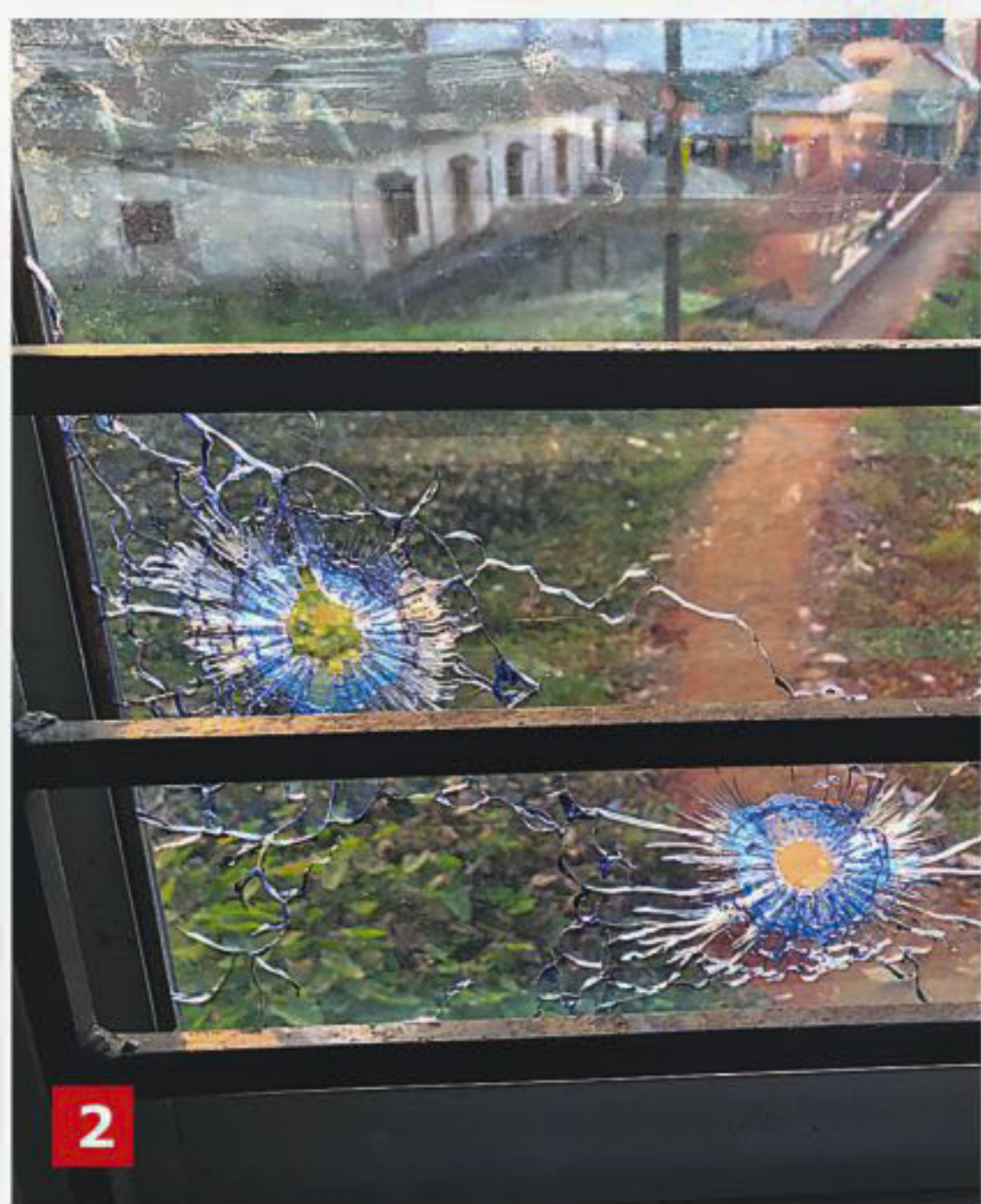




**Top to Bottom**  
1. Workers have been protesting against wage discrepancy in different grades. 2. At least 150 workers have been injured in 'clashes' between police and workers. 3. Holes in a make-shift curtain left by rubber bullet shot through closed glass windows 4. Injuries from 8 rubber bullets shot at close range.

PHOTOS: STAR & SUSHMITA S. PREETHA



**1. Indents from rubber bullets are found in many residential quarters of RMG workers. 2. Bullets through the glass windows of Akhi Begum—one of which hit her.**

#### After page 7

Two of them show us their own severe injuries, including rubber bullet wounds, sustained allegedly after law enforcers broke into their homes and shops, threatened them and beat them indiscriminately. "We were spared our lives, you can see what they did to us just for being witnesses to the event, but if we say anything more, who knows what will happen?" says a local, with no connection to the RMG sector.

The police do not seem to know who shot Sumon. Both the industrial police and local police have repeatedly told *The Daily Star* that the shots were not fired from their guns. SP of Industrial Police Shana Shaminur Rahman claims they had fired several rubber bullets, tear shells and shotguns in the air to disperse workers. Could one of these shots in the air have accidentally hit Sumon? "No, no injuries were sustained from those shots and no lethal weapons were used on that day," says Shaminur Rahman.

Has a probe committee been formed to investigate such a possibility? "Why are you asking a settled issue over and over again? There is no need of a committee because the worker in question was from Anlima and there was no untoward incident at Anlima.

How a worker died there, that is not our headache, who knows who killed him?" argues Shaminur. "Why do you keep bringing up this worker's death?"

"Because you are... the police? And we usually ask the police if there has been a death? It's not personal, we are just doing our job," I suggest tentatively. "This is a very important sector and bringing up this issue is not a wise decision," concludes Shaminur.

Superintendent of Police (SP) in Dhaka Sha Migan Shafiur Rahman reiterates Shaminur's stance that they had no conflict with Anlima workers. He goes a step further and adds, "The problem happened at Standard, which is 15 km away from where Anlima is."

To be clear, as mentioned previously, Standard and Anlima are, at most, a five-minute walk apart.

Shafiur informs that a case has been filed but no progress has been made yet. When asked about the post-mortem report, he says the police have not received it from Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital, seven days after the incident happened.

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Sumon wasn't the only worker shot by mysterious forces on January 8.

#### SPOTLIGHT

Akhi Begum, a 45-year-old housewife who lives in a building adjacent to residential quarters of RMG workers, sustained severe injuries from gunshot and is undergoing treatment at Enam Medical College and Hospital. Shots fired from outside penetrated through the second-floor window of their three-storey house—one went right into her stomach, another pierced through her skin and into her TV a couple of metres from her bed, and another is still lodged inside one of the walls of her home.

"All of a sudden I heard a lot of noise, and tear gas was starting to come into my room. I quickly went towards the window to close it, and just as I sat down on the bed to see what was going on, something came in through the window and went into my stomach. I didn't know what it was, I saw blood was gushing out of me, and then I lost consciousness," says Akhi, who is a diabetic and is suffering from complications as a result of the injury.

Sabur Hossain Ullash, her husband and a local businessman, thinks his building was targeted because whoever fired the shots thought that workers had taken refuge there. "Just moments before this happened, police started throwing tear gas to disperse the workers, then they were chasing them and trying to find those who had hidden in the residential quarters. Even though our home does not house any worker, they must have thought we were giving them protection," he says.

"But, tell me, can they just shoot like this? At any one? Even if workers were here, is this legal? Don't we have a Constitution?" asks a livid Sabur Hossain, who is adamant about taking whoever is responsible to court.

The doctors have surgically removed the bullet lodged into Akhi's stomach and showed it to them, says Akhi and Sabur. "We even have a video if anybody wants evidence whether it was a real bullet or not," says Sabur.

We visit a few residential areas in Savar, a day after the government revised wages in

six grades for garment workers in response to workers' week-long demonstrations for fairer wages. We speak to three more workers with severe wounds, who claim they were beaten and shot in their own homes—and have medical reports to prove it. We also find rubber bullet indents on the walls, broken glass windows, beat up metal doors and tear gas shells in their residential quarters.

"I was hiding in my room from the tear gas when the police started kicking down the doors. Then they just started shooting. They shot through this closed window and the bullet went through my leg," says Rubia Begum, a worker and a resident of Baghbari area of Hemayetpur.

Rubia's medical report from Enam Medical College and Hospital states she had "foreign body in right leg due to gunshot injury."

AZM Salim, junior consultant of Orthopedics in Enam Medical College and Hospital, who supervised her surgery, says she had been shot with a rubber bullet.

Rubia has already spent around Tk 35,000 on her treatment—money she has had to borrow from her neighbours.

Another worker says law enforcers, along with some outsiders, had come into their compound, broken into his room, dragged him out and beat him. "I could not feel anything anymore, I kept on thinking for how long can they beat me? When they were tired of it, they shot me in my leg [with a rubber bullet]," he says, lifting his lungi to show his bandaged wound.

In another residential quarter, we again find injured workers who, after a moment's hesitation about our identities, provide similar descriptions. I ask if the attacks are against targeted individuals. "They didn't know who was inside. They were targeting anyone who looked like a worker," replies Amina Begum\*, the landlady of the quarter. "We are really afraid of what's going to happen now. Please don't write anything that would get us into trouble," she begs.

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At the time of writing this, at least 150

workers have been injured as a result of clashes between police and workers, according to media reports alone. The real number is likely to be considerably higher. Policemen, too, have reportedly sustained injuries.

Violence while dealing with labour demands have become an unfortunate norm in Bangladesh. In fact, almost every major labour protest in the recent decade has resulted in one or more deaths of workers. According to labour leaders and human rights activists, none of these cases have ever seen justice.

"Workers in Bangladesh have rights just as any other citizen, but their rights, unfortunately, are not recognised. That is what these killings, with impunity, suggest," says human rights advocate Sultana Kamal. "We want to press forth the demand for a fair probe into the death [of Sumon] to find out exactly how he died—if it's not the police, even if he died from an accident, that needs to be investigated," she adds.

And while our factory owners and government officials are apt to point out that it is our workers who are to be blamed for the violence (eight cases that we know of have already been filed against 215 named and more than 1,000 unnamed garment workers for their alleged involvement in vandalism and looting), one needs to ask if the violence used against workers is in any way proportional—or constitutional.

Supreme Court lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua says, "There are clear guidelines laid out in Police Regulations, Bengal-1943 about the rules of engagement in use of firearms in dispersing an assembly, even if it is an 'unlawful' one. The use of firearms is allowed only under the most extreme circumstances—and only as a last resort."

According to Section 153 (c) of The Police Regulations Act—

**(I) An order to fire upon a crowd should be regarded as an extreme measure to which recourse should be had only in the last resort when it is absolutely necessary for the defence**

**of life or property or when a Magistrate, an officer-in charge of a police-station or police officer superior in rank to such officer considers it impossible to disperse a mob by any other means.**

**(ii) Before an order is given to fire upon a crowd the Magistrate or, if no Magistrate is present, the police officer in command shall give full and sufficient warning to the rioters that they will be fired upon if they do not disperse' immediately.**

"Even if and when firing is necessary, there are guidelines as to what kind of bullets you use or where you aim. There are also strict instructions on how to investigate a death from use of firearms, but these guidelines are rarely, if ever, followed," argues Barua.

Former Inspector General of Police of Bangladesh Police Mohammad Nurul Huda agrees that use of force should be proportional but adds that what is proportional depends on the context. "If someone charges you with a stick and you shoot, that is not proportional, but if someone throws a heavy rock at you that can have lethal consequences, you may need to shoot."

Under what circumstances would it be justified to shoot inside a home, I ask. "Again, it would depend, for instance, if you were apprehending an extremist and there might be firearms and explosives," says Huda. "But if you had knowledge they were unarmed and you did not give them any prior warning, there would not be a justification."

With no major union leading or guiding the workers this time around—or standing up for them, for that matter (the complex reasons of which are beyond the scope of this article)—workers may, in fact, be more vulnerable to retaliation, including arrests, assaults, harassment, and terminations, for demanding a fairer wage structure. Mass arrests, as well as terminations, are already underway, as per media reports and worker testimonies.

"This time, workers came out on the streets spontaneously to press forth a logical demand. But in the absence of workers' right to unionise, the government and owners have chosen to respond through a crackdown on workers, with local goons and police collectively repressing them," says Taslima Akhter, coordinator of Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity, a left-wing trade union. "These cannot be good examples for the protection and expansion of this very important industry. You need to give space to workers and trade unions if you really want peace in this sector."

Sumon's death and its handling by the police raise serious questions of methods of response to a particular situation—how to handle a demonstration before it degenerates into violence and the fundamental issue of "open fire" upon demonstrators before giving them due warning. The state, as it attempts to tackle the grievances of workers, ought to keep in mind that over-reaction by law enforcers sometimes worsens a situation instead of solving it.

Akash Mahmud is the Savar correspondent of The Daily Star.



**"When they were tired of beating me, they shot me in my leg [with a rubber bullet]," a worker says, lifting his lungi to show his bandaged wound.**



**Exploded bullet fragments recovered from Akhi's residence. We could not independently verify whether they were real or rubber bullets.**