

Speech of Dr. Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed, the Hon'ble Chief Justice of Bangladesh at the
2025 Annual Meeting on Rule of Law and Human Rights
Opening Panel
New York, 10 June 2025
Video Message

Honorable Under-Secretary-General and Associate Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Mr. Haoliang Xu,

Honorable Ambassadors,

Esteemed Rule of Law Practitioners,

Colleagues and dear audience in New York and online.

Introduction:

I am honored to address you at the opening session of the 25th Annual Meeting on Rule of Law and Human Rights at a critical time for my country, Bangladesh, where I have the distinct honor to serve as the Chief Justice since August 2024. I am also conscious that I am speaking to you at a **critical time for the United Nations** and for those of us with a **calling to promote the rule of law and uphold human rights** globally, regionally, nationally, in our offices, chambers and in our court rooms. Distinguished colleagues and Rule of Law Practitioners, our work to support fair and equal justice delivery, ensure access to justice for all and uphold the rule of law and human rights is more pertinent than ever.

The call to unite in promoting justice and human rights is enshrined at the very heart of the **UN Charter** as it is in Sustainable Development Goal 16. The 2024 **Pact for the Future** mandates to “strengthen efforts to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels and uphold human rights and fundamental freedoms”¹. There must be no doubt that the United Nations must reinforce and upscale their rule of law support as the fundament for peace, stability and prosperity. I call on you to support this mission regardless of historical and contemporary setbacks, despite competing priorities and in face of a sense that building robust and independent judiciaries is too daunting a task to even embark on.

Bangladesh context:

Our work in Bangladesh over the past nine months is a **prime example** of both, the centrality of rule of law reforms in countries in transitions, and of the UN’s – and in particular UNDP’s – ability to effectively support profound and far-reaching justice reforms with its broad and specialized expertise and its agility to scale up, deploy and tailor support as required for transformative change.

In Bangladesh, the July-August 2024 Revolution led to the ousting of the previous regime and the appointment of an interim government led by Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus. Student-

¹ See: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sotf-pact_for_the_future_adopted.pdf, Action 7.

led protests featured an unprecedented uprising of the youth against injustice, arbitrariness and oppression and a stark vindication of justice.

Reform Roadmap

Since assuming office as Chief Justice of Bangladesh the legacies of those young men and women who paid the ultimate price in the protests have guided my mission and hardened my resolve to restore equity and justice through a transformative agenda for judicial reform. The inherited backlog of more than 4,2 million cases and the deeply rooted distrust in a judiciary, crippled by ever growing political instrumentalization would not discourage me from taking immediate and resolute action. Rather, the fearless call for justice of those who took to the streets became my mandate to design a **Reform Roadmap** tailored to the needs of the people of Bangladesh, and responsive to their aspirations and vulnerabilities.

At its core, our Reform Roadmap aims at building **judicial independence and efficiency**. UNDP supports us in its implementation with technical expertise including on alignment with international standards and norms and advice on integrity, digital transformation, people-centered approaches and outreach advice. Together with a growing number of international partners, including the EU, the UK and Sweden UNDP also supports the convening of country-wide judicial discussion on judicial independence.

A recent peer-exchange with South African experts on transitional justice tools supported by UNDP re-enforced my conviction that far-reaching and transformative reforms of the judiciary must be the **fundament for other sectoral reforms in any transition** from unjust and dictatorial regimes to stable, peaceful and prosperous democracies. As guardian of constitutionality, legality and human rights compliance of all other reform efforts the judiciary must be the first to liberate itself from dictatorial grips and transforms itself into an independent and trusted arbiter providing effective remedies for all seeking justice before our courts.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in as much as Bangladesh must be an example of a transition towards a better future, our resolute pursuance of justice reform in volatile and challenging circumstances must remain a pillar of hope for all Bangladeshi men and women that the promise of fundamental reforms towards a peaceful, stable, more equal and prosperous future is being kept. When justice is absent, it will be vindicated on the streets. Reinstating justice leads us to peace, stability and the promotion of human rights.

UN Support:

I am grateful to the United Nations and in particular to UNDP Country Office, the regional hub and the global team for the unwavering support we received in justice and human rights reforms.

I hope my address will inspire your deliberations in this Annual Meeting and reinforce your conviction to promote justice and rule of law globally.

Thank you for the opportunity to address you and greetings from Dhaka.