

IN THE CROWN COURT AT COVENTRY

THE KING

V

ZARA ARSALAN

Sentencing Remarks of Mr Justice Cavanagh

12 March 2026

1. Zara Arsalan, on 20 February 2026, you were convicted at this court, after a trial, of the murder of your daughter, Harleen Bains, also known as Bambi. I will call her Harleen. Harleen was two months old when you killed her.
2. Harleen Bains died as the result of extreme violence that was inflicted upon her on the morning of 23 July 2020. I will summarise the injuries that were caused to Harleen in a moment. When those injuries were inflicted upon Harleen, there were only two people present in the property in Caddick Crescent, West Bromwich, where the family was living, apart from Harleen. These were you, Ms Arsalan, then known as Sharandeep Kaur Talwandi, and your then partner and Harleen's father, Jatinder "Danny" Bains. Mr Bains died by suicide in August 2022 and so was not present to give evidence at the trial. There was no suggestion that Ms Arsalan and Mr Bains were jointly responsible for the assault on Harleen. Accordingly, the key question that the jury had to decide, in relation to the count of murder, was whether it was you, Ms Arsalan, or Mr Bains who had inflicted the fatal injuries on Harleen. The verdict which the jury returned against you, guilty of murder, means that the jury were satisfied so that they were sure that it was you, Ms Arsalan, and not Mr Bains, who killed Harleen. That is the basis on which I will sentence you.
3. There is only one sentence that the law allows me to pass for the offence of murder. It is a sentence of imprisonment for life. That is the sentence that I will

pass, but I am also required by the Sentencing Act 2020 to specify a minimum term which must elapse before you can be considered for release on licence.

4. It is important to stress two matters at the outset.
5. The first is that you – and everyone concerned with this case or watching, reading, or reporting this sentence – should understand what your sentence of imprisonment for life in fact means. The minimum term is not a fixed term after which you will automatically be released. Rather, it is the minimum time that you must spend in custody before your case can be considered by the Parole Board. It is for the Parole Board to say, after expiry of the minimum term, whether or not you are fit to be released. There is no guarantee that an offender upon whom a minimum term order has been imposed will be released once the minimum term has expired, or at any particular time thereafter. If and when you are released, you will be subject to licence, and this will remain the case for the rest of your life. If for any reason your licence were to be revoked, such as if you reoffend, you will be recalled to continue to serve your sentence in custody. You will, therefore, face the consequences for the rest of your life.
6. The second matter is this: your victim, Harleen, was a tiny child. She should have had a long and happy life ahead of her. She has been deprived of the opportunity to experience the joys and challenges of human existence over a full lifespan. Normally, when I sentence an offender for murder, I say something about the victim, so as to give a sense of their personality and character, but I cannot do so on this occasion, because this poor baby was too young to have developed a personality or to have given people a sense of what she was like. However, her aunt, Kiranjit Bains, in a victim impact statement, said that Harleen was a beautiful sweet baby who was deeply cherished. The death of a child at this young age is a great tragedy. Kiranjit Bains said that the grief that Harleen's family carry is constant and overwhelming. The minimum term that I am about to impose should not be seen by anyone as being intended to be a measure of the value of Harleen's life. Nothing that I can do will provide recompense for the loss of this young child's life.
7. I am about to describe the key facts that are relevant to your sentence. Unfortunately, the Court has not heard evidence directly from anyone who was present when the terrible events took place on 23 July 2023. Harleen, of course,

did not survive and in any event would have been far too young to speak up for herself. Jatinder Bains is no longer alive, and you chose not to give evidence. You gave conflicting and untruthful statements to the police about the events on that morning. The best evidence I have about the circumstances of the assault that led to Harleen's death comes from the medical evidence about her injuries and from the evidence of the first responders. I will come to this in a moment. Before I do so, I will say something about your background and about the period leading up to Harleen's death.

8. You were born on 25 November 1994 and so, at the time of Harleen's death, you were 25 years old. You are now aged 31. Jatinder Bains was aged 31 when Harleen died. You had, by then, been in a relationship for a year or two. Harleen was your only child. By 2020, you were somewhat estranged from your family.
9. Jatinder Bains suffered from mental health problems. These included bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia with psychotic episodes, ADHD, and emotionally unstable personality traits. When undergoing mental health crises, he would exhibit psychotic or "fantasy-based" behaviour, with rambling and incoherent speech. However, even during his crises, he had no history of violence, apart from one occasion in 2018 when he struck his mother, which did not cause any injury. Essentially, however, when Mr Bains took the medication that was prescribed for him, his mental health was good; the problems arose when he did not take his medication. At the time of Harleen's death, Jatinder Bains was taking his medication and said he felt well. He was assessed in hospital, on 23 or 24 July 2020 as showing no evidence at that time of acute mental illness, with no presentation suggestive of an acute psychiatric episode.
10. The relationship between you and Mr Bains was stormy in the period leading up to Harleen's death. The police were called out after a fight between the two of you in September 2019. You alleged that Jatinder Bains had punched you in the head, but you declined to make a statement. You went briefly to a women's refuge but then you returned voluntarily to the home you shared with Jatinder Bains. Some time after becoming pregnant, you moved to Caddick Close, and neighbours reported that they heard noisy arguments between you. On two occasions, on 3 March and 24 April 2020, the police attended because a disturbance had been reported, but both you and Mr Bains denied that there had been an argument. A few days later you both denied to a social worker that there

had been any violence between you. Harleen was born on 25 May 2020, and the police were called again to the property on 26 June 2020. On this occasion, the caller had been Jatinder Bains's mother. She said that you were suicidal, but you denied this. It was clear on this occasion that both you and Jatinder Bains were intoxicated. You and Harleen spent the night in hospital, and you told social workers whilst you were there that the whole matter had been blown out of proportion.

11. Text messages, WhatsApp messages, and a short video that was shown to the Court indicated that, at least verbally, you were aggressive towards Mr Bains and, at the very least, gave as good as you got in arguments with him.
12. As a result of concerns that had been raised, a community midwife, a health visitor, and social workers kept a close watch on you whilst you were pregnant and in the immediate post-natal period. You were assessed by a health visitor for post-natal depression six weeks after Harleen's birth but showed no signs of it.
13. There were concerns about your drinking and about the condition of the property, and it was clear that you were finding motherhood something of a struggle, but on the whole the professionals considered that you had a good mother and baby bond with Harleen and that she was well cared for.
14. The medical evidence showed that Harleen suffered a rib fracture between 3-6 days before 23 July 2020. This was the result of rough handling. I am sure that it was you who caused this injury to Harleen, and that, like the much more serious injuries that you inflicted on her a few days later, it was the result of a sudden loss of temper on your part. It is clear from the medical evidence that Harleen would have screamed or cried loudly for some minutes after you did this to her, and so you would have realised that you had hurt her. The significance of this for the purposes of this sentencing exercise is that you knew by that stage that you were at risk of harming Harleen, but you did not seek help or support.
15. I now come on to the events of the morning of 23 July 2020 itself. As I have said, the Court heard no evidence from anyone who was present in the property when the assaults took place. However, in light of the undisputed expert medical evidence and evidence from the first responders, I can be satisfied so that I am

sure of the following: Jatinder Bains made a 999 call just after 10 am. The assault by you which resulted in the fatal injuries being inflicted on Harleen had taken place only a few minutes before. The manner in which the assault was carried out is made clear by the nature of the injuries that Harleen suffered. The injuries suffered by Harleen were catastrophic and resulted from the use of extreme force. Harleen suffered a number of severe fractures to her skull, and brain injuries which caused catastrophic and irreversible brain damage. The injuries to Harleen's brain and skull were consistent with multiple blunt force blows to the head, or with repeated and savage banging of her head against a hard surface. Harleen also suffered very severe injuries to her spine, to the dura and other tissues around her spine, and a number of rib fractures. She suffered a broken collarbone and a fracture to her left leg close to her ankle. It is clear from the injuries to her spine and to her ribs that Harleen had been held very tightly and roughly whilst she was shaken very vigorously, resulting in severe oscillation of her head and neck.

16. In the light of these injuries, I am sure that your assault upon Harleen involved two mechanisms, though it is impossible to know the order in which they took place. It was essentially a single incident. First, you shook Harleen very violently indeed, holding her very tightly and roughly whilst you did so. This was, as one medical expert put it, far outside the range of normal handling, and the person doing it would have had no doubt that it would cause injury to the child. Second, as no weapon was found at the scene, I am sure that you banged her head, very hard, against an unyielding object, probably the floor, which consisted of carpet over concrete. It is clear from the medical evidence of the skull injuries that severe blunt force was applied to Harleen's head a number of times, and I am sure that you banged her head against the floor three or four times. It is clear from the medical evidence that the level of force used was exceptionally severe.
17. There was no evidence that you were under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs when the assault took place that morning, though there was evidence from Jatinder Bains's sister, Kiranjit Bains, that he had called her late the night before and had said that you were drunk. You had been taking the prescription drug pregabalin for sciatic pain. You said that this made you dizzy, but it could not possibly have had any connection with the assault that took place on Harleen.

18. In my view, it is likely that the immediate trigger for your fit of violence was that Harleen would not stop crying, and you were tired and stressed. It is not surprising that Harleen was fractious, as you had fractured her rib a few days before. In any event, it is absolutely clear that you lost your temper with her.
19. Whilst Jatinder Bains was speaking to the despatcher on the 999 call, you tried to resuscitate Harleen, but by then it was already too late. Harleen was in a coma. Her injuries were not survivable. Despite heroic efforts by the first responders, who arrived very quickly after the 999 call, and those of the doctors and nurses at Sandwell General Hospital and at Birmingham Children's Hospital, Harleen died the following day, 24 July 2020.
20. One of the police officers who attended at Caddick Crescent had a body worn camera, and on the video footage you come across as calm and somewhat detached, as if you were unaware of the seriousness of the situation. Shortly after you arrived at hospital, you were arrested and you were first interviewed by the police on 24 July 2020, before Harleen died. At that stage, you gave what was accepted on your behalf at trial to be a completely false and untruthful description of events. You said that Harleen had suffered her injuries when she wriggled out of your arms and fell onto the floor whilst you were leaning down to change her. This is what you had told the first responders and the medical staff at the hospitals. You did not depart from this explanation when you were interviewed again, over a year later, in December 2021. You were arrested for murder in November 2022, and, on this occasion, you gave a completely different account. By then, Jatinder Bains was dead, and you were made aware of this on the day of your interviews in November 2022. You said that Jatinder Bains had assaulted you and Harleen whilst you were holding her in your arms on the morning of 23 July 2020, raining blows on both of you. You said that he knocked you unconscious, and that when you woke up on the floor, she was lying next to you, having suffered the fatal injuries whilst you were unconscious. Accordingly, you told the police that it was Jatinder Bains who had inflicted the fatal injuries upon Harleen. This, too, was a false narrative, designed to throw suspicion onto Jatinder Bains rather than upon yourself. You had not complained about an assault by Jatinder Bains on 23 July 2020 when you spoke to the police on 23 and 24 July 2020, or at any time up until November 2022, and you showed no signs of injury when you were medically examined on 23 July 2020.

21. I now move on to address the considerations that I have taken into account when deciding upon the minimum term that I will impose for the offence of murder.
22. In deciding upon the minimum term that you must serve, I must take account of the starting point which is prescribed for this offending by Schedule 21 to the Sentencing Act 2020.
23. I begin by identifying the appropriate starting point for determining the minimum term. In your case, the appropriate starting point is 15 years. However, the starting point is not necessarily the end point, and it will not be in your case. I must also take into account the aggravating and mitigating factors which the Sentencing Act requires me to take into account, and I must take account of such other aggravating and mitigating factors as I consider relevant, before arriving at the appropriate minimum sentence.
24. I will deal first with aggravating factors.
25. The most significant aggravating factors are the extreme youth and vulnerability of your victim, and the gross abuse of trust involved in this offence. These are very substantial. Nobody is more vulnerable and reliant on others than a two-month-old baby. As Harleen's mother, you were the person, above anyone else, to whom she was entitled to look for love and protection. I bear in mind, however, the need to avoid double-counting when the aggravating factors of the victim's extreme youth and the abuse of trust are considered.
26. This offence was not aggravated by being planned or premeditated. I am satisfied that you had not intended to harm Harleen until the very moment when you did so. You acted in a sudden fit of rage. However, I consider that the scale and nature, the sheer ferocity, of the violence that was inflicted upon Harleen is a significant aggravating factor, particularly because of the suffering it will have caused to her. The assault will not have taken very long: it may well not have been any longer than a few seconds, and almost certainly it did not last longer than a minute or two. But, whilst it happened, the violence was ferocious and, tiny though she was, the pain and fear that Harleen will have suffered for the short time between the commencement of the assault and when she was rendered unconscious will have been truly terrible.

27. A further aggravating factor is that, as I have said, you had lost your temper with Harleen a few days before, and had fractured one of her ribs. You would have been aware that you had caused injury to her, because she would have screamed and cried. You had the opportunity to contact professionals in order to seek help for yourself and to protect Harleen, but you did not take it. This is not, however, a case in which the murder was the culmination of a sustained period of violence towards a small child: apart from that one earlier incident, you had tried to care for Harleen as well as you were able to do so.
28. The final aggravating factor is that you lied about the events of 23 July 2020, first to try to persuade the authorities that Harleen's death was a tragic accident, and then, when it became clear to you that you were under suspicion of murder, by blaming Jatinder Bains and accusing him of doing what you had done. It is true that, at the time when you did this, Jatinder Bains was already dead, and you were made aware of this on the day that you blamed him in November 2022, but nonetheless, you sought to tarnish his memory with a false accusation of murder.
29. I now move on to the mitigating factors, and potential mitigating factors.
30. It is a mitigating factor that Harleen's killing was not premeditated. As I have said, the assault was carried out in a sudden fit of rage.
31. However, it is not a significant mitigating factor in this case that you intended to cause serious bodily harm rather than to kill. This case is different from what are sometimes known as "baby-shaking" cases, in which a stressed and exhausted parent shakes a crying baby too hard and causes the baby's death. In this case, not only did you shake Harleen with extreme force, but you also hit her head with great force against a hard surface, a number of times. No-one could have done this to a tiny and fragile baby without appreciating that there was a real prospect that it would lead to her death, not just to injury. I am sure, therefore, that in the moment, you did not care if you killed her or not, even though this had not been your plan, and even though this was something you almost immediately regretted (as shown by your attempts to resuscitate Harleen during the 999 call).

32. There is no mitigating factor of remorse in your case. As I have said, from the moment the first responders arrived, you tried to cover up what you had done. Though I have no doubt that you genuinely loved Harleen, you have spent the time since she died looking out for yourself and seeking to avoid being held responsible for her death. You have never expressed remorse.
33. Again, there is no significant mitigation arising out of the stresses and strains of your relationship with Jatinder Bains. I have no doubt that your relationship was difficult, and that this added to the stress that you were under, but you were not under his control. You gave as good as you got with him. It would have been very easy to leave him, if you felt that the relationship was harmful. In any event, any resentment or hostility that you might have felt towards Jatinder Bains cannot possibly be a significant mitigating factor for the assault that you carried out upon your innocent child.
34. There is some mitigation arising from the fact that you were, at the time of Harleen's death, a young woman who was under strain from having recently given birth to a child. Though there is no evidence that Harleen was a particularly difficult baby, it is stressful and exhausting for any new mother to have to look after a child, and in the few days prior to the assault, Harleen was almost certainly more fretful and distressed than usual in her final days, because her rib had been fractured by you. Also, you suffered from back pain as a result of sciatica. It is likely that you were short of sleep and struggling to cope. You did not have much family support, though you were given a very great deal of support from the midwife, health visitor, and social workers. However, the violence that you inflicted upon Harleen was vastly out of proportion to the strain that you were under and you were well aware that you had the option of obtaining help from the midwife, health visitor, and/or social workers if you felt unable to cope. You were venting your anger on a defenceless child.
35. A further potential mitigating factor that I must consider is whether, at the time you assaulted Harleen, you were suffering from any mental disorder or mental disability which lowered your degree of culpability. I have reviewed the two expert psychiatric reports which were obtained during the course of the trial, for the purpose of considering whether you were fit to participate, but I bear in mind that those reports were focused on your mental state in early 2026, not in July 2020, more than five years previously, and that the experts had not been asked

to give an opinion about your mental state in July 2020. However, one of the experts, Dr Tim Rogers, reviewed and summarised in his report the GP and other medical records that were made whilst you were pregnant and in the period after Harleen's birth. These records show that you appeared to be well during this period, apart from pain from sciatica, for which you were prescribed medication. Though you had complained of feeling depressed at earlier periods in your life, there were no concerns on the part of your GP or other health practitioners that you were depressed during this period. You have since suffered several psychotic episodes, but the first one of these was in October 2021. There is no evidence that you were psychotic at the time of Harleen's death. Dr Rogers said in his report, "From 10 October 2019 until the time of the allegations, there is an absence of clear corroborative evidence in Ms Arsalan's medical records of abnormality of mental functioning in her." The midwife, health visitor, and social workers who engaged with you during your pregnancy and the post-natal period did not record any issues with your mental health. You told the health visitor in early May 2020 that you had no concerns about your mental health. When admitted to hospital overnight on 26 June 2020, you denied any current mental health issues including any paranoid or suicidal ideation. The following day you told social workers that you were not suicidal or experiencing low moods and that you were fit and healthy. During a visit from the health visitor on 7 July 2020, you completed the Edinburgh post-natal depression scale test, and scored 2, a score that does not suggest post-natal depression. This meant that the health visitor had no concerns about post-natal depression or other mental health issues.

36. There is, therefore, no medical evidence before the Court that you were suffering from any significant mental disorder or disability at the time of the offence, let alone any such disorder or disability that might reduce your culpability.
37. I bear in mind, however, that you have had episodes of psychosis since these events took place, for which you had to be hospitalised, and you are currently being treated with antipsychotic medication. Though I ruled during the trial that you were fit to participate in the trial, and the expert medical evidence showed that you were not suffering a severe psychotic episode at the time, there is some risk that your mental health may deteriorate at some stage during your sentence. It is impossible to place a reliable estimate on the likelihood of this.

If this were to happen, this would increase the strain of serving a long prison sentence.

38. It is, to some small extent, a mitigating factor that you were of previous good character. At the time of the offence, you had no convictions, reprimands, warnings or cautions recorded against you. Given the nature of this offence, however, this is only of very limited mitigating value. You were 25 years old at the time of this offence. Though this means that you were not very young at the time, I consider that you were somewhat immature.

39. It is also necessary to recognise that the offence happened well over five years ago, but, given the nature of this offence, this has no significant impact upon the appropriate minimum sentence. Throughout that period, you had maintained a false narrative of the events that led to Harleen's death.

40. I now come to the sentence.

41. The qualifying days that you have spent in custody will count towards the minimum term for murder. The time spent in custody to date is 65 days. The appropriate statutory victim surcharge will be applied.

42. Zara Arsalan, for the murder of Harleen Bambi Bains, I sentence you to imprisonment for life. Taking account of all the relevant circumstances, and the aggravating and mitigating factors that I have set out, the minimum term will be 19 years, minus 65 days to take account of time spent on remand. This results in a sentence of 18 years and 300 days.