

Time for a deeper reflection on protests

Legal action for violence is vital, but so is addressing popular anger

It is natural to be consumed by the sheer number of people killed during the recent clashes—at least 146 in six days, as per *The Daily Star*, and even higher by some other estimates. Tragedies like this leave behind a crippling sense of doom and hopelessness, especially with restrictive measures like curfew and internet shutdown isolating us not only from the outside world but also each other. But while we try to process all this, it is crucial to take stock of other losses suffered, notably through the destruction of key public infrastructures, which we condemn in unequivocal terms. People are already having to suffer for this, with key services disrupted or discontinued. Images showing charred remains of so many government establishments and installations indicate that any recovery from the fallout will take months, if not years.

The question is, how should we go about this unprecedented crisis in our life? While attempts are underway to bring back some semblance of normalcy, including through restoring internet partially, a key concern relates to establishing accountability for what happened so far. The government appears to have made up its mind, even before investigations. It claims that BNP-Jamaat men are responsible for the destruction and arson attacks, with the PM issuing a stern warning about not sparing them “like in the past.” But any blanket accusation shrinks the space for a more nuanced reading of the situation. Is it possible that what’s really to blame is a combination of political foul play and outbursts of popular anger? Would the situation become so uncontrollable if the government handled the initial protests more judiciously, without resorting to force? And is accountability at all possible without critically probing the role of security forces, especially the intelligence services?

It is important to separate the movement from the violence that has ensued, however. As experts have pointed out, what facilitated the unholy sync between the two is the “zero-sum game of politics” which leaves little space for opposition. In such a climate, subversive forces may capitalise on public discontent over growing economic hardships, governance deficits, and the general atmosphere of intimidation and insecurity against free speech and freedom of association. People want their grievances to be heard and acted upon. But intransigence and non-responsiveness, denial of reality, or use of disproportionate force in the event of protests may be counterproductive for the authorities in the end.

What we understand from analyses like this is that it is possible, even critical, to see the recent clashes from more perspectives than one (the government’s). As we write this, over 1,400 people were arrested across the country. Many cases were also filed. This trend will likely continue as the nation searches for answers. But before this again becomes a one-way road to political blame game and suppression of rivals, it is vital that the authorities try to understand the broader circumstances in which those indiscriminate killings and destructions occurred, and ask whether it was possible to prevent them. Otherwise, we may continue to be at risk of such meltdowns.

Dhaka filling up with garbage

Urgent action needed to remove accumulated waste

In the aftermath of the mayhem that saw the destruction of multiple public infrastructures across Dhaka city on July 18-20, we face a grim, putrid reality. While several service sectors have been severely disrupted due to the violent clashes and attacks, the city’s garbage management system has also collapsed. According to media reports, since July 18, the authorities have been unable to collect household waste from residential and other areas. As a result, Dhaka has been filling up with garbage.

The events of the last one week disrupted the garbage management system of both city corporations. Garbage collection was halted during the complete shutdown called by the quota reform movement. Later, saboteurs vandalised garbage management offices and vehicles. According to a report by this daily, four garbage-carrying compactors and 29 vehicles including 10 garbage-carrying container carriers used by the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) were set ablaze at its zone-4 office in Mirpur-10 on Friday and Saturday. Meanwhile, in the Matuail landfill area, four garbage-carrying vehicles of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) were burnt down, *Prothom Alo* reported. Amounting to Tk 120 crore in losses, these made up one-fourth of DNCC’s garbage management fleet and had the collective capacity of carrying 400 tonnes of waste.

The massive loss has greatly affected the city corporations’ garbage management system, the result of which is visible now. Piles of household waste are seen lying on the streets, spreading stench around. Collectors have not visited households for the last four or five days, forcing people to dump their garbage either in the local garbage containers or directly on the streets, per another report in this daily. The secondary transfer stations are full to the brim and the garbage is now spilling onto the streets in several areas of the city. We understand that this is an unprecedented situation, and the city authorities have limited resources at the moment. But they should have had a back-up plan.

The DNCC mayor has said his office is prioritising garbage removal and has staff working in shifts amid the curfew, but it will still take a week for things to go back to normal for all kinds of crisis. If the garbage is left to rot out in the open, it poses a serious threat to not only public health and well-being, but the environment as well. Moreover, if it rains, the garbage could block the drains and cause water-logging, exacerbating the problem. We urge the city corporations to be more prudent in handling the situation and mobilise the available resources to urgently remove all the garbage from the streets to prevent another potential crisis.

Saluting the spirit of our young people



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin
is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

There is no shame in admitting that in the last few days many of us have cried helplessly, over the senseless deaths of students—teenagers or in their early twenties—the same age or close to the ages of our children. The first time we saw the video of Abu Sayed, one of the coordinators of the movement in Rangpur, being shot to death as he spread out his hands in surrender, our hearts broke at the ruthlessness of a law enforcer, repeatedly shooting at a young man who was practically unarmed. But our hearts filled with awe at the bravery of this young man who was so steadfast in a cause that demanded equal opportunity for young people to compete for government jobs.

Amidst the anguish and despair, this is what stands out the most—the spirit and courage of our young people. Our young students have proved to us once again that they are a conscious generation—contrary to common perception of them. They are well aware of the reality they are surrounded by and do not live in a bubble. We got a glimpse of this clarity of purpose during the 2018 Road Safety Movement by school students after a few of their fellow students were crushed by a raging bus at a bus stop. Their outrage took a positive form as they organised themselves into monitoring groups and started checking vehicles for their fitness, licenses etc. They were doing the job the traffic police were supposed to be doing and trying to implement basic road safety rules that should have been enforced by the government a long time ago. They showed us what their state had failed to do, which was to keep people safe from the road crashes we have become notorious for. On the streets, we saw uniformed school kids stopping vehicles—even VIP cars going the wrong direction were turned back—and checking documents. What we saw in those young faces was hope, belief in a better future, a saner world where people do not have to worry whether they will come home alive, every time they step into the streets. Their selflessness, determination and immense courage, gave us an optimism we had forgotten how to feel anymore. Sadly, their movement was nipped in the bud with violence and

intimidation, though it didn’t erase the fact that they had made history during those days and shown the country their worth as leaders.

The anti-discrimination protests for quota reform started the same year and was considered successful as it led to the government to abolish the quota system altogether. This move, however, done in haste and possibly in a huff, proved to be controversial when the

blackout), seemed to have a much more determined and organised plan. Their agenda was the same as before—to have a reasonable quota system that would give more opportunity for regular, non-quota BCS candidates a chance to compete for government positions. They were challenging the system that gave 30 percent quota to freedom fighters, their children and grandchildren, a quota which, even many freedom fighters feel, is outdated and unnecessary after 53 years of independence.

The peaceful demonstrations started to spread all over the country, and were joined not only by students of public universities but private universities, colleges and even schools—young people who joined in out of solidarity for their brothers and sisters. This fraternity of students was something so beautiful to witness that

government decided to “nip it in the bud” yet again but this time their strategy backfired badly. The students refused to back down, even after they were beaten mercilessly by ruling party goons, even when the pellets from police shotguns pierced their young bodies and blinded their eyes, even when live bullets went through their hearts. The more force and brutality were inflicted on them, the more their numbers swelled in the demonstrations, the more resolute they became. It is this fearlessness that has shown us what these young people are made of.

While the movement was derailed by the government’s disproportionate use of force that took the lives of at least 146 people, many of them students and innocent bystanders, which gave the scope for political and extremist elements to carry out vandalism and



The more force and brutality were inflicted on them, the more their numbers swelled in the demonstrations, the more resolute they became.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

High Court ruled in July 2024, that it was unconstitutional and had to be scrapped leading to the second anti-quota protests. As we know, the anti-discrimination movement was never one to abolish all quotas but to come up with a logical, fair percentage for the various marginalised groups.

The young leaders of the current movement—Students’ Movement against Discrimination—from what we saw through clips of videos aired by the media (before the internet

we, the grownups, could not help but feel proud despite the inconvenience of prolonged traffic jams and restrictions on movement. The cause they were demonstrating for in the heat and rain, for hours on end, was justified and there seemed no reason for the government not to endorse it with open arms.

But what happened in the following days is a painful reminder of the disconnect between our leaders and their young population. The

arson attacks, the steadfastness of the student protesters of the current quota reform movement remained. While we can never reconcile ourselves with this unprecedented level of violence and deaths, we will never forget those bright young faces, their fiery speeches and articulate understanding of the realities they live in. Those heroes who literally took the bullet to bring about change will be remembered as crucial figures of a tipping point in history.

Preparing for a future of extreme heat waves

access to air conditioning or even clean water. Nor is it acceptable to suggest that women should cope with extreme heat by not wearing underwear, as a former Philippine health minister recently suggested.

Instead, governments must adopt a more proactive approach and accelerate efforts to build heat resilience. By the time the next historic heat wave hits, all countries should have a national plan to address it, along with adaptation measures for local communities. In fact, every aspect of policymaking should be viewed through the lens of resilience. Beyond the health sector, the top priorities should be housing, transportation, and water—which are all targets under the Sustainable Development Goals.

Housing should come first. Many of Asia’s most vulnerable people live in poorly ventilated public housing or densely populated slums. Globally, an estimated 1.6 billion people suffer from inadequate living conditions. Given that such surveys do not usually account for ventilation, this could well be an underestimate.

There are more viable options for adaptation than advising poor people to live in air-conditioned buildings. In addition to being costly, air conditioners consume vast amounts of electricity, with researchers estimating that they are responsible for 3.9 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. Instead of burning more fossil fuels to meet this increased energy demand, policymakers must reimagine urban development to protect both the planet

and public health. For example, some countries in Asia, including Indonesia and Singapore, have begun using low-cost “cool roof” paint to lower indoor temperatures without air conditioners.

Transportation is another heat-sensitive sector. Whether riding in overcrowded buses or waiting for extended periods on sweltering train platforms, commuters in low- and middle-income countries are often exposed to extreme temperatures. Investing in sustainable transportation systems that also provide comfort during heat waves is crucial to achieving vital climate and public-health goals.

To build heat resilience, governments must also address the global water crisis. Although hydration is crucial for protection against extreme heat, nearly one-third of the world’s population does not have access to safe drinking water. Single-use plastic water bottles are not the answer; like air conditioning, they are costly, carbon-intensive, and polluting.

Heat preparedness programmes must focus on highly vulnerable groups, such as farmers and fisherfolk, construction and factory workers, the elderly, and people with comorbidities. This effort must also be extended to prisoners, detained migrants, and psychiatric patients, all of whom are often confined to extremely hot, cramped spaces.

Like storm and pandemic-response protocols, heat preparedness must be embedded in health policies. To this end, Asian countries’ disease-

surveillance systems should be updated to account for heat-related illnesses before the region endures another historic heat wave. Maintaining adequate supplies of medical equipment, from basic items like intravenous fluids to cooling vests, is also crucial.

Moreover, the potential effects of extreme heat must be integrated into the education and training of emergency doctors, community-health workers, and primary care providers, who are often the first point of contact for underprivileged patients. Regrettably, the clinical management of heat-related illnesses like heatstroke was mentioned only in passing when I was a medical student.

Lastly, researchers must focus not only on the epidemiology of heat, but also the effectiveness of our policies and interventions. The National University of Singapore, for example, launched a research centre dedicated to heat resilience in 2023; my institute will complement this with a new initiative on planetary health that will help health systems and communities across Asia build climate resilience.

With global temperatures rising at an alarming rate, we have no choice but to adapt to a warmer world. At the same time, accelerating decarbonisation could enable us to reduce the frequency and intensity of extreme heat waves. By pressuring governments and corporations to stop burning fossil fuels, we can build true heat resilience and improve planetary health.