

# Holding to account the perpetrators of crimes against protesters



ON THE SHORES OF (IN)JUSTICE

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“It was the henchmen of the ruling party and the law enforcement who committed the crimes, but we (the students) are the ones who are being picked up.” — Tasneem Tanha, a protester.

The above statement succinctly captures the feeling of student protesters about the role of law enforcement agencies in committing the infamous July massacre, and what was then done in its aftermath. While electronic media lost no time in repeating the government’s carefully crafted narrative to divert people’s attention from mindless killings to the damaging of state properties and the much coveted symbols of development of the ruling regime, leading dailies were able to deliver updates and analysis on grievous state crimes unleashed on them.

It was only after the withdrawal of restrictions on internet services that the extent and magnitude of such wrongdoings began to unravel. Graphic video footage of wanton violence committed by the law enforcers on unarmed young protesters triggered outrage. The display of the government’s might through use of armoured personnel carriers and helicopters, new kits in the arsenal of “law enforcement,” further added to the trauma of the people. For the citizenry, by now habituated with social media offering them real time information and alternative perspectives, the internet blockade was stifling.

The number of those killed, injured or abducted by law enforcement grew with each passing day. The number of dead and maimed patients in the medical facilities began to swell. Some facilities (including renowned ones) refused to admit patients with gunshot wounds for fear of reprisal from the authorities. There are also allegations that law enforcers seized death registers from public hospitals. The families’ inability to track their lost members further contributed to the tense situation. Reports of police engaging in extortion from families of those detained caused further fury.

The move to diffuse the quota movement through the Appellate Division verdict failed to assuage the agitating students. By then, the situation deteriorated sharply as incidents of killing, involuntary disappearance, and



Wanton violence committed by the law enforcers on unarmed young protesters has triggered outrage.

FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

incarceration of protesters became rampant. The abuse of those while under arrest and in detention, particularly the female students, further incensed the people. All these prompted the protesters to make additional demands including that of accountability.

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their peers, parents, and loved ones, but also that of ordinary working people who were appalled by the brutality unleashed on the protesters. The reckless statements of the senior most functionaries of the government and the intellectuals who support their narrative—who have continued to blame the nebulous “third party” for “the violence”—have hardly resonated with ordinary citizens. Figures from Prothom Alo inform that

Students’ Movement against Discrimination has been able to maintain the momentum. Even in the absence of the top leadership who remained wrongfully detained for about a week in the Detective Branch office in Dhaka, events such as “march for justice” and “rally of defiance,” initiated by a different group of coordinators, became hugely popular. Despite on-the-spot rounding up of protesters and attempts of disruption by

very day that the government declared as a day of mourning is a testimony of the volume of support that the protesters enjoy over the beleaguered regime.

The July massacre has brought the credibility of this regime into question. While there is overpowering evidence, corroborated by Amnesty International, that Abu Sayeed of Begum Rokeya University was sprayed with pellets fired by the police, the police in

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the first information report (FIR) claimed that he died of bullets fired and brickbats flung by the protesters, and a 16-year-old had been blamed for the act. Completely denying the responsibility for shooting unarmed protesters, the government now maintains that the law enforcement agencies did not resort to firearms as they were not granted the permission to do so. This is an egregious distortion of facts.

On July 20, the general secretary of the Awami League, also a minister, while announcing the decision to impose nationwide curfew and deploy armed forces after a meeting with 14-party alliance members, categorically stated that “shoot-on-sight” order has been issued. The state minister in charge of information is on record boasting that the government had five-year supplies of bullets to quell the protest.

Such blatant misrepresentation of facts by the government makes it imperative that a thorough, credible and transparent investigation into the crimes committed by government forces, including killings, injuries, torture and abductions, and denial of the rights to express, assemble and pursue artistic freedom by the citizens, be conducted by an independent body. The youth of Bangladesh—along with ordinary masses—strive, aspire, and have remained on the streets to hold the rulers to account. Surely history will not disappoint them.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST STUDENTS

# A tribute to our little John Hampdens



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On July 23, 2024, a police officer kicked a teenager named Muhammad Fahir and mistreated an adult at UK’s Manchester airport. The incident caused shock and horror in British society and around the world and provoked protests in Greater Manchester. The police officer involved has been suspended and is under investigation.

Remarkably, around the same time, law enforcers—who are paid by our money—killed in broad daylight hundreds of unarmed protesters, mostly students, in the streets of our beloved Bangladesh. According to a July 26, 2024 report in the *Prothom Alo*, at least 204 people were killed during this spate of violence alone. Since there is an alleged attempt to suppress the records of the carnage, we may not know the true number of casualties. Perhaps, such massive shootings and killings in the streets of Bangladesh are unprecedented.

While many protesting students are succumbing to injuries, hundreds of them are lying in excruciating pain in hospitals with various degrees of bullet wounds. Fearing arrest by the police, many more chose not to receive treatment in hospitals and are suffering in silence. Many are staying under self-imposed house arrest to avoid police harassment in the streets. As Bangladesh is a country of roughly 170 million people, here we are talking about the ordeals of millions of students.

Is there no responsibility for all these killings, injuries, and sufferings? No compassion for the

tears of bereaved parents who had pinned so much hope on their now-murdered children?

Many in Bangladesh seem to have been processing the tragedy of the mass slaughter of students in dead silence. But what does it tell us about our status as human beings and about the value of our lives as Bangladeshis? I am talking about the lives of all Bangladeshis irrespective of their political complexion or partisan preferences. I repeat: here I am concerned with the lives of all

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Bangladeshis, including those who murdered our students in the streets.

Gruesome and unbearable shoot-to-kill images have continued to emerge. What transpires through a cursory look at social media sites is that students have been killed and maimed like birds. These students have parents and siblings; they are

sons and daughters of Bangladesh society and are the future of the country. Attacks on them are attacks on the entire population.

As regards the Manchester airport incident, race was most probably an important factor that incited the violent behaviour of the police officer concerned. But why did our law enforcers kill our young people

us all are lesser human beings. This realisation and efforts to address it will mark the beginning of our collective healing.

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present-day Bangladesh.

The phrase “the tip of the iceberg” is perhaps overused. But it serves to emphasise the magnitude of specific problems. The quota issue is only on the surface and only the tip of the iceberg. There are long, under-the-surface stories that have to be told to explain what gave the students such courage and brought them

underprivileged backgrounds from rural areas study at public universities with much hope and aspiration for a better life. Those who have graduated in the last couple of decades or are currently studying at Bangladesh’s universities, mostly the public ones, are cognisant of the suffering to which they have been vulnerable at the hands of so-called student leaders (known as “cadres” in campus parlance). The way ordinary students are mistreated at many of Bangladesh’s universities may reveal a pattern reminiscent of the master-slave relationship.

We do not discuss it enough, but we know what happens especially in the campus and dormitories at most universities in Bangladesh. You may not find many Bangladeshi university students/graduates who have not experienced or heard of the beatings of ordinary students by the “cadres” at universities. What is more, sexual harassment of female students at universities is common knowledge in present-day Bangladesh.

University students in Bangladesh have been enduring all forms of mistreatment; many had hoped that upon graduation they would get government jobs. The quota system hammered the last nail in the coffin of that aspiration for a better future. Seeing no other options, like Thomas Gray’s “village Hampden ... with dauntless breast,” students in Bangladesh are rising up against tyranny in their land. In a climate of cowardice and sycophancy, their exemplary courage and bravery and their faith in themselves and one another have given Bangladesh a renewed patriotism and a glowing confidence in the country’s future.

The government has been trying to contain students through bullets, blood and poison gas, but the number of John Hampdens is perhaps too many for it to suppress. Meanwhile, forces beyond our control have continued to whittle down our country to its bones.



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FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

in such large numbers? It’s not race hatred or political differences that have snatched away so many precious lives from us. It is the reduced value of our lives that made this possible.

Our lives are cheap. When we degrade and mistreat each other, we do so at our own peril. The oppressor and the oppressed among

the top of the government enjoy Brahmanical privileges, while the rest are pawns or hostages in an undemocratic system.

Students who were shot dead and injured were simply exercising their democratic rights and posed no threat to anybody. What took them to the streets tells volumes about

face-to-face with violence from law enforcement and ruling party men. They have defied the fear of death. On this issue, Bangladesh seems to have been in a war between two camps: the law enforcers and ruling party people on one side, and the general students on the other.

Meritorious students of