

**Speech of Dr. Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed, the Hon'ble Chief Justice of  
Bangladesh on the occasion of Legal Aid Day -2025 organised by Supreme  
Court Legal Aid Committee**

**Venue: Supreme Court Auditorium**

**Date: 14/05/2025**

**Hon'ble Chair, Madam Justice Kazi Zinat Haq**

**Senior most Judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of  
Bangladesh Mr Justice Md. Ashfaul Islam**

**Hon'ble Judges of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh**

**Hon'ble Judges of High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh**

**Learned Attorney General for Bangladesh**

**President, Supreme Court Bar Association**

**Distinguished Members of the Supreme Court Bar**

**Registrar General, Bangladesh Supreme Court**

**Director, National Legal Aid Services Organisation**

**Members of the Supreme Court Registry**

**Members of the print and electronic media**

**Good Evening**

I begin by paying homage to the martyrs of the 1971 Liberation War, the vanguards of our national existence; to the heroes of the Language Movement of 1952, whose struggle for dignity and identity gave voice to our collective soul; and

to the fallen of the July-August 2024 Revolution whose sacrifice rekindled the nation's moral imagination and hardened our resolve to restore equity and justice. Their legacies guide our mission and give depth to our aspirations.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is both a privilege and a solemn responsibility for me to address this distinguished audience on the occasion of Legal Aid Day a day that emphasizes our solid commitment to the ideal that justice must be accessible to all, regardless of economic condition or social circumstance. Although the official observance took place two weeks ago, the values it carries remain ever relevant and vital. Legal Aid Day is not a symbolic gesture marked by calendar dates, it is a reflection of a moral duty that lies at the heart of our constitutional promise that every person, however poor or powerless, shall stand equal before the law.

Bangladesh has a proud history rooted in the constitutional ethos of justice, liberty, and equality. But no constitutional pledge, however noble, can have meaning if it fails to reach those most in need. Legal aid, therefore, is not an act of benevolence rather it is an essential component of the rule of law. Through the National Legal Aid Services Organization, Supreme Court Legal Aid Committee and numerous District Legal Aid Committees, thousands have been assisted in asserting their rights and securing their remedies. Yet, I must admit that our present efforts, while commendable, fall short of our greater aspiration to ensure that no one is denied justice merely because they lack means or personal capacity.

**Esteemed Guests,**

In my assessment of legal aid eligibility, we have long relied upon the 'means test' the standard tool for evaluating a person's financial ability to bear litigation costs.

However, time and again, we have seen accused persons technically deemed above the income threshold, yet in reality, they were bereft of the ability to mount a meaningful defence. They were, for all practical purposes, voiceless in the courtroom. In response to this profound gap, soon after assuming office, I initiated a reform measure of critical importance, i.e., the inclusion of a ‘capacity test’ alongside the traditional ‘means test’. This initiative seeks to evaluate not only whether a person can pay for legal services but whether they can truly defend themselves. The message, therefore is: access to justice must be measured not only by entry into the courtroom, but by the ability to participate meaningfully in the process of justice.

This is only one component of a broader vision that I have sought to implement since assuming office. Ladies and Gentlemen, on 21 September 2024, I announced a comprehensive Judicial Reform Roadmap, founded on capacity building, administrative autonomy, and procedural efficiency. Under this initiative, two landmark developments have already taken place. The Supreme Judicial Appointment Council and the Supreme Judicial Council have been made operational as autonomous constitutional bodies under the authority of the Supreme Court. These bodies now hold exclusive powers to recruit and remove judges of the apex court, free from any executive or legislative interference. This is a vital step towards insulating the judiciary from external influence and reinforcing the independence that is indispensable to the credibility of our justice delivery regime.

At the same time, we have submitted a detailed proposal to the Government for the creation of a Supreme Court Secretariat. Such a body is not a privilege, it is a constitutional necessity. An independent judiciary must also be institutionally autonomous, capable of managing its own administrative, financial, and human

resources without dependence on the executive. This proposal has gained broad support from the government, within the judiciary, and from our development partners, and I remain hopeful that its implementation is imminent.

### **Distinguished participants,**

Complementing these structural changes, I have issued 12-point directives aimed at eliminating corruption from judicial processes, and have taken measures that include stricter oversight mechanisms, and open grievance redress platforms. As part of this broader initiative, the Supreme Court has established two dedicated helpline services, enabling justice seekers to submit complaints, seek guidance, and benefit from timely responses to their concerns. Such a measure has happily been replicated too at divisional and district level the past several months. These helplines have met with overwhelming response and success affirming the people's readiness to engage with a justice system that is transparent, responsive, and citizen-focused.

Encouraged by this success, I am pleased to take this initiative to the next phase. Today, before this august gathering, ladies and gentlemen, I am formally announcing the launch of a dedicated helpline for every district judiciary across the country. I am also announcing therefore, that each district will be equipped with a designated mobile number assigned in a symmetric and accessible pattern, accompanied by a smartphone device to ensure effective service delivery. To operationalise this, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh is simultaneously issuing a comprehensive circular even as I speak detailing the functionalities, standard operating procedures, and oversight modalities of the helpline service. This initiative seeks to ensure that no citizen regardless of their location or circumstance feels abandoned or unheard when seeking justice.

## **Distinguished Guests,**

In this holistic vision, legal aid occupies a place of paramount importance. It is not peripheral; it is central to our mission. Recognising this, I have undertaken the restructuring of the Supreme Court Legal Aid Committee. This body, under its new composition, has been entrusted with greater responsibilities and a renewed sense of purpose. I expect the Committee not only to administer aid but to act as a catalyst for change, through active engagement, particularly with the Bar, and civil society. I believe its mandate must be expanded to cover wider domains, including legal literacy campaigns, digital outreach, and support for vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly, and the climate-affected.

To fulfill these objectives, one must acknowledge a practical reality that is, legal aid cannot be sustained without adequate resources. It is, therefore, imperative that appropriate and predictable budgetary allocations be made to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of legal aid services nationwide. We cannot ask our legal aid committees to perform miracles on shoestring budgets. Investment in legal aid is not an expenditure, it is an investment in the rule of law and in the social fabric of justice.

## **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The transformative journey we have embarked on the past many months has neither been easy nor without challenge. But I am deeply inspired by the response of the district judiciaries and the magistracies across the country. I have personally travelled through all 7 (seven) divisions of Bangladesh, outside of the capital, to convey the urgency of reform and to call upon judges, magistrates, and members of the legal profession to claim ownership of this shared mission. Their responses

have been nothing short of remarkable. The Judicial Service Association, in particular, has embraced the reform agenda with vigour and dedication. Furthermore, local Bar Associations have enthusiastically come on board by organising seminars, convening public dialogues, and initiating grassroots consultations to align their work with my roadmap.

In continuation of this momentum, I am pleased to share that the Supreme Court of Bangladesh will host a national plenary session on 22 June 2025, to be graced by the august presence of His Excellency, the Chief Adviser of the Caretaker Government. This gathering will bring together the nation's key judicial stakeholders, development partners and policy thinkers to reflect, reaffirm, and recalibrate our collective commitment to reform. I consider this upcoming plenary not merely an event, but a milestone, an institutional tone-setter for the future we envision

Our development partners have walked beside us on this journey. The UNDP, since December last year, has been closely engaged with our reform efforts. The European Union, the UK, Sweden, and other stakeholders have lent not only technical support but moral endorsement. Their belief in our vision has fortified our resolve. But ultimately, it is the people of Bangladesh, the justice seekers in the remotest corners of our land, who must remain at the heart of everything we do.

Today, as we reflect on Legal Aid Day, I call upon every stakeholder, government officials, members of the bar, judicial officers, media and development partners, to renew their pledge for people-centric justice.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We shall together reaffirm that legal aid is not a marginal activity, it is the lifeline of constitutionalism. It is the foundation upon which an inclusive and humane justice system must rest. And let it be our legacy that the judiciary of Bangladesh not only delivered judgments, but delivered justice.

Thank you all.