disinformation—for example, by proving a victim is a civilian professional rather than a militant—thereby preventing false narratives from taking root in the public consciousness.

C. **Creative Advocacy: Leveraging Art and Mitigating Gendered Disinformation**

Recognizing the limitations of traditional reporting in penetrating public consciousness, it is advised that advocacy strategies integrate "art and activism," utilizing mediums such as documentaries and short films to visualize the grief and resilience of affected families. This visual evidence is critical for emotional engagement and is more resilient against debunking attempts than text-based reports. Additionally, specific campaigns must be developed to address gendered disinformation, as female relatives of the disappeared are frequently targeted with sexualized slander and character assassination intended to deter their activism. Validating their trauma and protecting their reputations are necessary steps to shift the narrative focus away from their private lives and back to the state's legal obligations.

D. **Navigating Geopolitical Disinformation**

Civil society organizations operating in the region face the complex challenge of navigating a geopolitical information war, where the issue of enforced disappearances is often weaponized by external state actors for political gain. Activists often find themselves



treated as "collateral damage" in these cross-border narrative conflicts. Consequently, it is imperative for human rights defenders to act as honest brokers, exposing these geopolitical machinations while maintaining a steadfast focus on the domestic humanitarian crisis. This involves distinguishing genuine grassroots advocacy from state-appropriated narratives to ensure that the plight of victims is not overshadowed by regional power dynamics.

E. Institutional Engagement and Litigation

Despite systemic deficiencies and a prevailing lack of trust in mechanisms such as the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances (COIED), which has been criticized for providing cover to perpetrators, total disengagement is not a viable strategy. A strategy of "persistent pursuit" regarding dialogue with government agencies is recommended to push for critical policy reforms, including the criminalization of enforced disappearance. Furthermore, continued litigation remains essential to compel the state to submit official responses in court. This legal pressure allows advocates to expose contradictions in state narratives—such as proving that individuals declared "dead" or "abroad" are, in fact, in state custody—thereby challenging the culture of impunity through judicial records.

Country Report: Indonesia

I. Indonesia: Political Context On Human Rights

As of December 2025, the political context regarding human rights and enforced disappearances in Indonesia is defined by a significant paradox: the executive branch is currently led by President Prabowo Subianto, inaugurated in October 2024, whose historical association with past human rights violations presents a complex challenge to transitional justice mechanisms. The current period is characterized by the entrenchment of institutional impunity, a deteriorating security situation in West Papua involving allegations of systemic violence, and a resurgence of "short-term" enforced disappearances during recent periods of civil unrest.

A. Political Context and Institutional Impunity

The central tension within the Indonesian human rights landscape involves the executive leadership and its implications for judicial accountability. President Prabowo Subianto, a former general and commander of the Special Forces (Kopassus), was discharged from military service in 1998 following the findings regarding the "Rose Team" (Tim Mawar), a unit under his command responsible for the abduction and enforced disappearance of student activists. To date, 13 of these activists remain missing¹⁴¹.

Civil society organizations, including KontraS and Amnesty International Indonesia, have expressed concern that his presidency represents a consolidation of impunity, noting a distinct lack of political will to pursue judicial accountability for gross human rights violations when the head of state is implicated in such cases¹⁴². Consequently, the administration has shifted its focus toward non-judicial resolutions, such as reparations without trials, a strategy that victims' families have rejected as an attempt to obscure historical truths and evade legal responsibility¹⁴³.

B. Situation in West Papua

While historical cases from 1998 remain unresolved, West Papua has emerged as the contemporary epicenter for enforced disappearances and related violations. The region

¹⁴¹ Amnesty International Indonesia. (2024). The 1998 disappearances: A legacy of impunity. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.id/>

¹⁴² Human Rights Watch. (2025). Indonesia: Presidency of Prabowo Subianto raises rights concerns.8 Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/asia/indonesia>

¹⁴³Source AFAD?



remains subject to heavy militarization, justified by state security forces as necessary counter-insurgency operations against armed separatist groups (TPNPB-OPM). In 2025, United Nations experts and human rights monitors raised alarms regarding the escalation of violence, with some observers characterizing the situation as a "slow-phased extermination" of indigenous Papuans¹⁴⁴.

Military operations in highland areas, specifically Nduga and Intan Jaya, have frequently resulted in the displacement of villagers into forests, where many reportedly disappear or succumb to starvation and lack of medical access. Furthermore, the stigmatization of Indigenous Papuans through labels such as "terrorists" or "separatists" continues to legitimize arbitrary detention and disappearance by security forces. Reports from late 2025 indicate the utilization of drone strikes and sniper attacks against civilians in Yahukimo and Puncak, though casualty verification remains challenged by the ongoing media blackout in the region¹⁴⁵.

C. Civil Unrest and Short-Term Disappearances

A significant regression in civil liberties was observed between August and September 2025, triggered by the "Emergency Warning" (*Peringatan Darurat*) protests against legislative attempts to alter regional election laws. During this period, security forces employed the tactic of "short-term enforced disappearance." This practice involved the arrest and incommunicado detention of protesters for several days without notification to families or legal counsel, often accompanied by the transfer of detainees between police stations to evade detection.

Data provided by the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS) indicates that dozens of protesters went missing during the August 2025 crackdown. While the majority were eventually located within detention facilities, a minority of cases, particularly in Central Java, remained unaccounted for weeks following the cessation of protests¹⁴⁶. This crackdown was further exacerbated by the application of the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law, which continues to be utilized to criminalize online dissent and suppress reporting on these violations.

D. Institutional Mechanisms and International Commitments

¹⁴⁴United Nations Human Rights Council. (2025). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples: Situation in West Papua. United Nations.

¹⁴⁵ International Coalition for Papua. (2025). Human rights situation in West Papua: 2025 consolidated report. ICP.

¹⁴⁶ Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS). (2025). Democracy in decline: The August 2025 crackdown and short-term disappearances. KontraS.



Despite signing the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (ICPPED) in 2010, the Government of Indonesia has not ratified the convention as of late 2025. The House of Representatives (DPR) continues to delay ratification, perpetuating a legal void wherein enforced disappearance is not explicitly criminalized as a distinct offense within the national penal code¹⁴⁷. Additionally, while the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) has formally declared several past events—including the 1965-66 mass killings, the 1989 Talangsari incident, and the 1998 riots—as gross human rights violations, the Attorney General's Office (AGO) has consistently declined to proceed with prosecution, citing administrative technicalities as the primary impediment¹⁴⁸.

E. Civil Society Response

Despite a restrictive political environment, civil society actors maintain a robust posture of resistance. A primary symbol of this resilience is the *Aksi Kamisan* (Thursday Action), a silent protest held weekly outside the Presidential Palace by victims and their families, including Maria Sumarsih. As of 2025, this demonstration has continued for over 18 years, approaching its 900th iteration. The *Kamisan* serves as a persistent reminder of the state's unfulfilled obligations regarding the 13 activists missing since 1998 and the assassination of human rights defender Munir Said Thalib in 2004, countering narratives of historical amnesia¹⁴⁹.

II. Indonesia: Notable Cases of EDs and Disinformation

A. The "Emergency Warning" Protests (August 2024)

Verified Reports

In late August 2024, widespread civil demonstrations, known as the "Emergency Warning" (*Peringatan Darurat*) protests, occurred across Indonesia in response to legislative attempts to alter regional election laws. Monitors from the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS) and Amnesty International Indonesia documented a systematic pattern of excessive force by security personnel. Verified video evidence and eyewitness testimonies indicate that law enforcement officials utilized tear gas grenades—including variants prohibited for crowd control in other jurisdictions due to

¹⁴⁷ United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. (2025). Country report: Indonesia. United Nations.

¹⁴⁸ National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM). (2025). Annual report on gross human rights violations and judicial stagnation. Komnas HAM.

¹⁴⁹ The Jakarta Post. (2025, December 10). Aksi Kamisan continues: 18 years of standing for justice. The Jakarta Post.



their explosive charge (GLI-F4)—and high-pressure water cannons against peaceful assemblies at close range¹⁵⁰.

A critical concern during this period was the deployment of "short-term enforced disappearances" as a crowd control tactic. Legal aid organizations, including the Legal Aid Institute for the Press (LBH Pers), reported that security forces detained protesters incommunicado for periods ranging from 24 to 72 hours. During this interval, detainees were frequently denied access to legal counsel and their families were not notified of their whereabouts¹⁵¹. In several documented instances in Jakarta and Central Java, detainees were transferred between multiple police precincts to evade detection by legal aid teams, a practice that constitutes a violation of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (ICPPED), to which Indonesia is a signatory.

Field reports confirmed the arbitrary arrest of minors and non-participating bystanders. Data aggregated by civil society coalitions indicates that of the hundreds arrested during the peak of the crackdown (August 22–27), a significant proportion were under the age of 18. Furthermore, security operations frequently extended beyond protest zones into residential areas and commercial centers (malls), where officers conducted "sweeping" operations, resulting in the indiscriminate apprehension of civilians not involved in the demonstrations¹⁵².

Legal Developments

The unrest was precipitated by a constitutional crisis wherein the House of Representatives (DPR) attempted to ratify a revision to the Regional Election Law (Pilkada) that would have effectively annulled two binding rulings by the Constitutional Court (MK). These rulings¹⁵³ lowered the threshold for political party nominations and upheld minimum age requirements for candidates, thereby barring certain high-profile political figures from running. The legislative attempt to override these judicial decisions was widely interpreted

¹⁵⁰ Amnesty International Indonesia. (2025). *Police beat protesters and unlawfully used tear gas to crush protests – new investigation*. Amnesty International.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/12/indonesia-police-beat-protesters-and-unlawfully-used-tear-gas-to-crush-protests-new-investigation/>

¹⁵¹ Asian News Network. (2025, December 11). Indonesian police accused of using 'excessive force' in August protests. Asian News Network.
<https://asianews.network/indonesian-police-accused-of-using-excessive-force-in-august-protests/>

¹⁵² KontraS. (2025). Democracy in decline: The August 2025 crackdown and short-term disappearances. Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence.

¹⁵³ Decisions No. 60/PUU-XXII/2024 and No. 70/PUU-XXII/2024



by legal scholars and the public as a violation of the rule of law and an encroachment on judicial independence¹⁵⁴.

Following the protests, authorities leveraged the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law and the Criminal Code (KUHP) to prosecute activists. Charges such as "incitement" and "defamation" were filed against individuals who organized the protests online or distributed the "Emergency Warning" digital imagery. This trend reflects a broader contraction of civic space, where digital expression is increasingly subject to criminal liability under vague legal provisions¹⁵⁵.

As a direct result of the sustained public pressure and mass mobilization, the DPR officially cancelled the ratification of the Regional Election Law revision on August 22, 2024. Consequently, the 2024 Regional Elections proceeded under the legal framework established by the Constitutional Court's rulings. However, no independent inquiry has been established to investigate the allegations of police misconduct during the suppression of the protests.

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

The digital information operations targeting the Peringatan Darurat protests evolved through three strategic phases, transitioning from passive suppression to active delegitimization and targeted intimidation.

In the pre-escalation phase, state-aligned cyber-troops ("buzzers") and anonymous accounts attempted to dilute the visibility of the "Blue Garuda" resistance symbol. This was achieved through algorithmic flooding, where high volumes of irrelevant entertainment content were deployed to prevent protest hashtags from trending, thereby obscuring the initial public warning regarding the legislative attempt to override the Constitutional Court.

During the peak of mobilization, the strategy shifted toward eroding the movement's credibility. Pro-government influencers and proxy accounts propagated conspiracy theories alleging that the protests were orchestrated and funded by foreign intelligence agencies (e.g., the CIA). These narratives aimed to frame the constitutional defense as an external "Color Revolution," aiming to isolate protesters from the general public by invoking nationalist sentiments and characterizing demonstrators as "paid rioters."

¹⁵⁴ International IDEA. (2024). Indonesia - August 2024: Protests and criticism force government to backtrack on election law. The Global State of Democracy Indices. <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/indonesia/august-2024>

¹⁵⁵ Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet). (2024). Digital Rights Situation Report 2024. SAFEnet.



Following the cessation of physical protests, tactics escalated to direct digital repression. Law enforcement cyber units and partisan media engaged in the doxing of protest organizers and the dissemination of decontextualized video footage. These materials were manipulated to portray security forces as acting in self-defense, effectively rewriting the chronology of events to justify excessive force and create a "chilling effect" to deter future dissent.

Table 10. Timeline of Disinformation - "Emergency Warning" Protests (Indonesia)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
Pre-escalation (20-21 Aug 2024)	State-aligned "buzzers"; anonymous social media accounts (TikTok, X)	Non-state (state-aligned digital networks)	Secondary suppresses visibility through coordinated distraction	Denial of state involvement through administrative refusal and procedural erasure	Suppress early warning signals and sustain a façade of normalcy during institutional maneuvering	Hashtag flooding with entertainment content ("Gemoy"); SAFEnet monitoring showing bot-like spikes promoting "peaceful election" narratives during DPR Baleg meeting
Pre-escalation (20-21 Aug 2024)	Coordinated cyber-troops	Non-state (state-aligned)	Secondary - limits circulation of alert symbols	Denial of state involvement through administrative refusal and procedural erasure	Prevent the "Emergency Warning" (Blue Garuda) symbol from trending	Platform activity patterns indicating algorithmic suppression concurrent with



						legislative proceedings	
Peak mobilization (22-24 Aug 2024)	Pro-government influencers; local proxy accounts	Non-state (political influencers)	Secondary reframes protest legitimacy	-	Delegitimization of families and human rights actors	Portray protests as externally orchestrated rather than constitutionally grounded	Claims framing demonstrations as a foreign-backed "Color Revolution"; Tempo CekFakta debunking foreign-link allegations
Peak mobilization (22-24 Aug 2024)	Pro-government influencers; partisan commentators	Non-state (political influencers)	Secondary escalates security framing	-	Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared	Cast protesters as security threats to justify repression	Labeling protesters as "anti-nationalist" or "paid rioters"; coordinated posting across platforms
Post-protest (25-31 Aug 2024)	Law enforcement cyber units	State	Secondary - intimidates and deters dissent	-	Victim-blaming and moral justification	Create a chilling effect on future mobilization	LBH Pers reports documenting threats and doxing of



						activists via WhatsApp
Post-protest (25-31 Aug 2024)	Hyper-partisan media channels	Non-state (media)	Secondary - revises event chronology	Victim-blaming and moral justification	Legitimize security force actions and obscure excessive force	Amnesty International verification showing viral "riot" videos edited to remove prior police aggression



B. West Papua (Ongoing Conflict)

Verified Reports

The security landscape in the provinces of Papua, Highland Papua (Papua Pegunungan), and Central Papua (Papua Tengah) has undergone a marked deterioration throughout late 2024 and 2025. The Office has received credible allegations indicating a resurgence of indiscriminate military operations, locally referred to as "sweeping" campaigns, conducted by the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) in response to attacks by the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB). These operations, particularly in the regencies of Nduga, Intan Jaya, and Puncak, have reportedly resulted in the destruction of civilian infrastructure, including churches and health facilities, which are protected under international humanitarian law¹⁵⁶.

A critical humanitarian consequence of this intensification is the protracted displacement of indigenous civilians. Estimates from local humanitarian monitors suggest that thousands of villagers remain displaced in forest areas, inaccessible to aid agencies due to strictly enforced security cordons. These Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) face acute food insecurity and a lack of medical access, leading to preventable deaths among vulnerable groups, specifically children and the elderly. The obstruction of humanitarian access remains a primary violation, with international organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), facing significant bureaucratic and security impediments to operating in the highland conflict zones¹⁵⁷. Furthermore, reports of extrajudicial killings and torture of civilians suspected of supporting separatist movements continue to emerge, though verification is severely hampered by the ongoing internet throttling and the restricted access granted to independent journalists and UN mechanisms¹⁵⁸.

Legal Developments

The judicial framework governing the region continues to be characterized by the securitization of civil administration and the misapplication of counter-terrorism legislation. The continued classification of armed separatist groups as "terrorist organizations" allows state authorities to invoke Law No. 5 of 2018 on Counter-Terrorism. This legal mechanism permits extended pre-trial detention periods of up to 21 days without formal

¹⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch. (2025). World Report 2025: Events of 2024. Seven Stories Press.

¹⁵⁷ International Coalition for Papua. (2025). Human rights in West Papua: The cost of the security approach. ICP. <https://www.humanrightspapua.org>

¹⁵⁸ United Nations Human Rights Council. (2025). Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. United Nations.



charges—significantly longer than the standard criminal code allows—and facilitates the involvement of the military in domestic law enforcement, thereby bypassing standard due process protections afforded to civilians¹⁵⁹.

Concurrently, the implementation of the revised Special Autonomy Law (Law No. 2 of 2021) has facilitated the creation of new administrative provinces (New Autonomous Regions or DOB). While ostensibly designed to accelerate development, legal analysts and indigenous rights groups argue that this fragmentation has served as a pretext for the establishment of new military commands (Kodim) and police precincts in previously demilitarized areas, effectively entrenching the security approach. Furthermore, judicial mechanisms for addressing past and present gross human rights violations remain stalled. The Human Rights Court has failed to prosecute any new cases regarding the conflict in 2025, and the Attorney General's Office has not initiated investigations into the reported drone strikes and sniper attacks in Yahukimo, signaling a persistent culture of impunity within the judicial system¹⁶⁰.

Disinformation Pathways and Typologies

The information operations surrounding the conflict in West Papua during 2025 demonstrated a strategic evolution, shifting from the obfuscation of military activities to the targeted criminalization of dissent and the systematic denial of humanitarian crises.

During periods of intensified military operations in the highland regencies, state-affiliated actors employed "information flooding" tactics. By saturating social media platforms with generic, positive content and irrelevant hashtags, these actors successfully manipulated algorithms to drown out real-time reporting on military raids and civilian displacement. This effectively reduced the visibility of alleged human rights violations during critical operational windows.

Eventually, as civil unrest and protests increased, the strategy transitioned toward the delegitimization of indigenous actors. Pro-government influencers and nationalist media outlets systematically labeled student activists and human rights defenders as "separatist terrorists" or affiliates of armed groups. This narrative was reinforced through the circulation of manipulated media (doctored images), aiming to erode public empathy and provide a pretext for arbitrary detention and the excessive use of force by security services.

¹⁵⁹ Amnesty International Indonesia. (2024). Civil and political rights in the Papuan provinces: A legal analysis. Amnesty International.

¹⁶⁰ Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC). (2025). The impact of new autonomous regions on conflict dynamics in Papua. IPAC.



In response to heightened international scrutiny, particularly from UN mechanisms, disinformation efforts focused on "whitewashing" the humanitarian situation. State-sponsored portals and proxy accounts aggressively promoted narratives denying the existence of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and characterizing reports of famine as foreign propaganda. This strategy utilized "development propaganda"—highlighting infrastructure projects—to deflect diplomatic criticism and obscure the severity of the humanitarian crisis on the ground.

Table 11. Timeline of Disinformation - West Papua (Indonesia)

Timeline	Key actors / sources	Actor type	Role in disinformation	Disinformation typology	Intended effect	Evidence
Intensified “sweeping” operations in Nduga, Intan Jaya, and Puncak (Late 2024–Early 2025)	State-affiliated digital actors	Non-state (state-aligned networks)	Secondary – amplification during active military operations	Denial of state involvement – administrative erasure through information flooding	Reduce visibility of military raids, civilian displacement, and infrastructure destruction during operational periods	Verified Reports describing coordinated “information flooding” using generic positive content and unrelated hashtags during highland operations
Protracted displacement and famine reporting (2025)	State-sponsored portals; proxy accounts	State; Non-state (state-aligned media infrastructure)	Primary – narrative denial of humanitarian crisis	Denial of state involvement – denial of humanitarian harm	Deny existence of IDPs; characterize famine reports as hoaxes or foreign political propaganda; shift responsibility away from security forces	Verified Reports noting aggressive promotion of narratives denying IDPs and framing famine as propaganda



Civil unrest and student protests (2025)	Pro-government influencers; nationalist media outlets	Non-state (politically aligned actors)	Secondary targeted - delegitimization of indigenous activists	Criminalization of the victim - terrorism and separatist labeling	Legitimize arbitrary arrests and excessive force by framing student activists and defenders as "separatist terrorists" (KKB) or armed affiliates	Verified Reports documenting systematic labeling of activists as separatist terrorists
Online smear campaigns during protest visibility (2025)	Same actors as above	Non-state (politically aligned actors)	Secondary reputational attack via manipulated content	Victim-blaming and moral justification	Erode public empathy and portray repression as necessary security enforcement	Verified Reports describing circulation of doctored or decontextualized images alleging armed affiliation
Application of Law No. 5 of 2018 on Counter-Terrorism (2025)	Law enforcement; military authorities	State	Primary - legal reframing of detention	Criminalization - expansive terrorism designation to absorb detention into lawful process	Permit extended pre-trial detention (up to 21 days) and military involvement in civilian law enforcement	Verified Reports detailing invocation of counter-terrorism law in the region



Failure to investigate alleged drone strikes and sniper attacks in Yahukimo (2025)	Attorney General's Office; Human Rights Court	State	Structural normalization through inaction	Judicial and bureaucratic normalization - procedural closure without accountability	Foreclose investigation into alleged extrajudicial killings and torture; entrench impunity	Verified Reports noting absence of new prosecutions and failure to initiate investigations
International scrutiny and humanitarian access concerns (Late 2025)	Government-aligned portals; official communication channels	State; Non-state (state-aligned media)	Primary reputational shielding during international review	Delegitimization of families and human rights actors - credibility erosion	Cast doubt on UN mechanisms and humanitarian agencies; deflect diplomatic criticism	Verified Reports noting denial of access to journalists and UN mechanisms; portrayal of humanitarian reporting as propaganda
Development-focused messaging during scrutiny (2025)	State-sponsored communication platforms	State	Primary reframing conflict context	Denial of state involvement - administrative reframing through development narrative	Counter human rights criticism by emphasizing infrastructure projects; obscure severity of humanitarian crisis	Verified Reports describing promotion of infrastructure achievements to deflect criticism



III. Indonesia: A Conversation with Local Human Rights Defenders

The consultation with representatives from KontraS and IKOHI delineated the historical trajectory of false narratives employed by the Indonesian state to obscure enforced disappearances. In 1965, the prevailing state narrative categorized victims as "Communists" to justify their removal, whereas in the 1980s and 1990s, pro-democracy activists were framed as elements "defying the government" or acting "against the State". During the authoritarian tenure of President Suharto, state-led infrastructure initiatives, referred to as "development aggression," utilized specific rhetoric to suppress dissent; individuals resisting eviction or industrial projects were accused of opposing the state ideology (*Pancasila*), labeled as separatists, or charged with treason. This historical revisionism persists in the contemporary educational sector, where a new history curriculum frames past gross human rights violations not as crimes, but as "Reactions to Development," thereby justifying security force intervention as necessary for national stability.

A. Recent Developments and Short-Term Disappearances

Monitoring bodies reported a resurgence of "short-term enforced disappearances," where protesters were detained incommunicado by security forces, regarding the civil unrest observed in August and September 2024. In response to inquiries regarding missing individuals, police authorities deployed a new narrative characterizing these incidents as mere "miscommunication" or claiming the individuals had "lost contact," effectively denying the element of state custody. While many detained during the Jakarta protests were eventually located in detention, the situation in West Papua remains distinct and severe; reports indicate that victims of disappearance in the region have been found deceased, with bodies discovered in rivers. Additionally, the legacy of the occupation of Timor-Leste (1975–1999) involves complex cultural challenges regarding the "stolen children" taken to Indonesia; reunification efforts are complicated by high costs associated with traditional ceremonies required to culturally "bring back" those previously presumed dead.

B. Mechanisms of Disinformation and "Buzzers"

The interviewees identified the deployment of "buzzers"—paid online trolls—as a primary instrument for state propaganda and denial. Evidence suggests that these operations are financed through the state budget (APBN), although the specific ministerial allocations remain opaque. Alongside direct state funding, a coalition of political parties, including Gerindra, Golkar, and NasDem, utilizes influencers and public figures to sanitize the public image of political leadership. Specifically, disinformation campaigns related to President Prabowo Subianto aim to absolve him of responsibility for the 1998 disappearances by claiming he was merely following orders or falsely asserting that victims



were returned. These disinformation actors frequently utilize reactionary tactics in comment sections to attack victims' families during public advocacy events.

C. Civil Society Strategies and Support Requirements

To address these challenges, KontraS and IKOHI have adopted distinct but complementary roles; KontraS leads on legal advocacy and campaigning, while IKOHI focuses on psychosocial support and economic empowerment for victims' families through cooperatives. Current countermeasures include collaborating with key social media accounts outside the human rights sphere to reach middle-class and younger audiences who lack historical context due to the sanitized education curriculum. To strengthen these efforts, the organizations requested specific support in the form of strategic consultancy for structured anti-disinformation campaigns, the development of comprehensive physical and digital security guidelines, and capacity building for creating impactful content to counter historical amnesia.

IV. Indonesia: Summary of Key Findings

The information environment in Indonesia is currently characterized by historical revisionism concerning state-sponsored violence, the sophisticated utilization of social media for political rebranding, and a media system that remains vulnerable to oligarchic capture despite its relative freedom.

A. Historical Narratives and Transitional Justice

A central finding in the Indonesian context involves the systematic manipulation of historical narratives regarding EDs that occurred between 1965 and 1998, particularly under the Suharto regime. Current President Prabowo Subianto, who was identified by the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) as a perpetrator in the 1997–1998 EDs of pro-democracy activists, has consistently denied involvement in these violations. The dominant narrative promoted by the current administration frames his past actions as those of a "patriotic soldier" acting to save the country. Concurrently, a specific disinformation narrative asserts that activists abducted by subordinates were safely returned and currently support the government. This narrative leverages the fact that nine of the 23 individuals forcibly disappeared were returned alive, while deliberately omitting the status of the 13 individuals who remain missing. During the 2024 presidential campaign, a key disinformation tactic involved the cultivation of the "GEMOY" image, portraying the candidate as harmless and humorous. This strategy, disseminated primarily on TikTok, was designed to render allegations of past human rights abuses irrelevant to the younger generation.

B. Media Landscape and Structural Vulnerabilities



Indonesia is categorized within the "Public Watchdog" media system model, alongside the Philippines, Malaysia, and Timor-Leste. While this model is characterized by media self-regulation, private ownership, and a relatively high degree of journalistic independence, the openness of the system creates specific vulnerabilities. The media sector is plagued by capture by "bureaucrat capitalists," wherein politicians form strategic political and economic alliances with media oligarchs. This environment allows disinformation to thrive through discrete relationships rather than direct state monopoly. Furthermore, the pluralist and profit-driven nature of the media system provides fertile ground for "clandestine networked disinformation". Actors utilize financial resources to employ disinformation strategies en masse, utilizing "buzzers"—paid influencer accounts—to disseminate false narratives.

C. Digital Platforms and Disinformation Typologies

The findings highlight specific platforms and methodologies utilized to propagate disinformation in Indonesia. While false narratives are present on Facebook and Instagram, TikTok is identified as the most influential platform for spreading disinformation, particularly targeting younger demographics. Disinformation strategies frequently employ "attack memes" against political opposition, a tactic observed during elections involving supporters of President Joko Widodo. Additionally, misinformation on platforms such as WhatsApp has been linked to the incitement of inter-ethnic and inter-faith violence. These tactics exploit religious cleavages to subjugate political opposition.

D. Socio-Political Developments (2025)

Recent findings indicate a resurgence of civic dissent and protest in 2025, which challenges the narratives established by the administration. Since late August 2025, mass demonstrations have erupted in Jakarta and other cities protesting rising living costs, government corruption, and military involvement in civilian governance. In response to these developments, civil society organizations such as the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS) and the Indonesian Association of Families of the Disappeared (IKOHI) continue to document abuses from the Suharto era and monitor current state violence, serving as a counter-weight to state-sponsored narratives.

V. Indonesia: Ways Forward

The formulation of effective countermeasures against disinformation in Indonesia, particularly concerning EDs and human rights, requires a multi-dimensional approach. Strategies identified by civil society stakeholders emphasize the necessity of countering historical revisionism through documentation, engaging youth demographics via strategic digital platforms, and strengthening the resilience of civil society within the current media landscape.

A. Countering Historical Revisionism and Narrative Sanitization



A fundamental impediment to transitional justice in Indonesia is the state-sponsored distortion of historical events, specifically regarding the mass killings of 1965–1966 and the EDs of 1997–1998. Civil society organizations report that political narratives have been engineered to portray key executive figures implicated in past violations as patriotic actors, while falsely asserting that disappeared persons have been safely returned. To deconstruct these fabricated consensus narratives and the sanitized public personas cultivated during electoral periods, organizations such as the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS) and the Indonesian Association of Families of the Disappeared (IKOHI) prioritize the dissemination of verified historical records. This involves the publication of chronicles, books, and the production of documentary films designed to present factual evidence of past atrocities to the public.

B. Strategic Digital Engagement and Youth Mobilization

There exists a significant asymmetry in resources between state apparatuses and human rights defenders, notably regarding the deployment of "buzzers"—paid online actors funded by the state budget—utilized to disseminate government propaganda and denial. Recognizing that digital platforms such as TikTok serve as primary information conduits for the younger generation, civil society strategies are increasingly pivoting toward the proactive engagement of key social media influencers. The objective is to establish synergistic relationships with content creators capable of reaching middle-class and youth audiences who remain largely unfamiliar with the historical context of authoritarianism, thereby countering the reach of paid political actors.

C. Civil Society Mobilization and Holistic Support Mechanisms

Despite the prevailing challenges of impunity, civil society continues to implement robust mechanisms for transitional justice that extend beyond legal advocacy. IKOHI facilitates the provision of psychosocial support and economic empowerment for victims' families, including the establishment of savings and loan cooperatives to sustain the livelihoods of those demanding accountability. Concurrently, advocacy bodies maintain active monitoring operations regarding recent civil unrest and short-term disappearances to draw critical parallels between contemporary state violence and historical patterns of impunity.

D. Navigating Media Ownership and Political Influence

The integrity of the information environment is further complicated by the structure of media ownership and political alliances. Reports indicate that political parties and figures associated with the former authoritarian regime maintain ownership of significant media outlets, including television stations, which creates vulnerabilities for independent scrutiny. Furthermore, the systematic allocation of state funds for online operations designed to



manipulate public discourse necessitates a strengthened role for independent verification and civil society oversight to challenge the dominance of state-aligned narratives.

Cross-Country Results and Discussion

I. Emerging False Narratives

Enforced disappearances persist as a mechanism of political control, sustained through systematic efforts to manage how victims and their absence are publicly understood. Disinformation functions as a governing tool and serves dual purposes: it projects compliance with human rights obligations to the international community, while domestically it normalizes disappearance by framing it as a response to security threats, criminality, or voluntary absence.

While Nepal no longer experiences active enforced disappearances, false narrative and the failure to acknowledge the narratives of the victims continue to operate through the selective acknowledgment of victims and the treatment of some disappearances as administratively resolved rather than requiring criminal accountability.

Five recurring typologies emerge from the country studies, illustrating how enforced disappearance is denied or normalized. These typologies are not mutually exclusive and often operate together or recur sequentially at different stages of a disappearance. The table below summarizes each typology, situates it within the typical phases of an enforced disappearance, and outlines the specific effects these narratives are intended to produce.

Table 12. Disinformation Typologies

Disinformation Typology	When it is most crucial during the enforced disappearance	Intended effect
<p>Denial of state involvement – disappearance is attributed to private or non-state causes such as trafficking, migration, voluntary departure, or personal disputes, allowing state custody to be disclaimed while the absence itself is acknowledged; denial about ED as a collective event</p>	<p>Immediately before and during the disappearance; early search stage</p>	<p>Disclaims state custody, delays documentation and investigation, and shifts responsibility away from state agents</p>
<p>Criminalization of the victim – the disappeared are labeled as terrorists, communists, extremists, or criminals,</p>	<p>Even before the disappearance (pre-targeting and surveillance stage),</p>	<p>Legitimizes coercive action, conditions public perception, and reframes disappearance as law</p>



reframing disappearance as a legitimate security response	immediately prior to abduction, and at the moment of public disclosure	enforcement or counterterrorism
Victim-blaming and moral justification - disappearance is explained through insinuations about the victim's behavior or choices, suggesting abduction was foreseeable or deserved	During the search phase and public discussion	Undermines credibility of victims and families, weakens sympathy, and discourages sustained demands for investigation
Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance - courts and prosecutors rely on statements of police officers or arresting officers to erase custody gaps and convert disappearance into lawful detention	When charges are filed against victims	Legalizes custody gaps, erases secret detention, and forecloses accountability
Delegitimization of families and human rights actors - families, lawyers, and organizations seeking truth are portrayed as politically motivated, dishonest, or hostile to the state	Throughout the case, especially when advocacy gains visibility	Isolates families, discredits documentation and advocacy, and reduces public and institutional pressure

Summary of Emerging False Narratives

Each category is introduced here in outline form and will be further examined in detail in the sections that follow, where their internal sub-patterns, typical narratives, and cross-country manifestations are further introduced and analyzed.

A. Denial of state involvement - Disappearance is acknowledged as absence but detached from state custody or responsibility.

1. **Denial through voluntary departure or family abandonment** - The disappeared is framed as having left by choice, such as a personal decision to migrate, abandon existing family to reframe disappearance as a private domestic matter rather than a state crime.



2. **Denial through claims of militant or rebel affiliation** - Authorities suggest the individual joined armed groups or crossed borders to participate in an armed conflict, usually against the State.
3. **Denial through fugitive framing and flight from law enforcement** - The person is portrayed as hiding to evade arrest or prosecution, allowing the State to deny custody while implying lawful pursuit.
4. **Denial through administrative refusal and procedural erasure** - The disappearance is reframed as kidnapping, trafficking, or criminal violence by unknown actors, converting a state violation into a non-state crime.
5. **Denial through administrative refusal and procedural erasure** - State agencies refuse to register cases as enforced disappearances, issue certifications, or acknowledge applicable laws, effectively denying the crime through bureaucratic inaction.
6. **Denial by claiming there was never a disappearance** - When a person reappears, authorities claim no disappearance occurred, treating the period of incommunicado detention as irrelevant and denying victim status.
7. **Denial by casualty-of-war or died during cross-fire** - Disappearance is attributed to generalized hostilities or armed encounters, dissolving individual custodial responsibility by presenting death or loss as an impersonal consequence of conflict.

B. Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared - Disappearance is justified by framing the victim as a criminal or ideological threat

1. **Terrorism and extremism labeling** - Victims are branded as terrorists or extremists, often without charges or evidence, pre-emptively legitimizing coercive action. The victim is reframed as a public threat whose disappearance protected public order.
2. **Political or ideological tagging** - Disappeared persons are labeled as communists, rebels, separatists, or subversives to recast disappearance as counter-insurgency or national defense.
3. **Use of Fabricated Cases** - Criminal cases, warrants, or charges, sometimes filed before disappearance and sometimes invoked afterward, and often based on weak or fabricated allegations, are used to justify, absorb, or normalize unlawful detention by folding it into the ordinary criminal process.



C. Victim-blaming and moral justification - The disappearance is framed as a consequence of the victim's own conduct or character.

D. Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance - Legal and administrative processes render enforced disappearance lawful, resolved, or non-actionable by absorbing it into routine procedure rather than establishing truth or responsibility.

1. **Acceptance of security denials without scrutiny** - Courts and prosecutors accept police or military denials of custody at face value, without examining custody gaps, timelines, or command responsibility.
2. **Retroactive legalization of custody** - Periods of secret detention are erased by reconstructing legality after the fact. Disappearance is reclassified as formal arrest, encounter, or lawful detention through delayed records, warrants, or charges.
3. **Procedural closure without truth or accountability** - Cases are dismissed, archived, or administratively settled without determining fate, responsibility, or criminal liability. Compensation or registration substitutes for investigation, closing cases procedurally while leaving violations unresolved.

E. Delegitimization of families and human rights actors - Those demanding truth are discredited to isolate victims and reduce pressure for accountability.

1. **Political motivation and bad-faith framing** - Families, lawyers, and organizations are portrayed as partisan, oppositional, or acting in bad faith rather than seeking truth.
2. **Credibility erosion and fabrication claims** - Accusations that cases are exaggerated, fabricated, or pursued for money or sympathy. Meanwhile, NGOs are claimed to fabricate the number of Eds to receive foreign funding.

Patterns of false narratives across country contexts

The next section examines these typologies in detail, using selected country-specific samples to show how each narrative operates in practice. The discussion focuses on how the typologies are activated in concrete cases:

1. Denial of state involvement



"We do not know and we do not have him". Denial of state involvement operates by presenting disappearances as events unconnected to state action. Instead of contesting that the victim is missing, authorities and aligned actors reframe the absence as the result of private circumstances or individual choice. These involves several types of state denial but is often framed from a personal decision of the victim or a private crime done by other organizations which are not related to the state.

Denial through voluntary departure or family abandonment

Families are routinely told that nothing unlawful occurred because the individual supposedly left as a matter of personal choice. This narrative reframes the burden of explanation onto families and removes the disappearance from the sphere of state responsibility at the earliest stage of disappearance.

In **Bangladesh**, wives of disappeared men were advised by officials and local authorities to accept that their husbands had gone abroad or married someone else. These explanations did not merely deny state involvement but carried social consequences for the family. The narrative placed wives in a position of public shame by implying personal rejection by their husbands. It further discouraged continued searching and presented the absence as a private marital issue rather than a crime requiring investigation.

In **Pakistan**, similar explanations appear in police interactions and during habeas corpus proceedings. Families are told that the disappeared may have left home voluntarily, crossed borders in search of work, or gone into hiding of their own decision. Defence of Human Rights interviews indicate that these claims are repeatedly advanced by state agents even in cases where witnesses describe abductions by men identifying themselves as security personnel.

Comparable explanations circulate in the Philippines when families report at police stations. FIND describe families approaching police stations after a disappearance and being told that the person simply went away, may have been a drug user, or just left home. The police then refused to issue a certification of enforced disappearance and encourage the families instead to file an ordinary "missing persons" report. This strips the case of its legal character as an ED and delays access to remedies during the critical early period.

In **Indonesia**, particularly in Papua, interview with IKOHI show that disappearance is likewise reframed as labor migration, self-imposed hiding, or intentional withdrawal from family life.

Nepal presents a different pattern. Interviews did not document instances where authorities claimed that victims of enforced disappearance had voluntarily left their families. Instead, EDs were framed as casualties of the armed conflict, a denial narrative discussed in a separate section.



Denial through claims of militant or rebel affiliation

Denial of state involvement also operates through security narratives that frames disappearance as the result of the victim's alleged decision to join armed or militant groups. Instead of disputing that the person is missing, the government attribute the absence to voluntary participation in armed activity.

Documentation by Defence of Human Rights in **Pakistan** shows this narrative being used in police interactions and habeas corpus proceedings. Families are told that the disappeared crossed into Afghanistan or Iran to join militant groups or "went to jihad", or radicalized and left home voluntarily, even where witnesses describe abductions by men identifying themselves as security personnel. Courts frequently rely on these security assertions to dismiss custody allegations.

In the **Philippines**, police and military officers tell families that activists, environmental defenders, or community organizers "went to the mountains," a phrase widely understood to mean voluntary affiliation with the New People's Army. FIND identified this as a recurring response at police stations, including in cases where abductions occurred in public view.

In Papua, **Indonesia** IKOHI describe disappearance being reframed as voluntary association with separatist movements. Authorities imply that individuals left on their own to join armed resistance, a framing that discourages complaints by exposing families to accusations of separatist sympathy.

Meanwhile, in **Nepal**, the disappeared during the armed conflict continue to be portrayed as Maoists or sympathizers, including civilians and children. Similar narratives persist in post-conflict discourse, where state actors continue to characterize victims as combatants or collaborators rather than civilians, even in cases where individuals were taken from their homes in front of witnesses.

Denial through fugitive framing and flight from law enforcement

Denial also operates through portraying the disappeared person as a fugitive. Authorities claim that the individual went into hiding to evade arrest or prosecution. This narrative is used to deny custody and later absorb these periods of secret detention into the ordinary criminal process. This is especially evident in cases where criminal allegations exist prior to disappearance or are introduced immediately afterward.

In **Bangladesh**, interviews and case documentation discussed in the first draft refer to the disappearance of journalist Kajol, where authorities implied that he had fled to avoid arrest under security and digital laws. During the period when his whereabouts were unknown, state actors suggested that he was hiding. When he later resurfaced through a



formal arrest, the intervening period of incommunicado detention was not examined. Instead, the arrest narrative retroactively framed his disappearance as flight from law enforcement, which effectively erased the custody gap.

In the **Philippines**, before some disappearances, criminal complaints for rebellion or other offenses were filed against individuals in jurisdictions far from their place of residence, including areas they had never visited. These cases were often unknown to families at the time of disappearance and were later cited to suggest that the individual had gone into hiding to evade arrest, such in the case of Dexter Capuyan. Courts frequently accepted these filings with minimal scrutiny, issuing warrants without personally the evidence between the accused and the alleged offense. When families reported a disappearance, police and prosecutors relied on the existence of these cases to claim that the person was “on the run”.

In **Indonesia**, particularly in Papua, IKOHI indicate that fugitive framing is most visible when individuals later resurface. Authorities assert that the person was never detained but had merely gone into hiding or remained out of contact. Interviewees described cases where resurfacing was used to close complaints administratively, with no inquiry into where the person had been held, why they were unreachable, or whether security forces were involved.

In **Nepal**, fugitive framing did not typically appear at the initial stage when families searched for disappeared relatives. Instead, it operated retrospectively during the investigation and court hearings. This operates particularly in cases involving death in custody during the armed conflict. Police described individuals who died while detained as having been killed while attempting to escape or during armed encounters, even in the case of Maina Sunuwar, a 15-year-old school girl. These explanations framed custodial disappearance and killing as lawful conflict-related outcomes.

Denial through privatization of harm as private crime

Another form of denial shifts responsibility away from the State by reframing disappearance as a private criminal act. Rather than disputing that a person is missing, authorities attribute the absence to kidnappers, traffickers, or criminal syndicates, and presents the enforced disappearance as an ordinary and private crime.

In the **Philippines**, interviews with FIND consistently describe police treating reports of disappearance as cases of “abduction” or ordinary kidnapping. Officers record complaints under general criminal categories for kidnapping and advise families that the case does not fall under enforced disappearance. FIND interviewees noted that police often state they are unfamiliar with ED as a legal concept, or that no such category exists in practice, resulting in cases being handled exclusively through ordinary criminal



investigation procedures for kidnapping rather than mechanisms addressing state responsibility.

Comparable explanations arise in **Pakistan** at early stages of police interaction and legal proceedings. Defence of Human Rights indicate that families are told the disappeared may have been taken by criminal gangs, traffickers, or unknown armed groups. These assertions are often raised before any examination of allegations involving security forces and shape the narrative presented in habeas corpus proceedings.

In **Indonesia**, IKOHI state that reports of ED, particularly outside major urban centers and in conflict-affected areas such as Papua, are frequently reframed as kidnapping, criminal violence, or loss of contact unrelated to state action. Authorities describe these incidents as ordinary crime or social disorder rather than coercive acts by security forces, allowing complaints to be closed or redirected without inquiry into detention, unofficial holding sites, or command responsibility.

In **Bangladesh** and **Nepal**, privatization of harm is largely absent. Interviews did not document EDs being routinely reframed as kidnapping, trafficking, or ordinary criminal acts. Instead, in Nepal, denial operates primarily by framing them as victims of the armed conflict.

Denial through administrative refusal and procedural erasure

Denial is embedded in bureaucratic practice. Enforced disappearance is denied through refusal to acknowledge by preventing legal documentation. This form of denial operates through silence and procedural inaction.

In **Pakistan**, administrative refusal and procedural erasure operate primarily through police and court practice rather than through formal non-registration alone. Interviews with Defence of Human Rights describe families being told by police that authorities “do not have” the person or “do not know” their whereabouts, even where there are allegations or witnesses pointing to security agency involvement. Complaints are received, but custody is neither acknowledged nor meaningfully investigated. This denial becomes institutionalized in subsequent court proceedings for habeas corpus. Once non-custody is asserted by security agencies, courts rarely require documentary disclosure or cross-examination of agency claims. As a result, disappearance is procedurally erased through judicial reliance on administrative denials.

This is most visible where police refuse to register cases as enforced disappearances or to issue certifications required for legal remedies. In the **Philippines**, FIND documented repeated refusals by police officers who claimed unfamiliarity with the law on enforced disappearance or the absence of implementing protocols. Cases were instead classified as missing persons, or victims of ordinary “kidnapping”, or simply unrecorded. The result is



procedural paralysis that prevents families from accessing protection and delays search efforts during the most critical period following disappearance. FIND emphasized that this response recurs across regions and agencies, showing that this is a shared institutional practice rather than isolated error.

Administrative minimization also appears in **Indonesia** through the routine treatment of disappearances as temporary loss of contact, misunderstanding, or brief questioning. Interviews with IKOHI and KontraS describe authorities asserting that individuals were reachable, had been held only momentarily, or would return on their own, rejecting the legal characterization of enforced disappearance without directly denying contact. For older cases, this erasure is reinforced through historical distancing, with disappearances framed as closed episodes of past unrest rather than continuing violations.

In Papua, during the August–September 2024 protests, police publicly characterized reports of missing protesters as “miscommunication,” a framing that KontraS and IKOHI identified as a deliberate denial of incommunicado detention. Subsequent monitoring confirmed that at least 34 of the reported missing individuals were in detention, but the initial characterization allowed authorities to reject custody and delay acknowledgment. In cases where individuals later resurfaced, authorities asserted that they had never been detained, had been briefly questioned, or had chosen to stay away.

In Nepal, although thousands of disappearance cases have been registered with transitional justice bodies, not a single case has been fully investigated. Successive commissions functioned primarily as repositories for complaints rather than investigative bodies. Cases were recorded, but fate of the victims were not determined, and criminal responsibility was not attributed to individual perpetrators or command structures.

In **Bangladesh**, administrative refusal and procedural erasure appear less through bureaucratic silence and more through outright denial of enforced disappearance as a State practice or national phenomenon. Denial operates through official statements asserting that the State does not engage in EDs and that reported cases do not qualify as such. Where disappearances are reported, authorities deny custody. When individuals later resurface, authorities cite their return as proof that no disappearance occurred, retroactively erasing the period of incommunicado detention.

Denial by claiming there was never a disappearance

Denial does not end when a disappeared person reappears. In some cases, the re-appearance of the victim becomes the basis for denying that no ED ever occurred. The re-surfacing is also invoked to deny compensation and legally close any legal action filed by the family.



This form of denial was evident in **Bangladesh** after disappeared individuals resurfaced. Instead of examining the period during which their whereabouts were unknown and legal remedies were unavailable, public narratives frame the absence as voluntary hiding. State-aligned commentators claimed that the individual had been hiding to prepare weapons or prepare in rebellion. Others pointed to the victim's physical appearance, stating that he "still looked fat," to argue that detention could not have occurred.

A similar pattern appeared in the **Philippines** following the resurfacing of two environmental activists. Rather than recognizing their disappearance, authorities claimed that the individuals had voluntarily surrendered during legitimate military encounters. The period during which they were unaccounted for was treated as irrelevant, and the surrender narrative was used to deny that any enforced disappearance had occurred. Resurfacing of the victims were used to negate the disappearance itself.

In **Pakistan**, resurfacing commonly leads to judicial or administrative closure. Once a person reappears or makes contact, authorities assert that the individual was never disappeared but had gone into hiding, evaded arrest, or stayed away for personal or security reasons. Habeas corpus petitions are dismissed without inquiry into unacknowledged detention, with resurfacing treated as proof that no enforced disappearance occurred.

In **Indonesia**, denial after resurfacing takes the form of administrative reinterpretation. Returned individuals are described as having withdrawn temporarily, been briefly questioned, or remained reachable. In Papua, resurfacing is sometimes framed as evidence of voluntary association with separatist groups. Across both recent and legacy cases, resurfacing is used to close matters without investigation into secret detention, unofficial holding sites, or security force involvement.

In **Nepal**, resurfacing or confirmation of fate is similarly used to deny accountability. Once a person reappears, cases are treated as resolved or closed by transitional justice bodies. The prior period of disappearance is not investigated and responsibility is not attributed to individual perpetrators. Importantly, interviewees emphasized that individuals are not legally recognized as victims of EDs, as disappearance is treated as negated by reappearance. As a result, they are excluded from victim status under transitional justice frameworks and are not entitled to compensation or reparations available to families of those who remain disappeared.

Denial by casualty-of-war or killed during legitimate operations

Casualty-of-war or armed-conflict framing operates by asserting that the victim likely died during armed encounters or security operations. Disappearance or death is presented



as an impersonal consequence of conflict, displacing questions of detention, custody, and control by state agents.

This framing is most clearly documented in **Nepal**. Interviews describe how, during the armed conflict, disappeared persons were routinely labeled as Maoists, combatants, or conflict casualties. Arrests carried out from homes or in front of witnesses were later explained as deaths during encounters, crossfire, or escape attempts. This narrative persists in post-conflict settings. Transitional justice bodies and state actors continue to treat disappearance as a byproduct of war rather than as a custodial violation requiring reconstruction of arrest, detention, and command responsibility. As a result, the question of where and under whose control the person was held is displaced by generalized references to conflict conditions.

A related but narrower form appears in Bangladesh and Pakistan, where armed-operation framing is used after disappearance to deny prior custody. In **Bangladesh**, Odhikar document cases in which individuals were first disappeared and later described as having been killed in “crossfire” during security operations. The introduction of the crossfire narrative occurs after the period of disappearance and functions to foreclose inquiry into arrest, detention, or treatment while in custody by presenting death as the outcome of a lawful operation rather than a custodial act.

In **Pakistan**, Defence of Human Rights interviews describe a similar sequence. Individuals taken by security agencies are later said to have been killed in “encounters” or counterterrorism operations. Once death is framed as the result of a legitimate security encounter, habeas corpus petitions and related legal actions are closed or rendered ineffective, as courts accept agency denials without examining custody gaps or allegations of unacknowledged detention. In both contexts, armed-operation framing retrospectively absorbs disappearance into security narratives, allowing the State to deny responsibility for accounting for the individual during the period when their whereabouts were unknown.

2. Criminalization and political othering of the disappeared

Enforced disappearance is frequently accompanied by narratives that portray the victim as a criminal, a national security threat, or a political adversary. Through terrorism labeling, ideological tagging, or the use of criminal cases, disappearance is reframed as a justified or necessary state response. These narratives legitimize State action by presenting disappearance as preventive for public safety. It also undermines public empathy and isolating families by suggesting that the disappeared deserved to be arrested and that families seeking justice are merely sympathetic to terrorism or separatist causes.

In practice, terrorism and ideological labels often overlap. Individuals described as communists, separatists, or opposition activists are later reclassified as terrorists or extremists, allowing political dissent to be absorbed into security discourse. In some cases



this occurs through formal criminal cases, while in others it relies on informal assertions by state actors without judicial process.

Terrorism and Extremism Labeling

Terrorism and extremism labeling frames enforced disappearance as a security response rather than an unlawful deprivation of liberty. Individuals are described as terrorists, militants, or extremists, often without charges, warrants, or publicly verifiable evidence. Once applied, the label displaces the question of custody and replaces it with claims of danger and necessity, normalizing coercive action and muting legal and public scrutiny.

Defence of Human Rights interviews describe how, in **Pakistan**, disappeared persons are labeled as militants or terrorists in police replies and court submissions even where no formal charges exist. Families are told that their relatives are involved in terrorism-related activity, and these assertions are used to justify non-disclosure of whereabouts and to support denials of custody during habeas corpus proceedings. Courts frequently accept these claims without probing their factual basis.

In **Bangladesh**, Odhikar documents a similar use of extremism labeling in the context of counterterrorism operations. Disappeared individuals are portrayed as Islamic militants or extremists. Alongside formal legal action, public narratives reinforced this framing. Even without court findings or convictions, disappeared persons were described as terrorists destabilizing the government or as having gone into hiding during the period of disappearance to prepare subversive activity, further entrenching denial of custody and responsibility.

Political or ideological tagging

Political or ideological tagging reframes disappearance through political identity rather than alleged criminal conduct. Disappeared persons are identified as communists, rebels, separatists, or anti-state actors, allowing disappearance to be presented as part of counter-insurgency, national defense, or political stabilization. Unlike terrorism labeling, this narrative does not depend on claims of imminent danger but on assertions of disloyalty.

This framing is most pronounced in **Nepal**. Advocacy Forum describes how, during the armed conflict, civilians taken from homes or workplaces were routinely labeled as Maoists or Maoist sympathizers. This labeling persisted after the conflict and shaped how disappearance cases were later handled by state institutions, normalizing disappearance as victims of wartime.



In the Philippines, FIND interviews document a similar pattern directed at activists and community leaders, who are described as communists or supporters of armed insurgent groups through informal statements rather than formal charges. Red-tagging is frequently carried out through official and semi-official channels, including the public Facebook page of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), where individuals and groups are labeled as communist fronts without evidentiary basis. This practice has been used by military actors as a shortcut to flag opposition, including resistance to development projects such as dam construction, airport reclamation, mining, and other environmentally contested initiatives.

Use of fabricated cases

The use of fabricated or weak criminal cases creates an appearance of legality and shapes public perception of the victim. State-aligned media and officials point to the existence of a court warrant, charge, or pending case to present the disappeared as a criminal, discouraging public sympathy and legitimizing state action even where the allegations are weak or fabricated. The same warrants and cases are then used within the criminal justice system to justify continued detention and to present that detention as lawful.

In some cases, criminal complaints were filed **before** disappearance, creating a paper trail that later enabled authorities to claim lawful pursuit. In the **Philippines**, rebellion and other cases are filed before the disappearance of the target. These cases are often filed in cities far from the person's residence or areas they had never visited. Families frequently learned of these cases only after reporting a disappearance. Authorities then relied on the existence of pending cases to claim that the individual was hiding or evading arrest, reframing disappearance as flight from prosecution. This pattern is illustrated in the Capuyan case, where criminal complaints were used to justify his disappearance. After his disappearance, the military echoed and re-shared his existing warrants to frame that he is just probably hiding from law. Courts commonly accepted these filings with limited scrutiny of the evidence, acting as rubber stamps for police officers.

In the Kajol case in **Bangladesh**, charges under the Digital Security Act were filed on the night of his disappearance. When he re-appeared, these charges were later used to justify his continued detention and to erase the period of his disappearance.

In other contexts, criminal cases are introduced after disappearance, once the individual resurfaces or is produced in custody. In the Chakma case in Bangladesh, a criminal conviction for an alleged offense dating back several years was issued after he resurfaced. Proceedings that continued while he was missing were later cited in public narratives to claim that he had merely been hiding as a fugitive during the period of his disappearance.



In **Pakistan**, Defence of Human Rights interviews describe criminal allegations being introduced after disappearance, once individuals held in secret detention were produced in custody under terrorism or security-related charges.

Criminal cases filed after reappearance can also function as legal harassment rather than as genuine prosecution. In the Philippines, the filing of grave oral defamation charges against Castro and Tamano following their press conference illustrates how resurfaced victims may face new legal action after speaking publicly. Although the case was ultimately dismissed, the initiation of proceedings shifted attention away from alleged state involvement and placed the burden on the victims to defend their credibility, deterring further testimony.

Fabricated cases are not primarily used to secure convictions. Instead, they establish legal justification once a person disappears, legitimize deprivation of liberty, and shape public narratives by presenting criminal process as proof of wrongdoing. The criminal case functions less as a vehicle for adjudication than as a tool for normalizing disappearance and closing off questions about state responsibility.

3. Victim-blaming and moral justification

Victim-blaming and moral justification frame disappearance as a consequence of the victim's own conduct or character. Rather than contesting the fact of harm, these narratives suggest that the outcome was foreseeable or deserved by the victim through their own actions. They often operate alongside denial of state involvement, by reinforcing claims by the State that nothing unlawful occurred while further shifting the blame onto the victim.

In the **Philippines**, FIND interviews describe police officers telling families that the disappeared "joined leftist organizations," or "went to the mountains," language widely understood to imply voluntary involvement with insurgent groups. Families were also told that the person "might be a drug user" or had "mixed with the wrong people."

These statements were often made at police stations at the moment families sought help, simultaneously denying custody and framing disappearance as the predictable result of personal choice of the victim. FIND also noted that activists opposing development projects were frequently portrayed as having knowingly placed themselves at risk by participating in these causes.

In **Bangladesh**, Odhikar document similar patterns, particularly in explanations directed at spouses. Wives were deemed "half-widows" and were told that their husbands had "left on their own," "gone abroad," or "married another woman." These narratives place shame on the wives and imposed moral judgment by suggesting abandonment by the man,



or that the woman deserved abandonment. Interviewees emphasized that these accounts publicly shamed women and their families.

In **Pakistan**, Defence of Human Rights interviews describe families being told that the disappeared “must have done something,” “was not innocent,” or had “chosen this path.” Even where witnesses described abductions by men identifying themselves as security personnel, officials relied on behavioral and moral explanations to deny custody and discourage complaints, presenting disappearance as a consequence of personal or political wrongdoing rather than state action.

Across contexts, victim-blaming overlaps with denial of state involvement by providing a moral explanation where factual denial alone is insufficient. Behavioral attributions establish disappearance as foreseeable, while character judgments suppress empathy and urgency. Together, these narratives convert enforced disappearance from a continuing state obligation into a private misfortune, allowing denial and inaction to persist even when explanations of voluntary departure or lawful detention become less credible.

4. Judicial and bureaucratic normalization of disappearance

Enforced disappearance is further sustained through decisions taken by courts, prosecutors, and administrative bodies that classify cases as lawful, resolved, or non-actionable. Instead of examining how a person was taken into custody or identifying responsibility, courts simply accept denials submitted by police or military officers, prosecutors rely on these denials to oppose further inquiry, and administrative bodies close or archive cases through procedural rulings.

This section examines three ways in which judicial and prosecutorial processes contribute to this outcome. First, courts accept denials of custody by state agents or issues warrants of arrest without examining the evidence presented, which leads to the issuance of warrants for fabricated cases. Second, authorities later formalize detention through warrants, charges, or reconstructed records, erasing earlier periods of unacknowledged custody. Third, courts and administrative bodies dispose of cases without determining criminal liability or identifying perpetrators.

Deference of courts and prosecutors on submissions by the police

Across the countries studied, courts and prosecutors rely on assertions that no arrest took place or that the person is not in state custody, without examining inconsistencies, custody gaps, or the circumstances of arrest. Further, for the issuance of arrests, the courts and prosecutors primarily rely on the claims of the police officers.

Habeas corpus proceedings described in Defence of Human Rights interviews from **Pakistan** show courts accepting agency denials of custody even when witnesses recount



abductions by men identifying themselves as security personnel. Judicial inquiry rarely extends to timelines, arrest locations, or chains of command, and proceedings often stall once a written denial is submitted.

A graver version of this pattern appears in **Bangladesh**. Odhikar interviews and records of the Inquiry Commission on Enforced Disappearance describe cases in which disappeared persons were later produced before judges by the same security personnel alleged to have tortured or disappeared them. Courts confined their inquiry to confirming custody with arresting officers and did not examine how the arrest occurred, where the individual had been held, or whether torture or coercion had taken place. Victims also reported that the judges did not even inquire with the victims on their safety or if they have been tortured.

Similar reliance on security denials is documented in **Nepal** in both judicial and transitional justice settings. Advocacy Forum interviews describe consistent refusals by security forces, particularly the Nepal Army, to acknowledge arrest or detention.

In the **Philippines**, courts issued warrants based on police charge sheets naming large numbers of accused persons, including activists and community leaders, without individualized examination of evidence linking each person to the alleged offense. These warrants were later cited to portray disappeared persons as fugitives or lawfully pursued suspects, shifting attention away from questions of custody.

Retroactive legalization of custody

Periods of secret or unacknowledged detention are later presented as lawful custody through newly filed charges, revived cases, or reliance on existing warrants. Legal attention shifts away from how custody began and toward whether formal requirements appear to have been met at a later stage.

This pattern is most clearly documented in **Bangladesh**. Odhikar interviews describe cases in which individuals who had been disappeared were later produced in court under newly initiated charges or long-dormant cases. In the Kajol case, charges under the Digital Security Act were filed on the night of his disappearance and later relied upon to justify his continued detention after resurfacing. Judicial proceedings focused on the validity of the charges rather than on where he had been held during the period when his whereabouts were unknown, leaving the disappearance itself unexamined.

Odhikar interviews and records of the Inquiry Commission on Enforced Disappearance also describe cases in which older convictions or pending cases were invoked after resurfacing, presenting custody as the execution of an existing legal process rather than addressing prior incommunicado detention. Commission records indicate that



these cases were used to regularize custody and maintain detention without inquiry into how or when the individual had first been taken.

A comparable sequence appears in **Pakistan**. Defence of Human Rights interviews describe individuals held in secret detention who were later produced in custody under terrorism or security-related charges. Once formal charges were presented, courts treated detention as lawful from the point reflected in official records, and inquiry into the preceding period of unacknowledged detention effectively ended.

Procedural closure without truth or accountability

Disappearance is further normalized through procedural closure of cases. Courts, prosecutors, and administrative bodies often terminate proceedings through dismissal, archiving, or administrative settlement without determining the fate of the disappeared, reconstructing custody, or attributing responsibility. Closure is achieved through procedural action, while the substance of the violation remains unresolved.

This pattern is most clearly documented in Nepal's transitional justice processes. Advocacy Forum interviews describe how thousands of disappearance cases were registered with successive commissions but not investigated beyond intake. Security institutions, particularly the Nepal Army, refused to cooperate or disclose custody records, and commissions lacked the authority to compel compliance. As a result, cases remained formally recorded without factual findings on arrest, detention, or responsibility.

Advocacy Forum further indicates that many families received interim relief from the State while investigations remained stalled. Although these payments were formally described as temporary measures, they frequently had the effect of administrative closure. After relief was provided, cases rarely progressed, and disappearance was treated as administratively addressed even though the fate of the disappeared and responsibility for the violation had not been established.

Judicial closure following resurfacing appears in **Pakistan**. Defence of Human Rights interviews describe habeas corpus petitions being disposed of once an individual was produced in custody or made contact with family. Courts treated reappearance as resolution and did not inquire into the period of unacknowledged detention, even where families alleged prolonged incommunicado custody. Proceedings ended without findings on how, when, or by whom the individual had been detained.

A similar effect is documented in Bangladesh. Odhikar interviews describe cases in which production in court or linkage to criminal proceedings led to the effective termination of disappearance claims. Once formal custody was established, courts and commissions did not pursue investigation into the period during which the person's whereabouts were unknown, and prior incommunicado detention was left unexamined.



5. Delegitimization of families and human rights actors

As factual denial becomes harder to sustain, attention shifts to those demanding answers. Families, lawyers, and human rights organizations are discredited to isolate victims, weaken public support, and reduce pressure for accountability. Rather than addressing allegations of detention or custody, state actors question the motives and credibility of those pursuing truth, reframing advocacy itself as suspect.

Political motivation and bad-faith framing

A recurring strategy is to portray families and human rights actors as politically motivated or acting in bad faith. Advocacy for ED victims and human rights are framed as partisan activity, opposition maneuvering, or support for insurgent or separatist causes, rather than as an effort to locate disappeared persons or establish responsibility.

Defence of Human Rights reported that in **Pakistan**, families pursuing habeas corpus petitions were warned that continued engagement with lawyers and NGOs would mark them as hostile to the State. Legal advocacy was characterized as interference with security operations rather than a rights-based demand.

In **Indonesia**, IKOHI and KontraS described similar dynamics, particularly in Papua. Families pressing for information were portrayed as sympathetic to separatist movements, and human rights organizations were framed as destabilizing actors. This shifted attention away from detention and custody and increased the risk of surveillance or harassment.

In the **Philippines**, FIND documented how families and organizations supporting disappeared activists were informally labeled as communist fronts or enablers. Advocacy related to land, environmental protection, or opposition to large development projects was treated as inherently political, allowing disappearance cases to be dismissed as ideological conflict rather than examined as potential custodial violations.

Credibility erosion and fabrication claims

A related tactic focuses on undermining the credibility of survivors, families, and human rights organizations. In international forums and public statements, state representatives and aligned actors claim that disappearance cases are exaggerated, fabricated, or pursued for money, sympathy, or foreign funding, targeting the reliability of documentation rather than the facts of custody.



Odhikar described how, in **Bangladesh**, families and organizations documenting disappearances were accused of inflating numbers or inventing cases. When individuals resurfaced, prior disappearances were retroactively dismissed as false rather than examined.

In **Pakistan**, Defence of Human Rights reported that resurfacing often led courts and officials to treat earlier allegations as disproven rather than unexamined. Habeas corpus petitions were dismissed once contact was made, reinforcing claims that disappearance cases were unreliable.

In the **Philippines**, FIND documented similar credibility attacks. In international forums, state representatives denied the scale of enforced disappearances and, at times, claimed that civil society organizations were inflating statistics to secure international attention or funding.

II. Platforms through which misinformation operates

Disinformation related to enforced disappearances does not circulate through a single channel. Interviews with human rights defenders and organizations across countries show that denial narratives move through multiple platforms, including face-to-face interactions, official state communications, media environments, judicial and bureaucratic records, and international forums. In Nepal, however, most enforced disappearances occurred during the 1996–2006 armed conflict and continue to be shaped by post-conflict governance and transitional justice processes.

1. Face-to-face interactions with families

Denial is most directly experienced through face-to-face encounters. Families are told at police stations, military facilities, prosecutor's offices, and government agencies that authorities do not have the person, do not know where the person is, or cannot act because no disappearance is officially recognized. Odhikar and Defence of Human Rights described families being sent from one office to another, with each agency denying responsibility. IKOHI reported families being told that the person would return on their own or that no complaint could be accepted. FIND described repeated encounters in which families were told that their cases did not qualify as enforced disappearance.

In Nepal, face-to-face denial was most pronounced during the conflict and immediate post-conflict years. Families who approached police stations, army barracks, or district authorities were commonly told that arrests had never occurred or that the person was a Maoist or conflict-related casualty. Unlike other contexts, Nepalese families were rarely told that victims had voluntarily left or surrendered; denial instead took the form of refusal to acknowledge arrest or custody.



2. Online and social media platforms

In Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines, interviews consistently identified **Facebook** as the primary platform where misinformation on enforced disappearances circulates. Families and human rights organizations encounter claims that disappeared persons left voluntarily, joined armed groups, committed crimes, surrendered lawfully, or were never disappeared at all. These narratives commonly appear in posts, comment threads, and coordinated reactions targeting both victims and advocates.

TikTok was highlighted in interviews with FIND and IKOHI as particularly influential, especially in the Philippines and increasingly in Indonesia. Short-form videos portraying disappeared persons as surrenderees, criminals, or insurgents were described as spreading rapidly and shaping public perception, particularly among younger audiences. **YouTube** was identified as a platform for longer-form misinformation, including videos combining narration with AI-generated or digitally manipulated images, which are often reshared across other platforms.

For Nepal, there was no documented disinformation in social media and online because most EDs occurred before the rise of contemporary social media platforms, online spaces do not function as a primary site of misinformation. While isolated commentary exists framing EDs as resolved conflict-era events, there is little evidence of coordinated digital campaigns targeting victims or families. In the Nepal case, misinformation operates far more through institutional and legal platforms than through social media ecosystems.

3. State and official communications

Official statements, written responses, and public briefings function as a central platform for misinformation across all countries studied. Government officials and security agencies repeatedly deny custody, assert lack of knowledge, or reframe disappearances in ways that remove state responsibility.

In **Bangladesh**, Odhikar documented how officials publicly denied detention or recast disappearances as voluntary absence during engagements with inquiry bodies and through public statements. In **Pakistan**, Defence of Human Rights described how denial is formalized through police responses and intelligence agency submissions in habeas corpus proceedings, where agencies consistently assert that the person is not in their custody. In **Indonesia**, IKOHI reported that authorities described disappearances as misunderstandings, brief questioning, or security-related absences rather than unlawful detention. In the **Philippines**, police and military officers routinely issue official non-custody statements through government websites and press briefings, which are then re-echoed by the media with limited scrutiny.

In **Nepal**, official denial operates less through outright rejection of disappearance and more through acknowledgment without accountability. State communications



emphasize the existence of transitional justice mechanisms, registration of cases, and compensation schemes, while avoiding investigation, reconstruction of custody chains, or attribution of responsibility. This framing presents disappearance as administratively addressed rather than as a continuing violation requiring criminal accountability.

4. Media commentary and aligned content producers

Interviews describe a layer of commentators and media actors who repeat and amplify official narratives. In **Bangladesh** and **Pakistan**, commentary often mirrors state positions, portraying disappeared persons as militants or fugitives. In **Indonesia**, particularly in Papua, public discussion is heavily shaped by security framing, with commentators implying insurgent involvement and minimizing the possibility of state custody. In the Philippines, the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility documented how many outlets uncritically repeated official statements, though important exceptions were noted where journalists questioned inconsistencies and staged evidence.

In **Nepal**, the media environment is characterized less by active amplification of false accusations and more by normalization and silence. Reporting frequently frames disappearances as part of a closed conflict-era past or defers to the language of peace and reconciliation, limiting sustained scrutiny of state responsibility and reinforcing the perception that these cases no longer demand investigation.

5. Courts, prosecution records, and official case files

Courts, prosecution records, and official case files function as a platform for misinformation by shaping what becomes legally visible and what is erased. Criminal complaints, arrest warrants, and “wanted” listings assign official labels that recast disappeared persons as criminals or fugitives, even in the absence of conviction. Once entered into legal records, these labels acquire an evidentiary weight that is repeatedly invoked to explain absence as evasion of law enforcement rather than unlawful detention. Judicial documentation is also used to reconstruct timelines that begin only at the moment of formal arrest, omitting prior periods of secret detention and converting enforced disappearance into ostensibly lawful custody.

In **Bangladesh**, this practice is visible in cases where disappeared persons where resurfaced but claimed to be formally arrested. Commission findings show that charge sheets and case files often record custody as beginning on the date of arrest, while remaining silent on the months during which the person’s whereabouts were concealed. These persons are then detained with the appearance of legality, effectively erasing that they were victims of EDs.

A comparable pattern appears in the **Philippines**, where courts and prosecution records normalize disappearance through criminal labeling. Disappeared persons were publicly presented as “wanted” individuals, with arrest warrants or criminal complaints



cited to explain their absence as flight from justice. In some instances, wanted posters circulated prior to the disappearance, and after the person went missing, pending cases, such as rebellion or other security-related charges, were invoked to deny that any enforced disappearance had occurred. Once reflected in court records, these allegations were repeatedly echoed in official statements and media coverage.

In Nepal, courts and official case files operate through a different but equally consequential mechanism. Thousands of disappearance cases have been formally registered with transitional justice bodies, yet not a single case has been fully investigated. Case files function primarily as administrative repositories of complaints rather than instruments of fact-finding. Chains of custody remain unreconstructed, legal responsibility is not attributed with perpetrators, and disappearance is rendered administratively complete without truth or accountability.

6. International and transnational forums

Interviews described the circulation of denial narratives in international and transnational spaces, including international meetings, consultations, and reporting processes. In these settings, state representatives and state-aligned actors were observed minimizing the scope of enforced disappearances or contesting the characterization of reported cases. Accounts from interviews noted instances where disappearances were described as private abductions, isolated incidents, or claims advanced by civil society organizations rather than as matters engaging state responsibility.

In the **Philippines**, interviewees reported that state representatives raised allegations that statistics on enforced disappearances were exaggerated by families and human rights organizations. These allegations were described as being raised in international forums and consultations, with references to international attention and funding used to question the credibility of documentation efforts.

In **Nepal**, international denial takes a more procedural form. State representatives emphasize the existence of commissions, peace agreements, and legal frameworks, presenting formal compliance with process as evidence that disappearances have been addressed. The payments to the families as interim relief are also highlighted as state acknowledgement. However, this framing fails to give attention to the absence of investigations, direct attribution of liability against perpetrators and reinforces the narrative that enforced disappearances are a closed legacy issue rather than an ongoing obligation under international law.

7. Emerging risks related to AI-assisted disinformation



A recent development in disinformation on enforced disappearances is the use of AI-generated or digitally altered images to shape how victims are perceived. Instead of relying only on written accusations, this approach uses images to suggest criminality, allowing allegations to be communicated visually without factual support.

Within this study, this practice was observed only once, in the Bangladesh case of Michael Chakma. After he testified before the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, online material circulated portraying him as a militant figure. A video released in November 2025 used narration accusing him of armed activity alongside AI-generated or manipulated images showing him with firearms. The images were used to link Chakma to violence, despite the absence of judicial findings and in contrast to the Commission's confirmation that he had been forcibly disappeared and held in secret detention.

No similar use of AI-generated content was identified in the Philippines, Pakistan, Indonesia, or Nepal. In those contexts, disinformation continues to rely on more familiar practices, such as press statements, selective video clips, criminal case filings, and repetition of official claims through traditional media. This suggests that AI-assisted disinformation is not yet common, but represents an emerging tactic.

III. Impacts on Families and Victims

While family members are not the direct victims of disappearance, NGO workers consistently described them as bearing distinct and lasting harms arising from the disappearance itself and from the conditions that follow. These impacts on families fall into three broad categories:

- 1. Psychological and social impacts.** Families face stigma, suspicion, and prolonged uncertainty, often having to defend the disappeared against claims of criminality or voluntary absence. The lack of official findings prevents mourning and leads to emotional exhaustion and withdrawal from public life.
- 2. Gendered harms.** Women are most often the ones who continue searching and advocating, exposing them to misogynistic attacks, sexualized threats, and political stigmatization. Women who resurfaced after disappearance were frequently described as remaining silent due to trauma and fear of further harm.
- 3. Legal and economic harms.** Without legal recognition of disappearance, families cannot access compensation, social benefits, or inheritance and may wait years and incur legal costs to declare presumptive death. During this time, assets remain frozen and children are unable to access resources for basic needs.



The table below summarizes the documented psychological, social, gendered, and legal-economic impacts of enforced disappearances on victims' families. It highlights both country-specific manifestations and patterns that recur across settings, based on interviews with families and NGO workers. Each category and its underlying dynamics are examined in greater detail in the sections that follow.



Table 13. Types of Impacts on Families and Victims

Country	Psychological & Social Impact	Gendered & Specific Harms	Legal, Economic, & Bureaucratic Burdens
<p>Philippines</p>	<p>Fear and Withdrawal: Families in areas such as Negros and Mindanao limit participation in meetings and public activities after police questioning and surveillance.</p> <p>Despair and Exhaustion: Repeated referrals “from one office to another” lead families to conclude that seeking help is futile.</p> <p>Spillover to Support Workers: NGO workers experience intimidation, reinforcing fear within families.</p>	<p>Gendered Exposure: Wives and mothers are the primary actors in follow-ups and dialogues, increasing their visibility and risk.</p> <p>Sexualized Threats: Women relatives and women NGO workers receive threats of sexual violence linked directly to ED advocacy.</p>	<p>Certification Denial: Police refusal to issue certifications of disappearance the Anti-Enforced Disappearance Act.</p>



Bangladesh	Public Doubt and Harassment: Families who speak publicly are subjected to online trolling and comments questioning whether the disappearance occurred.	“Half-Widow” Narratives: Wives are told husbands “abandoned” them, “went abroad,” or “married another woman,” reframing disappearance as private failure. Sexualized Slander: Women protesters labeled as sex workers in online media. Silencing After Return: Women who resurfaced frequently stop speaking, even to NGOs, as a trauma response.	Erasure of Disappearance: Resurfacing is used to deny that disappearance occurred at all, weakening claims to recognition.
Pakistan	Permanent Stigma: Families are treated as suspect and monitored, with disappearances framed through terrorism narratives. Advocacy Fatigue: Repeated hearings without outcomes lead to long-term exhaustion.	Misogyny in Institutions: Women face degrading remarks in courts and inquiry processes. Sexualized and Political Attacks: Women advocates are targeted through character assassination. “Foreign Agent” Labeling: Women leaders are branded as Western allies to delegitimize demands.	Administrative Dead Ends: The Commission of Inquiry closes cases using narratives such as “self-disappearance,” without fixing responsibility. Shifted Burden of Proof: Terrorism allegations place evidentiary and financial burdens on families.



<p>Nepal</p>	<p>Ambiguous Loss: Families cannot mourn due to absence of bodies or authoritative findings.</p> <p>Historical Framing: Disappearances are treated as past conflict events, making clarification harder.</p> <p>Disengagement: Repeated failures by commissions lead families to withdraw from processes.</p>	<p>Gendered Responsibility: Women relatives remain engaged in follow-ups and care work, carrying emotional burdens over time.</p>	<p>Stalled proceedings in Fact-Finding Commissions: Thousands of complaints registered without completed investigations.</p> <p>Exclusion of Resurfaced Victims: Those who later returned are not legally recognized as victims, blocking compensation.</p> <p>Long-Term Legal Costs: Families shoulder years of unpaid travel and hearing expenses.</p>
<p>Indonesia</p>	<p>Denial and Distress: Families of 1998 victims face claims that relatives were “returned safely” or that perpetrators were “patriotic heroes.”</p> <p>Long-Term Psychological Impact: More than two decades of truth-seeking affects well-being, requiring ongoing support.</p>	<p>Sustained Maternal Advocacy: Mothers maintain long-term contact with organizations and carry advocacy labor over decades.</p>	<p>Impunity for Past Cases: Lack of accountability for 1998 disappearances persists.</p> <p>Cultural Economic Burdens: Reunification of stolen children requires costly traditional ceremonies, deterring some families from pursuing reunification.</p>



<p>Common across countries</p>	<p>Stigma and Suspicion: Families are doubted, monitored, or accused of fabricating cases.</p> <p>Prolonged Uncertainty: Absence of bodies or findings prevents mourning and closure.</p> <p>Emotional Exhaustion: Long-term truth-seeking leads to withdrawal and psychological strain.</p> <p>Inability to Mourn: Absence of bodies or findings keeps families suspended between hope and loss.</p>	<p>Gendered Exposure: Women disproportionately carry advocacy, care, and visibility-related risks.</p> <p>Sexualized or Moral Attacks: Women face slander, silencing, or delegitimization tied to public engagement.</p>	<p>Denial through Procedure: Legal recognition is delayed or refused, blocking remedies.</p> <p>Cost of Justice: Families bear prolonged financial, bureaucratic, and emotional costs with little resolution.</p> <p>Frozen Assets: Legal limbo prevents access to benefits, inheritance, and social protection.</p>
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1. Psychological and social impacts

Social stigma and suspicion

Families report that harm arises not only from the disappearance itself, but also from how the disappeared are publicly portrayed. Some families have reported having to repeatedly defend the reputation of the disappeared by denying claims that their relatives were terrorists or criminals. In some cases, families themselves were labeled as sympathizers.

Families also reported being treated with suspicion when seeking help. In the Philippines, FIND interviews recount police officers telling families that the disappeared had “joined leftist organizations” or had “gone to the mountains.” In Bangladesh, families who spoke publicly said they were “getting trolled from the media... online media,” including comments questioning whether the disappearance occurred.

In Pakistan, families described being asked intrusive questions about personal matters unrelated to the disappearance. Even when engaging legal processes, families said they felt monitored and reluctant to speak openly.

Uncertainty and inability to mourn

Families in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Indonesia emphasized that the absence of a body or official findings prevents mourning. They described living between hope and loss for extended periods. In Nepal, interviewees noted that disappearances are often framed as events of the past linked to armed conflict, which families said makes it harder to pursue clarification.

In Indonesia, families of those disappeared in 1998 described encountering public claims that their relatives were “returned safely” or that those responsible were “patriotic heroes.” Families reported that such claims caused additional distress.

Emotional fatigue

NGO workers reported families expressing discouragement after repeated attempts to seek information without results. In the Philippines, particularly in Negros and Mindanao, families said they stopped attending meetings or community activities after being questioned by police officers. One family member described being referred “from one office to another” when seeking assistance, eventually concluding that “there is nothing we can do.”

In Indonesia, NGO workers noted that families of those disappeared in 1998 have been pursuing information for more than two decades, which they said has affected



families' psychological well-being and led organizations to provide ongoing support rather than short-term assistance.

Effects on support workers

Psychological pressure extends beyond families to those who support them. NGO workers advocating on behalf of victims reported harassment directly linked to their support work. In the Philippines, one NGO staff member recounted being followed into a restroom by a man identifying himself as military, who warned her to “stop looking” for a disappeared person.

Long-term psychological strain

NGO workers consistently describe the psychosocial impacts of enforced disappearance on families as long-term, extending for decades beyond the disappearance. In Bangladesh, women survivors are described as being under “severe mental” trauma and “pressure,” with interviewees noting that attempts to communicate have not been successful. Meanwhile, in Indonesia, one interviewee explained that “more than two decades of efforts by the victim families” have affected their psychological well-being. As a result, organizations emphasized the need for ongoing counseling and support structures rather than short-term interventions, recognizing that the psychological consequences of enforced disappearance do not resolve with time alone.

Attacks on credibility and reputational harm

Families, especially women relatives, are accused of fabricating disappearance cases to gain funding, attention, or sympathy. These accusations delegitimize both the disappearance and the family's grief, recasting advocacy as opportunism rather than a search for truth. NGO workers in Pakistan and the Philippines described this narrative as recurring in online attacks and institutional settings, including claims that families or organizations are “making stories” for financial gain.

Psychological and social impacts on resurfaced victims

NGO workers report that resurfaced victims often continue to experience fear after return. Some are described as remaining alert to the possibility of being taken again. TAs a result, resurfaced victims were described as limiting movement, avoiding public exposure, or distancing themselves from government institutions.

Resurfaced victims also face disbelief and suspicion following return. NGO workers in Bangladesh and Pakistan noted that resurfacing is sometimes used to question whether a disappearance occurred at all. Survivors reported encountering comments suggesting that their detention was fabricated or politically motivated. These reactions were described as affecting their willingness to speak publicly or engage with formal processes.



In Bangladesh and Pakistan, NGO workers noted that resurfaced individuals were subjected to hostile comments including being portrayed as criminals or terrorists. In response, some resurfaced victims were described as reducing public engagement or avoiding visibility after return.

2. Gendered harms

While most victims of ED are men, women are the ones who step forward after a disappearance and remain engaged over time. Wives and mothers most often pursue information, attend hearings, and participate in campaigns, while male relatives appear far less frequently. In Pakistan and Philippines, NGO workers consistently observed that wives and mothers continue approaching institutions and speaking publicly. In Indonesia, mothers were described as sustaining contact with organizations long after the disappearance. The following sections describe the gendered harms experienced by survivors of enforced disappearances and by the families of those who remain missing.

Misogyny and sexualized slander

Women whose husbands were disappeared are frequently subjected to narratives that reframe enforced disappearance as private abandonment rather than a state crime. In Bangladesh, NGO workers described officials telling wives that their husbands had “gone abroad,” “abandoned them,” or “married another woman,” and questioning why they continued to wait. Similar narratives were reported in other contexts, where women are pressured to accept disappearance as a personal or marital failure rather than a State violation requiring investigation.

Women who seek information or speak publicly are subjected to gendered and sexualized attacks that focus on their morality or appearance rather than on the disappearance itself. In Pakistan, NGO workers recounted women being subjected to degrading remarks within legal processes, including a judge telling the wife of a disappeared person, “why do you need a husband because you’re so beautiful yourself, you could get remarried.”

In Bangladesh, women-relatives who appeared in protests or public actions were targeted through sexualized labeling in online media. One interviewee described cases where women were “labeled as sex workers,” including instances involving three girls publicly branded after participating in protests. In the Philippines, women advocates and family members were reported to have received messages containing threats of sexual violence, which NGO workers linked directly to advocacy against EDs.

Silence of women after return

Silence among women who resurfaced after ED was repeatedly emphasized by Bangladeshi NGO workers. Interviewees stated plainly that “no female ED victims are



talking.” Women survivors were described as “not talking, not communicating,” even to human rights organizations.

One account involved a husband and wife who were both disappeared. The husband remains missing, while “the wife came back but she is not talking.” Odhikar also described a woman who began giving testimony and then stopped. She said that “her hands were like crucified,” that her scarf was taken away, and that people were laughing at her. After this, “she did not talk more.” Odhikar could not confirm sexual violence because the woman herself did not elaborate, and subsequent attempts to communicate were unsuccessful. Silence was described as a response shaped by trauma. For some women, remaining silent appears to be a way of coping with what they endured while avoiding further exposure to stigma or harm.

“Foreign agent” labeling and political delegitimization

Women who lead protests or engage with international mechanisms face additional stigmatization as “foreign agents” or “Western allies.” In Pakistan, women advocates were described as being branded in this way to undermine their standing and portray their demands as externally driven. This narrative is used to justify surveillance and to frame women’s advocacy as disloyal or anti-state.

South Asia and Southeast Asia compared

Gender is one of the few distinct differences between South and Southeast Asia. In South Asia disinformation is closely tied to concepts of honor and shame. Women whose husbands were disappeared were labeled “half widows,” a term associated with stigma and social diminishment. Women who are themselves disappeared often face silence upon return, unable or unwilling to speak about their detention due to reputational pressure.

In Bangladesh, family members of the victims were reportedly targeted online and labeled as sex workers during the previous regime. Female survivors of EDs were described as largely silent due to trauma and social stigma. In Pakistan, female relatives of the disappeared face derogatory remarks from officials. Gendered disinformation in South Asia frequently attaches moral suspicion and sexualized stigma to women.

By contrast, accounts from the Philippines and Indonesia do not foreground honor-based shaming as dominant patterns. The Philippine experience highlights red-tagging, terrorist labeling, staged surrenders, and legal harassment as the primary mechanisms of disinformation. The narratives revolve more around criminalization or political othering rather than moral dishonor tied to gender. The contrast does not suggest the absence of gendered harm in Southeast Asia, but it indicates that in South Asia, stigma linked to honor



and shame emerges more prominently as a silencing mechanism within disinformation campaigns.

3. Legal and economic harms

Barriers to legal recognition and remedies

When authorities refuse to acknowledge custody or refuse to issue documents confirming a disappearance, families are unable to access basic legal protections. In the Philippines, police officers often decline to issue certifications of disappearance and instead say that the person “just left home.” Without this certification, families cannot effectively use legal remedies under the Anti-Enforced Disappearance Act and cannot secure support from other state institutions.

In Pakistan, families who bring cases to court or appear before the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances face a similar barrier. Officials frequently introduce allegations of terrorism or wrongdoing at the outset, placing suspicion on the disappeared person and shifting the burden of proof to the family.

In Nepal, people who were disappeared for a period of time and later resurfaced are not legally recognized as victims of enforced disappearance. Because they are excluded from this category, resurfaced persons and their families are not eligible for compensation or other forms of redress provided to families of those who remain missing.

Commissions and courts as sites of delay

Instead of providing accountability, legal and quasi-legal bodies were often described as places where cases stall. In Pakistan, the Commission of Inquiry was described as closing cases without identifying responsibility and adopting narratives such as “self-disappearance.” Families attend repeated hearings but do not receive answers, leading to frustration and exhaustion rather than resolution.

In Nepal, commissions have registered thousands of complaints but have not completed investigations. Interviewees described multiple commissions that failed to deliver results. Over time, this has led many families and civil society groups to disengage from the process, as participation did not lead to truth or accountability.

Economic impact of disappearance

The disappearance of a family member, usually the main breadwinner, immediately cuts off the household’s primary source of income. Families lose wages and support



overnight, yet they cannot access compensation, pensions, or social benefits because the person is not officially recorded as either alive or dead. This legal uncertainty blocks inheritance claims, employment benefits, and other forms of assistance that depend on formal documentation.

Disappearance also prevents families from resolving the legal status of the missing person. In many cases, families must first obtain a court declaration of death before they can access property, savings, or inheritance. This process often takes years and requires hiring lawyers and attending repeated court hearings. These legal costs place an additional financial burden on families who are already struggling. During this period, bank accounts, land, and other assets remain frozen. Heirs, especially children, are unable to access inheritance or financial resources needed for education, housing, or basic living expenses.

Financial costs of seeking justice

Pursuing justice also creates ongoing financial pressure. Families travel repeatedly to police stations, courts, commissions, and military camps, often across long distances. These trips are unpaid and unsupported. In Pakistan and Nepal, families described attending multiple hearings over many years without progress, while continuing to shoulder transport, food, and lodging costs linked to legal processes.

In Indonesia, interviews highlighted additional economic burdens related to cultural practices. In cases where children taken during past conflicts are later found, families are expected to conduct traditional ceremonies to culturally welcome them back. These ceremonies can involve significant costs, including livestock and large gatherings. Many families cannot afford this, and some decide not to pursue reunification because of the financial burden.

IV. Constraints on truth-telling and collective alignment

Difficulties in correcting false narratives on enforced disappearances do not stem primarily from lack of information, but from conditions that restrict how facts are accessed and verified.

1. Structural barriers to fact-checking

Families and human rights organizations repeatedly described the inability to obtain basic records needed for verification, including arrest logs, detention registers, transfer orders, CCTV footage, and official acknowledgments of custody. Police, military, and intelligence offices frequently deny the existence of such records, claim lack of jurisdiction, or refer families between offices without producing documentation.



In several contexts, interviewees noted that the absence of records is itself treated as confirmation that no disappearance occurred. Courts and prosecutors rely heavily on written submissions from police or security agencies asserting non-custody, even where families, witnesses, or former detainees provide consistent accounts of arrest. These assertions are often accepted without inquiry into how custody records are generated, maintained, or withheld, limiting the possibility of independent verification.

Legal and bureaucratic procedures further narrow what can be established as fact. Arrest records and case files commonly begin only at the point of formal arrest, excluding prior periods of secret or unacknowledged detention. Once these truncated timelines are entered into official records, subsequent proceedings tend to rely on them as authoritative, making it difficult to introduce evidence of disappearance that falls outside the documented arrest window.

In Bangladesh, interview findings point to additional structural barriers arising from the destruction or alteration of physical evidence. Human rights defenders reported that the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances encountered multiple sites linked to secret detention where material traces had been removed or obscured. According to interview accounts, detention rooms were repainted, walls cleaned, and identifying features altered before inspections took place. These changes limited the Commission's ability to corroborate testimony through site visits and reduced inquiries to competing narratives rather than verifiable findings.

Media practices compound these constraints. Journalists were described as relying primarily on official statements in security-related cases due to restricted access to detention facilities or legal files. Once an official version is placed on record through a court filing or press briefing, it is repeatedly cited as fact, while family accounts are treated as allegations requiring higher thresholds of proof.

Resource limitations further restrict verification. Human rights organizations described shortages of staff, funding, and technical capacity to conduct rapid field checks, particularly during the early period after a disappearance. Delays in accompaniment, documentation, and site access reduce opportunities to preserve evidence, allowing denial narratives to consolidate before counter-information can be assembled.

2. Psychosocial and safety constraints

Interview findings further describe that fact-checking and truth-telling on enforced disappearances is also challenged by sustained psychosocial strain and exposure to safety risk. Families described long periods of uncertainty, repeated retelling of traumatic events, and the emotional burden of navigating institutions that consistently deny custody or responsibility. Recounting the circumstances of a disappearance, often in police stations,



courts, media interviews, and public forums, were described as exhausting and retraumatizing.

Several interviewees noted that families' willingness to speak publicly changes over time. In the early stages after a disappearance, families often engage actively with authorities, media, and civil society. As months or years pass without progress, repeated denial and lack of response contribute to fatigue and withdrawal. Some families described deliberately limiting their public statements or declining interviews to preserve emotional stability, even when misinformation about their cases continued to circulate.

Safety concerns of the families and friends were also reported. Families described experiences of surveillance, visits from security personnel, and hostile questioning following public advocacy or international engagement. In some contexts, family members were advised by local officials to "stop making noise" or risk consequences for themselves or their remaining relatives. These encounters affected decisions about whether to correct false narratives, participate in campaigns, or pursue legal remedies.

Human rights defenders reported parallel pressures. Interviewees described being monitored, subjected to online harassment, accused of fabricating cases, or portrayed as politically motivated or foreign-funded. Limited staff and the need to prioritize immediate protection work further reduce the capacity to engage in sustained narrative correction.

Interviewees emphasized that these constraints operate cumulatively. Psychosocial exhaustion intersects with safety concerns, producing a narrowing of who speaks, how often, and in what forums. In this environment, false narratives often persist unchallenged not because they are accepted as true, but because responding carries emotional, social, or physical costs that families and defenders are unable or unwilling to bear over extended periods.

3. Fragmentation of investigating enforced disappearances

In several country contexts examined in this study, courts tend to approach enforced disappearances as individual cases, with evidentiary burdens placed largely on victims and their families. Proceedings are structured around case-by-case assessment, requiring families to establish arrest, custody, and responsibility through their own submissions. This individualized approach limits the capacity of judicial processes to recognize patterns across cases, even where similarities in methods, locations, or alleged perpetrators are observable.

In the **Philippines**, this fragmentation is reinforced by prevailing evidentiary rules and legal presumptions. Police officers and other state agents are generally accorded a presumption of regularity in the performance of official duties. As a result, official denials



of custody are often treated as credible unless families can produce affirmative proof to the contrary. Enforced disappearance cases are assessed primarily on the sufficiency of evidence within each individual file, rather than examined in relation to other cases exhibiting similar features. While the Commission on Human Rights documents cases and provides assistance, there is no centralized investigative mechanism mandated to assess enforced disappearances collectively as a national practice. This structure places a heavy evidentiary burden on victims in a context where access to records, detention sites, and witnesses is structurally constrained.

A different investigative configuration was observed in **Bangladesh** with the establishment of a centralized Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances. The commission was mandated to examine multiple cases together, allowing information to be aggregated across testimonies, site inspections, and documentary material. This collective review enabled the identification of recurring methods of abduction, detention, and denial that were less visible in isolated proceedings. The aggregation of cases allowed enforced disappearances to be examined as a patterned practice, rather than as a series of unrelated incidents, and made it possible to assess responsibility beyond individual actors.

In **Nepal**, commissions were established to address enforced disappearances that occurred during the armed conflict. These mechanisms provided a formal avenue for case registration and acknowledgment, and the Supreme Court issued decisions recognizing the occurrence of enforced disappearances in certain cases. However, most cases did not progress to the establishment of individual criminal liability. While disappearance was addressed through centralized mechanisms, investigative and prosecutorial follow-through remained limited, and responsibility was not systematically attributed to perpetrators or command structures. As a result, aggregation at the level of registration did not translate into sustained investigation or accountability.

4. Public detachment, normalization, and empathy fatigue

EDs were described as increasingly distant from the everyday concerns of the general public. Disappearances are often perceived as affecting only particular groups, activists, organizers, journalists, or individuals already framed as politically involved, rather than as violations that implicate broader society. Disappearance is treated as a foreseeable risk attached to activism or dissent, rather than as a violation of human rights requiring public condemnation.

This normalization shapes how cases are received. When disappeared persons are identified as activists, environmental defenders, or community organizers, their disappearance is frequently interpreted as an expected consequence of their advocacies. Such framing reduces public shock, even where evidence of state involvement exists.



Empathy fatigue further compounds this detachment. Interviews described how repeated exposure to unresolved cases, prolonged searches, and the absence of accountability contribute to declining public engagement. Stories of disappearance circulate intermittently, often without resolution, leading to a sense of repetition without outcome. In this context, public attention shifts quickly, and new cases struggle to generate sustained concern, particularly when earlier cases remain unresolved.

In Nepal, historical distance plays a significant role. Most enforced disappearances occurred during the armed conflict, and younger generations have limited direct exposure to the issue. Advocacy Forum described disappearance as increasingly framed as a closed chapter of the past, associated with the conflict period rather than as a continuing legal and moral obligation.

At the same time, interviews also noted efforts to counter public detachment through cultural and artistic forms of remembrance. In **Indonesia**, particularly in relation to past and ongoing human rights violations, NGOs described partnerships with musicians and artists to engage audiences beyond traditional advocacy spaces. Concerts and artistic collaborations were cited as ways of introducing enforced disappearance to new publics, especially younger audiences, by connecting memory, emotion, and collective experience rather than relying solely on legal or factual presentation.

V. Disinformation Actors

Clarifying “disinformation actors”: intent and effect

In this study, the term disinformation actor does not imply uniform intent, coordination, or bad faith across all institutions involved in ED cases. Actors are identified based on the function they perform in the production or institutionalization of false or misleading narratives relating to disappearance, custody, and responsibility.

Some institutions actively construct and circulate narratives that deny custody, criminalize victims, or deflect responsibility. Others do not originate such narratives, but embed them within authoritative systems through procedural reliance, evidentiary defaults, or sustained non-correction. Both contribute to the persistence of disinformation, but they do so through different institutional mechanisms.

For analytical clarity, the study therefore distinguishes two functional categories of disinformation actors: primary producers, who generate the initial narrative, and institutional validators, who confer official status on those narratives through affirmative acts or sustained inaction.

A. Primary disinformation producers (intentional narrative construction)



The first category consists of actors that originate or deliberately craft narratives designed to deny custody, criminalize victims, or deflect responsibility for ED. These actors shape the initial account that circulates immediately after a person goes missing and often determine the frame within which all subsequent responses unfold.

What unites these actors is their position at the point of narrative origin. They define whether an absence is treated as a disappearance, a lawful arrest, a security operation, or a private act. Once this initial framing is established, it becomes the reference point for courts, prosecutors, commissions, and media outlets. In this sense, these actors are disinformation actors in the strict sense: they actively construct and circulate misleading accounts as a matter of institutional practice or political strategy.

Military and intelligence agencies

Military and intelligence agencies emerge as the most consistent originators of disinformation related to ED. Their position within the security sector gives them control over information concerning arrest, detention, transfer, and classification. This control enables them to deny custody, obscure chains of command, and substitute alternative narratives before independent scrutiny becomes possible.

In Bangladesh, the **Directorate General of Forces Intelligence** is identified as a central intelligence body associated with secret detention and the sustained concealment of detainees' whereabouts. Disinformation originates through categorical denials of custody and the suppression of any record linking the individual to state detention.

In Pakistan, the **Inter-Services Intelligence** functions similarly, generating narratives that portray disappearances as voluntary absence, cross-border movement, or involvement in militancy. These narratives precede judicial or media engagement and shape the terms on which families and lawyers must later contest custody.

In the Philippines, intelligence functions embedded within units of the **Armed Forces of the Philippines** generate disinformation primarily through red-tagging. Individuals are publicly labeled as members of the New People's Army or as security threats before or after their disappearance, reframing ED as counterinsurgency.

In Indonesia, particularly in Papua, intelligence units within the **Tentara Nasional Indonesia** construct narratives that depict disappearances as voluntary affiliation with separatist groups or as deaths in armed encounters. These narratives displace questions of custody by situating absence within generalized conflict.

Police units and paramilitary forces



Police and paramilitary forces operate as primary disinformation producers by translating secrecy and denial into **procedural narratives** that appear legally intelligible. Their reports, press statements, and records often constitute the first public documentation of an event.

In Bangladesh, the **Rapid Action Battalion** and police units produce disinformation by denying custody following arrest or by later presenting individuals as “new arrests,” thereby erasing periods of incommunicado detention. Aside from the RAB, the **Border Guard Bangladesh** has reframed resurfacing near the borders as “rescue” or illegal entry.

In the Philippines, the **Philippine National Police**, including the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group, produces narratives that frame disappeared persons as fugitives, drug users, or rebels. These narratives are communicated directly to families at police stations and become embedded in early case records.

In Indonesia, units of the **Indonesian National Police** reclassify EDs as kidnappings, brief questioning, or ordinary crimes. This reframing originates in police documentation and shapes how cases are subsequently handled.

Central political–security bodies

Certain political and security bodies function as primary disinformation producers by coordinating and publicly legitimizing state narratives. Their interventions are often decisive in moments of heightened scrutiny. More broadly, security spokespersons and senior officials across contexts issue categorical denials of ED as a state practice, accuse families and organizations of fabrication, or attribute cases to security threats.

In the Philippines, the **National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict** plays a central role in constructing disinformation. Through press briefings and public statements, it reframes disappearances as voluntary surrender or legitimate security operations, often presenting coerced or selective material to substantiate these claims.

State-aligned media and pro-government online networks

State-aligned media and pro-government online networks act as primary disinformation producers when they originate stigmatizing and criminalizing narratives rather than merely relaying official claims.

In the Philippines, **Sonshine Media Network International** and allied digital platforms actively frame disappeared persons as criminals or insurgents and discredit families and advocates. Pro-government online video bloggers (or “vloggers”) and social



media pages extend these narratives, declaring individuals “fugitives” or accusing families of bad faith.

In other contexts, partisan online networks circulate manipulated images, misleading videos, and moral accusations that visually and emotionally reinforce security narratives. These forms of disinformation personalize and intensify state claims, shaping public perception before factual verification is possible.

B. Institutional amplifiers and normalizers (procedural validation and record-making)

The second category consists of institutions that do not ordinarily originate false narratives about ED, but nonetheless play a decisive role in **embedding such narratives within authoritative legal and administrative systems**. These actors operate after the initial account has already been constructed by security or political bodies. Through routine procedural acts such as the judicial reliance on affidavits, prosecutorial repetition of official positions, administrative classification, and commission-based record-making, these institutions absorb denial narratives and convert them into findings, files, and databases that structure how cases are treated over time.

What unites these actors is their position at the point of **institutional validation**. They do not define the first explanation for a disappearance, but they determine which version of events is accepted as credible and dispositive. Once a denial narrative is validated through institutional process, it becomes the reference point for later decisions across the system. Further, court decisions and prosecutorial findings are branded by the primary actors as the “truth”.

Courts

Courts act as institutional amplifiers when they resolve disappearance-related cases by relying on police or military denials of custody without examining custody gaps. This practice is evident across country contexts, albeit through different procedural forms.

In **Pakistan**, habeas corpus proceedings before the High Courts routinely rely on affidavits submitted by security agencies stating that the individual is not in custody. Courts often dispose of petitions on the basis that custody has not been established, without requiring the production of detention records, arresting officers, or logs of transfer. Although courts do not assert alternative explanations for disappearance, the judicial finding that custody is unproven is subsequently treated by other institutions as confirmation that state detention did not occur.



In the **Philippines**, courts similarly rely on police and military submissions when resolving petitions related to disappearance. In cases where habeas corpus petitions are dismissed for lack of proof, these dismissals are later cited by security agencies as evidence that there was no state involvement, even though the dismissal rests on evidentiary insufficiency rather than factual determination. These court decisions are then shared by the police and military social media pages to propagate that the State has no involvement in the “missing person”.

In **Bangladesh**, courts have accepted revised arrest timelines and post-hoc documentation submitted by law enforcement to assess legality of detention. When such records are treated as conclusive, periods of incommunicado detention preceding the revised timeline are effectively erased from the judicial record.

From these countries, courts do not fabricate denial narratives, but through acceptance of official submissions without probing custody gaps, they convert denial into judicial fact. Once reflected in court orders or decisions, these findings stabilize disinformation within the legal system.

Prosecutors and state lawyers

Prosecutors and state lawyers amplify denial narratives through their handling of case files and pleadings. Their role becomes significant when security narratives are repeated as the formal position of the state without independent investigation. Prosecutors and state lawyers do not originate disinformation but contribute to its normalization by incorporating denial narratives into formal legal documents.

In the **Philippines**, prosecutors have filed criminal cases without examining directly the individual links of persons to the alleged crimes. Sometimes, they inadvertently become part of the legal harassment through filing of defamation cases against resurfaced victims.

In **Pakistan**, state lawyers routinely reiterate security-agency affidavits in habeas corpus proceedings. These submissions do not test the factual basis of denial but restate it as the state’s official position. As these narratives appear repeatedly across filings, they become embedded in the legal record and are treated as consistent and authoritative.

In **Bangladesh**, prosecutorial reliance on charges filed immediately before or after disappearance has served to normalize detention once individuals resurface. The existence of a charge is used to justify custody, while the prior period of disappearance is excluded from legal scrutiny.

Administrative agencies



Administrative agencies play a critical role through classification and record-keeping practices that determine how cases are recognized within state systems. These practices have long-term consequences for whether disappearance is treated as a distinct violation.

In **Bangladesh**, administrative records have omitted periods of detention or failed to reflect custody prior to resurfacing, aligning official databases with revised arrest narratives. Once entered into administrative systems, these records are relied upon by courts and prosecutors as accurate accounts.

In **Indonesia**, particularly in Papua, administrative reclassification of disappearances as kidnappings or brief questioning redirects cases away from scrutiny of military involvement. The initial administrative entry becomes the baseline for all later institutional engagement.

Transitional justice bodies

Transitional justice bodies become institutional normalizers when they prioritize registration and procedural completion over investigation and factual determination.

In Nepal, the **Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons** and the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** register cases of ED without establishing the fate of the victims, whereabouts, or responsibility. Resurfaced individuals may be excluded from victim status on the basis that they are no longer missing, despite having experienced prolonged incommunicado detention. Files may be treated as resolved once registered, even in the absence of substantive findings.

In these circumstances, disappearance is acknowledged administratively but detached from accountability. The existence of a registered case is later cited as evidence that the issue has been addressed, notwithstanding the lack of investigation.

Effect of institutional validation

Across courts, prosecutors, administrative agencies, and transitional justice bodies, the key mechanism is procedural validation. Once denial narratives are reflected in court decisions, prosecutorial filings, administrative records, or commission databases, they acquire official status. At that point, the narrative no longer circulates as a contested claim but as part of the institutional record.

In ED cases, this process has specific effects. The absence of the victim already places families at an evidentiary disadvantage, as the state controls information about arrest, detention, and transfer. When institutions rely on denial narratives without



independent verification, uncertainty is converted into legal or administrative fact. The burden shifts to families to disprove accounts that were never substantively examined.

These actors are therefore not disinformation producers in the strict sense. Their role lies in stabilizing and entrenching disinformation through routine institutional practice, making denial durable even in the absence of explicit intent or coordinated narrative construction.

Families as potential conduits of misinformation

Families of the disappeared occupy vulnerable positions and, in certain circumstances, can become conduits of misinformation. At critical moments, some relatives publicly repeat official accounts regarding the fate of their loved ones. In the case of Jonila Castro and Jhed Tamano in the Philippines, Tamano's stepfather stated that she had been involved in the communist movement and was arrested during a military operation. Tamano herself later contradicted this account, asserting that they had been abducted by state forces and were community organizers advocating for fisherfolk.

Similar patterns have been observed in cases of extrajudicial killings, where families who are often economically vulnerable were reportedly offered financial assistance. Thereafter, they publicly recant their statements or complaints or simply a statement of support to the existing government while calling for accountability on the lower "erring officials". For families facing funeral costs and limited access to legal representation, these financial pressures intersect with fear and fatigue.

It should be noted, however, that the framing and amplification of these false narratives remain primarily with state actors. Families do not possess the institutional capacity to manufacture disinformation at scale. Public sympathy is often placed on the family, and when their statements appear to affirm the government's version of events, these are readily appropriated by propagandists to counter allegations of state involvement. When the state is able to secure or influence the family's voice, that voice carries persuasive weight precisely because it is perceived as intimate, apolitical, and credible.

When families repeat official state accounts, they do so within asymmetrical power dynamics, economic vulnerability, fear of harassment, and also by institutional fatigue. Prolonged legal proceedings and the absence of effective remedies can produce a sense that no resolution will come through the justice system. In such circumstances, the acceptance of monetary settlements which are often framed as "assistance" may address urgent needs for survival.



Civil society engagement with families

For civil society organizations, this dynamic in assisting families should be approached with caution. Documentation processes should prioritize informed consent, confidentiality, and an assessment of potential risk to both the disappeared person and the family. Family interviews must also be conducted with increased sensitivity.

Strategically, counter-disinformation work should not rely on families as primary rebuttal actors, particularly where doing so may expose them to retaliation or social harm. Advocacy should center on institutional accountability while providing psychosocial and legal support to the family.

Table 14. Primary disinformation producers

This table identifies institutions that function as *primary disinformation producers* in cases of enforced disappearance. These actors originate or actively construct the initial narrative that explains a person’s absence, including claims that deny custody, criminalize the victim, or reframe disappearance as lawful security or criminal activity.

Actor / institution	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Philippines	Indonesia	Nepal	Level of responsibility	Primary platforms / methods	Function in the disinformation ecosystem
Military and intelligence agencies	Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) repeatedly identified by families and NGOs as a central intelligence body linked to enforced disappearances and sustained denial of custody	Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) explicitly named by families as the primary agency associated with long-term disappearances; fear of reprisal shapes silence	Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) intelligence units embedded within battalions identified as conducting surveillance and red-tagging	Intelligence units of Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI) in Papua identified as framing enforced disappearances as separatist activity	Nepal Army identified as responsible for conflict-era disappearances; intelligence role no longer operational but never judicially examined	Very high (primary originators)	Security briefings; court submissions and affidavits; controlled leaks to state-aligned media; official military statements	Originates denial of custody, frames disappearance as security operation, insurgency, or separatism; establishes authoritative narratives later reused by police, courts, and media



<p>Police and paramilitary forces</p>	<p>Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and police units named as arresting forces later denying custody or producing detainees as “new arrests”</p>	<p>Police and paramilitary forces act as visible arresting bodies while custody is denied in court</p>	<p>Philippine National Police (PNP), especially CIDG and local stations, deny custody and discourage ED classification</p>	<p>Indonesian National Police (POLRI) units, particularly in Papua, reframe ED as brief questioning or ordinary crime</p>	<p>Nepal Police not identified as current ED actors; historical role secondary to the army</p>	<p>High (operational enablers)</p>	<p>Police blotters; revised arrest records; court affidavits; police Facebook pages; refusal to issue ED certifications</p>	<p>Normalizes denial through procedure: retroactive arrests, misclassification as ordinary crime, discouragement of ED framing, and early narrative fixing at case intake</p>
<p>Central political task forces / security bodies</p>	<p>Senior government officials and ministers under the Hasina administration publicly deny enforced disappearance as a state practice</p>	<p>Federal political leadership shields security agencies; rarely contradicts intelligence narratives</p>	<p>National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) explicitly identified as a disinformation actor through red-tagging</p>	<p>Central government bodies reinforce nationalist and anti-separatist framing, especially in Papua</p>	<p>No equivalent task force; political leadership relies on commissions and delay</p>	<p>Very high (coordinators and amplifiers)</p>	<p>Press conferences; televised addresses; livestreamed briefings; coordinated releases to media and online influencers</p>	<p>Synchronizes and legitimizes disinformation across institutions; escalates red-tagging, terrorism framing, and delegitimization of families,</p>



			of victims, families, NGOs, and lawyers					NGOs, and lawyers
State-aligned broadcast media	Pro-government television and print outlets aligned with the ruling party reproduce official denials	Television channels aligned with Inter-Service Public Relations (ISPR) amplify military framing	Sonshine Media Network International (SMNI) consistently cited as amplifying AFP and NTF-ELCAC narratives	National television outlets reproduce nationalist security discourse	Mainstream media frame enforced disappearances as historical and no longer urgent	Medium-high (legitimization)	Television news; talk shows; print editorials; cable and online simulcasts	Amplifies official narratives without scrutiny, converting state denial and security framing into "common sense" public understanding
Online pro-government influencers / pages	Ruling-party-linked Facebook pages and YouTube channels harass families and mock resurfaced victims	Pro-military online networks intimidate families and flood platforms with security narratives	Pro-government vloggers and pages echo NTF-ELCAC red-tagging and character attacks	Nationalist and anti-Papuan online communities racialize and delegitimize victims	Minimal coordinated online harassment identified	High (harassment and saturation)	Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter/X; coordinated commenting; vlogs	Performs character assassination and narrative flooding: harasses families, mocks resurfaced victims, racializes or criminalizes



								the disappeared, and exhausts counter-narratives
Street-level police officers	Police discourage complaints; tell families victims left voluntarily or remarried	Police deny custody at first contact, reinforcing fear and withdrawal	Police tell families victims are drug users or joined the NPA	Police classify ED reports as kidnapping, miscommunication, or loss of contact	Not central; commissions replace police as main interface	Medium (micro-level normalization)	Face-to-face encounters; verbal statements; informal advice to families	Disinformation at point of contact: steers families away from ED classification



Table 15. Secondary disinformation producers

This table identifies institutions that act as *institutional validators* of disinformation. These actors do not typically generate the initial narrative of disappearance, but embed existing denial narratives into authoritative legal, administrative, or quasi-judicial systems through affirmative procedural acts or sustained non-correction.

Actor / institution	Bangladesh	Pakistan	Philippines	Indonesia	Nepal	Level of responsibility	Primary platforms / methods	Function in the disinformation ecosystem
Courts (trial and appellate)	Courts accept reconstructed arrest timelines and revised charge sheets without probing custody gaps	High Courts hearing habeas corpus routinely accept security-agency affidavits, including those attributed to ISI	Courts defer to police and military denials; burden of proof placed almost entirely on families	Cases commonly closed or reclassified without inquiry into custody or command responsibility	Judicial processes effectively suspended once cases are routed to commissions	Secondary (institutional legitimizers)	Judicial decisions; evidentiary standards; acceptance of affidavits and revised records	Convert executive denial into legal fact; normalize custody gaps and foreclose inquiry into command responsibility



Prosecutors / state attorneys	Police prosecutors retroactively legalize detention through revised records	State lawyers repeat security-agency positions in court proceedings	Prosecutors pursue cases against resurfaced victims rather than alleged perpetrators	Prosecutors decline ED framing and classify cases as non-ED	No criminal prosecutions pursued for enforced disappearance	Secondary (narrative enforcers)	Court pleadings; charging decisions; litigation strategy	Reinforce security narratives through prosecutorial discretion; redirect coercive power away from perpetrators
Administrative officials / registrars	Manipulation and revision of arrest and detention records	Administrative silence reinforces court-level denial	Refusal to issue ED certifications delays legal remedies	Bureaucratic reclassification enables case closure	Registration without investigation substitutes for truth	Secondary (procedural erasure)	Arrest logs; detention records; civil registries; certification processes	Sustain denial through paperwork, delay, and misclassification; replace investigation with administrative closure



Transitional justice bodies	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP); Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)	Secondary (displacement of accountability)	Case registration; hearings; reporting processes	Absorb cases into transitional justice mechanisms without investigation; exclude resurfaced victims from victim status
Pro-government NGOs / civic groups	Government-aligned NGOs discredit human rights organizations as anti-state	Military-aligned civic groups challenge families' credibility	Pro-state NGOs accuse families and NGOs of fabrication	Limited but present in nationalist advocacy	Transitional-justice-aligned civil society emphasizes closure over accountability	Secondary (social legitimization)	Statements; media appearances; social media posts; advocacy events	Socially validate state narratives; undermine credibility of families and human rights organizations; promote closure narratives



Synthesis and Strategic Recommendations

I. Conceptual Adaptation and Contextualized Diagnostics

The contemporary information ecosystem in the Global South is characterized by a pervasive disorder that threatens democratic stability and human rights, necessitating a rigorous conceptual framework that transcends Western-centric models. While the Information Disorder Framework established by Wardle and Derakhshan provides a foundational lexicon distinguishing misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, its application requires critical adaptation to the Asian context where the state functions not merely as a regulator but often as the primary architect of disinformation. In nations such as the Philippines, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, disinformation serves as a strategic mechanism of statecraft designed to dehumanize victims, deny state custody, and discredit dissent through "red-tagging" and terrorist labeling. Consequently, the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) must operationalize a localized taxonomy that categorizes state-sponsored narratives not as generic "fake news" but as specific instruments of "autocratic legalism" and historical revisionism.

To address this, AFAD should expand its flagship research project, "Aligning Collective Consciousness," to include the development of a **Regional Disinformation Observatory**. This program would move beyond general mapping to create a specific "Lexicon of State Deception" for member organizations. By codifying the specific vernaculars of hate used in each context—such as "urban naxals" in India or "terrorist sympathizers" in the Philippines—this observatory would provide a standardized analytical tool for the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance (FIND), KontraS, and Odhikar to categorize and predict state narrative attacks before they fully materialize.

Consequently, in order to bridge the gap between Western theoretical models and the specific geopolitical realities of the Global South, this report proposes an Enhanced Disinformation Typology Matrix (see Table 3 below) that operationalizes the IDS for the Asian context. Synthesizing empirical findings from the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nepal, this diagnostic tool categorizes state-sponsored narratives not merely as generic misinformation, but as strategic instruments of "autocratic legalism" and historical revisionism. This matrix provides the taxonomic precision required to identify the "vernaculars of hate" unique to the region by delineating specific mechanisms—ranging from the denial of state involvement and the criminalization of victims to judicial normalization and gendered victim-blaming.



Table 16. Disinformation Typology, Early Warning Indicators, Sample Rebuttals and Counter-Narratives, Platform of Disinformation

Typology & Definition	Key Phrases & Claims	Early-Warning Indicators	Sample Rebuttals & Counter-Narratives	Platform of Disinformation	Monitoring Indicators
<p>1. Denial of State Involvement: Disappearance is acknowledged as an absence but detached from state custody. It is reframed as a private event, voluntary choice, or ordinary crime.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "He went abroad/migrated ." ● "She left due to family problems." ● "It was a kidnapping by criminals." ● "They are just hiding." ● "Miscommunication/Lost contact." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Police Refusal: Officers refuse to file an ED report, advising families to file a "missing person" report instead . ● Bureaucratic Runaround: Families are sent from one agency to another, with each claiming lack of jurisdiction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Affidavits of Arrest: Witness statements confirming apprehension by security forces. ● Proof of Presence: Digital footprints or testimony proving the victim was at work/home, countering "migration" claims. ● Habeas Corpus: Immediate legal demand to produce the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Face-to-Face: Police stations, government offices ● Official Statements: Press briefings, written replies to courts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rates of police refusal to issue certifications of disappearance. ● Spikes in "missing person" classifications for known activists.



			body.		
<p>2. Criminalization & Political Othering:</p> <p>The victim is framed as a national security threat (terrorist, communist, rebel) to legitimize the disappearance as a necessary state defense.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Communist terrorist." • "Joined the mountains (NPA)." • "Drug addict/pusher." • "Jihadist/Extremist." • "Enemy of the state." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Red-Tagging: Public labeling of the individual or their organization as a "front" prior to abduction . • Pre-emptive Warrants: Filing of rebellion charges in distant jurisdictions the victim never visited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Biography of Innocence": Verified profiles of the victim's professional/civilian life (e.g., engineer, teacher) to debunk militant claims. • Alibi Verification: Evidence proving the victim was elsewhere during alleged "crimes." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Media: Facebook, TikTok (viral videos, memes) . • State Media: Government-aligned news and "vloggers" . • "Wanted" Posters: Physical and digital circulation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergence of "wanted" posters for activists. • Coordinated online hate speech or "red-tagging" campaigns.
<p>3. Victim-Blaming & Moral Justification:</p> <p>Disappearance is explained as a consequence of the victim's own character flaws or poor choices,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "She abandoned her husband."• "He married another woman." • "Must have done something wrong." • "Mixed with the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hostile Questioning: Officials immediately asking wives about marital fidelity or domestic disputes upon reporting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanization: Narratives focusing on the family's grief and the victim's role as a parent/spouse. • Legal Focus: Asserting that personal choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-Face: Police stations (directed at spouses) . • Community Rumors: Local gossip networks. • Online Comments: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports from families of gendered or moralizing harassment by officials.



<p>dissolving state responsibility.</p>	<p>wrong crowd."</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character Assassination: Rumors circulating about the victim's personal life or "immorality." 	<p>do not negate the state's obligation to protect life and liberty.</p>	<p>Trolling of family members.</p>	
<p>4. Judicial & Bureaucratic Normalization:</p> <p>Legal and administrative processes absorb the disappearance, reclassifying it as a lawful arrest, "rescue," or closed case without investigation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Lawfully arrested." • "Rescued from traffickers." • "Surrendered voluntarily." • "Died in crossfire/encounter." • "Fugitive from justice." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "New" Arrest Records: Sudden appearance of arrest records dated weeks after the actual disappearance . • Uncritical Acceptance: Courts accepting police affidavits of non-custody without cross-examination. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Custody Gap Documentation: Highlighting the time difference between the actual abduction and the "official" arrest date. • Challenge to "Surrender": Exposing signs of coercion or torture in "surrender" videos/affidavits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court Records: Affidavits, charge sheets, warrants . • Prosecution Files: Indictments filed post-resurfacing. • Administrative Databases: "Closed" case files. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discrepancies between family testimony and official arrest logs. • High rates of habeas corpus dismissals based solely on state denial.



<p>5. Delegitimization of Families & Advocates:</p> <p>Those seeking truth are portrayed as politically motivated, dishonest, or foreign agents to isolate the victim and deflect pressure.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Foreign agents/spies." • "Doing it for money/funding." • "Fabricating cases/statistics." • "Terrorist sympathizers." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding Accusations: Public officials questioning the financial sources of NGOs or families . • Harassment: Surveillance or hostile questioning of lawyers and family leaders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency: Open disclosure of methodology and funding. • Solidarity: International statements of support to validate local advocates. • Fact-Checking: verification of case numbers to counter "inflation" claims. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International Forums: UN meetings, diplomatic consultations . • State-Aligned Media: Editorials and talk shows. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official statements accusing NGOs of inflating numbers . • Threats or legal harassment against lawyers (e.g., defamation suits).
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II. **Mechanisms of State Denial and the Crisis Management Model**

Empirical data reveals a consistent "Crisis Management Model" employed by perpetrators of enforced disappearances, characterized by the systematic dehumanization of victims to strip them of public sympathy and the deployment of "imposter content" to dilute accountability. Case studies from Pakistan and the Philippines demonstrate that state actors utilize digital armies and "gonggos" (government-operated NGOs) to flood the information space with conflicting narratives immediately following an abduction. This strategy creates an informational fog that allows the state to reframe victims as insurgents or criminals, thereby legitimizing extrajudicial actions under the guise of national security. The "Indian Chronicles" operation further illustrates the geopolitical weaponization of these narratives, where genuine human rights concerns are co-opted by foreign influence operations, turning victims into collateral damage.

AFAD should counter these tactics by establishing a **Rapid Response Verification Unit** tasked with "pre-emptive humanization." This program would operationalize the "disappearED-Asia" database not just as a repository of past cases, but as an active tool for immediate narrative intervention. Upon the report of a disappearance, this unit would deploy pre-prepared "biographies of innocence"—verified digital portfolios of the victim's professional and personal life—to instantly counter state narratives of criminality. By saturating the digital space with verified, humanizing content within the first 24 hours of an abduction, member organizations can inoculate the public against the state's dehumanization scripts before they take root.

III. **Governance, Regulation, and the Potential for Harm**

Countering disinformation on EDs cannot be confined in addressing false narratives as it also requires legal reform at the state level. For example, the Bangladesh framework of establishing an independent committee to investigate enforced disappearances collectively rather than treating cases as fragmented incidents. This approach was contrasted with contexts where enforced



disappearances remain dispersed across agencies without a centralized mandate.

Judicial reform was also raised through potential discussions of Supreme Court intervention in the Philippines, where judicial authority can compel access to evidence and restrain abusive security narratives . These exchanges suggest the need to strengthen court powers in habeas corpus, evidence preservation, and disappearance certification. Documentation reform, including freedom of information advocacy, was framed as essential to breaking cycles of denial, particularly where arrest logs, detention records, and surveillance materials are withheld or destroyed . Without access to records, families and advocates remain structurally disadvantaged.

Addressing information disorder requires a paradigm shift in governance from regulating content based on the elusive criteria of truth and intention toward a standard based on the "potential for harm." Legal scholars argue that empowering state authorities to adjudicate truth invites censorship, particularly in regimes where the government is a primary source of falsehoods. Furthermore, proving an intention to mislead is operationally impractical regarding the secondary dissemination of content by unknowing users. A harm-based approach facilitates a tiered regulatory response where statutory restrictions are reserved for content posing imminent danger to life and liberty, such as incitement to violence against human rights defenders.

In response, AFAD should launch a **Legislative Advocacy and Watchdog Program** focused on "Information Integrity Laws." This initiative would move beyond lobbying for the ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED) to actively monitoring and challenging "fake news" laws that are weaponized against civil society. Working with legal partners like the Defence of Human Rights (DHR) in Pakistan and Advocacy Forum in Nepal, this program would draft model legislation that distinguishes between malicious disinformation campaigns and legitimate dissent, providing member organizations with the legal frameworks necessary to challenge arbitrary detentions justified by state-controlled narratives.

Beyond ratification of international conventions, civil society actors must systematically monitor the enforcement of existing laws intended to protect victims of enforced disappearance. The Philippine experience illustrates this gap: despite the enactment of the Anti-Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance Act, there have been no convictions to date. The existence of legislation alone has not translated into accountability. A watchdog approach would track implementation, prosecutorial patterns, budget allocations, rule-making, and case outcomes, identifying



whether legal protections are being operationalized or rendered symbolic through inaction.

IV. **Operational Strategies and Offline Interventions**

Operational strategies must address the critical knowledge gap between online-focused interventions and the reality of offline information flows in the Global South. A significant portion of the population in AFAD's operational territories lacks internet access, necessitating the deployment of offline solutions that leverage local opinion leaders and traditional media infrastructure to reach marginalized communities. The dominance of platforms like TikTok and closed messaging apps like WhatsApp in spreading "clandestine networked disinformation" requires a hybrid approach that combines digital forensics with community-based trust networks.

Within this framework, community-based mechanisms play a supporting role alongside legal, documentation, and media strategies. One such mechanism is the **Community Truth Advocates Network** designed to bridge the digital divide. This program would train local opinion leaders, religious figures, teachers, and elders, in the basics of source verification and media literacy, equipping them to act as nodes of truth within offline communities. By providing these advocates with "low-tech" verification kits, such as SMS-based fact-checking services or radio-ready scripts debunking common state narratives, AFAD can disrupt the peer-to-peer spread of rumors in rural areas of Indonesia and Bangladesh where digital reach is limited. This ensures that the counter-narrative penetrates the "filter bubbles" of those most vulnerable to state propaganda.

The operational responses below are designed to address the specific false narratives documented in this study. Each response aligns a recurring disinformation type with a concrete objective and a set of actions that can be deployed and sustained through the legal, social, and documentation processes:



Table 17. Response Mechanism for Disinformation Typologies.

Disinformation typologies	Strategic objective	Recommended action / response mechanism
<p>1. Denial of state involvement</p>	<p>Establish custody and disrupt denial</p>	<p>Rapid Response Verification Unit: Conduct immediate field verification within the first 24–72 hours after disappearance. Document last sightings, locations, involved units, vehicles, CCTV footage, call records, and witness statements to establish state contact before narratives consolidate.</p> <p>Strategic litigation: File habeas corpus petitions to compel state agencies to formally deny or admit custody on record. Use sworn denials to fix the state’s position early and preserve inconsistencies for future proceedings.</p>
<p>2. Criminalization (terrorist or rebel labeling)</p>	<p>Pre-empt dehumanization</p>	<p>“Biography of Innocence” dossiers: Release verified, fact-based profiles of the victim showing civilian life, employment, community roles, and family ties. Use official records, photographs, and third-party attestations. Focus on traceable daily life rather than moral argument.</p> <p>Lexicon of state deception: Maintain a shared glossary of recurring criminalizing terms and phrases used by authorities and aligned actors. Use the lexicon to flag emerging narratives early and issue coordinated responses across cases.</p>
<p>3. Victim-blaming and moral justification</p>	<p>Generate empathy and reduce polarization</p>	<p>Art as advocacy / multimedia narratives: Produce short films, photo essays, or audio stories centered on the family’s experience after the disappearance, including economic loss, caregiving disruption, and prolonged uncertainty. Exclude political claims and focus on lived impact.</p>



		<p>Humanitarian framing: Frame the disappearance as a violation of family rights and the right to know the fate of a loved one, rather than as a political or ideological dispute. Use language accessible to non-aligned audiences.</p>
<p>4. Judicial and bureaucratic normalization</p>	<p>Challenge legal erasure</p>	<p>Legislative advocacy and watchdog work: Promote legal and policy measures that distinguish false state statements from legitimate evidentiary gaps. Monitor how agencies communicate case status, dismissals, and findings to prevent procedural closure from substituting for truth.</p> <p>Collective case analysis: Aggregate disappearance cases to document recurring patterns of denial, delay, and dismissal. Produce consolidated reports that reveal institutional practices obscured in individual case filings.</p>
<p>5. Delegitimization of families and advocates</p>	<p>Build trust and resilience</p>	<p>Community Truth Advocates Network: Train trusted local actors such as teachers, religious leaders, and community workers to serve as offline verification points. Use them to counter rumors, confirm facts, and relay accurate information in areas with limited digital access.</p> <p>Digital psychosocial support: Provide counseling, security guidance, and digital safety support to families and advocates, with attention to gendered and sexualized online harassment targeting women.</p>



V. **Civil Society Resilience and Creative Advocacy**

Civil society organizations must adopt proactive, narrative-centric counter-strategies to dismantle the state's model of denial. This involves pivoting from purely political confrontations to humanitarian framing, utilizing creative mediums such as documentary film and storytelling to generate empathy that transcends political polarization. The psychological toll of disinformation on families—specifically the gendered disinformation targeting female relatives of the disappeared with sexualized slander—requires specific psychosocial interventions integrated with digital security training.

Correcting false narratives cannot rely solely on technical rebuttals, legal templates, or rapid-response fact sheets. While structured counter-narrative tools are necessary, template-driven responses risk becoming mechanical and emotionally detached. When fact-checking is framed only as correction of inaccuracies, it may replicate the bureaucratic tone of state denial rather than challenge it. Counter-disinformation strategies must therefore move beyond procedural accuracy to address the human dimension of disappearance.

Experiences shared from Pakistan highlighted the use of art, including visual installations, memorial practices, poetry, and performance, as a means of restoring voice and dignity to the disappeared. Artistic advocacy was described not as supplementary but as central to reasserting moral subjecthood and making absence publicly visible. Civil society strategies should treat creative humanization as a core element of resilience. Effective counter-narratives must not only dispute false claims but also sustain empathy, collective memory, and recognition of victims as persons rather than cases.

To operationalize this, AFAD should develop a **Multimedia Narrative Lab** focused on art as advocacy. Drawing on the success of DHR's documentary work in Pakistan, this program would fund and distribute short films and visual storytelling projects that center the emotional and human reality of the families left behind, bypassing political polarization. Additionally, AFAD should institutionalize a **Digital Psychosocial Support Mechanism** that specifically addresses the trauma of online harassment. This program would provide specialized counseling and digital hygiene training for female advocates in the Philippines and Pakistan, empowering them to safely navigate the digital space while resisting the silencing effects of gendered disinformation campaigns.



List of Acronyms

General and International

AI - Artificial Intelligence
CSOs - Civil Society Organizations
ED(s) - Enforced Disappearance(s)
ICPPED - International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs - Internally Displaced Persons
IDS - Information Disorder Syndrome
NGOs - Non-Governmental Organizations
OHCHR - Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
M/D/M - Misinformation / Disinformation / Malinformation
UN - United Nations
WGEID - Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Philippines

AFP - Armed Forces of the Philippines
CHR - Commission on Human Rights
CIDG - Criminal Investigation and Detection Group
CMFR - Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility
CPP-NPA-NDF - Communist Party of the Philippines – New People’s Army – National Democratic Front
CTG - Communist Terrorist Groups
DILG - Department of the Interior and Local Government
DOJ - Department of Justice
FIND - Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance



NCRPO - National Capital Region Police Office

NSC - National Security Council

NTF-ELCAC - National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict

PCHR - Presidential Committee on Human Rights

PNP - Philippine National Police

SMNI - Sonshine Media Network International

Bangladesh

BGB - Border Guard Bangladesh

CPJ - Committee to Protect Journalists

DGFI - Directorate General of Forces Intelligence

DSA - Digital Security Act

RRAG - Rights & Risks Analysis Group

UPDF - United People's Democratic Front

COIED - Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances

Nepal

CPA - Comprehensive Peace Agreement

CIEDP - Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons

DITF - Detainee Investigation Task Force

FOPHUR - Forum for the Protection of Human Rights

NPR - Nepalese Rupees

TRC - Truth and Reconciliation Commission

USD - United States Dollars



Pakistan

ANI - Asian News International
BLA - Baloch Liberation Army
BYC - Baloch Yakjehti Committee
CIA - Central Intelligence Agency
COIED - Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances
CTD - Counter-Terrorism Department
DHR - Defence of Human Rights
ECL - Exit Control List
FBR - Federal Board of Revenue
FIR - First Information Report
IHC - Islamabad High Court
ISI - Inter-Services Intelligence
ISPR - Inter-Services Public Relations
KPK - Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MPO - Maintenance of Public Order
PECA - Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act
PML-N - Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz
PM - Prime Minister
PTI - Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
TTP - Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan

Indonesia

AGO - Attorney General's Office
APBN - Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Negara
DOB - Daerah Otonom Baru
DPR - Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat
GLI-F4 - Grenade Lacrymogène Instantané F4



IKOHI - Ikatan Keluarga Orang Hilang Indonesia

ITE - Information and Electronic Transactions

KKB - Kelompok Kriminal Bersenjata

Kodim - Komando Distrik Militer

Komnas HAM - Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia

KontraS - Komisi untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Tindak Kekerasan

KUHP - Kitab Undang-Undang Hukum Pidana

LBH Pers - Lembaga Bantuan Hukum Pers

MK - Mahkamah Konstitusi

OPM - Organisasi Papua Merdeka

SAFEnet - Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network

TNI - Tentara Nasional Indonesia

TPNPB - Tentara Pembebasan Nasional Papua Barat

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