

# The first night of curfew and a surprise ‘abduction’



**Determined not to miss out on their first curfew experience, three reporters of The Daily Star – Asifur Rahman, Ahmed Deepto and Sukanta Halder – decided to go gallivanting around Dhaka. Just when they thought their hopes of finding a story unfolding on the streets were dashed, they got a call from an acquaintance. It was a major breaking story ...**

ASIFUR RAHMAN

It was a clear moonlit night. There was a slight breeze. An eerie quiet blanketed the streets. I could even hear our bike's growl echoing off the walls along the deserted streets. Compared to the sounds of gunshots, the acrid smell of tear gas and loud slogans during the day, the night was quite the contrast. It was past midnight on the 19th of July. We had reported 66 deaths that day – the highest death toll in a single day since our independence. The government came down with a countrywide curfew from midnight ordering the police to 'shoot at sight'. Army would be patrolling the streets too.

But we were not going to pass up this opportunity. Until then I had only heard of curfews. This was my chance to see how Dhaka looked during one. So, we were out and about with our bikes cruising around town from one end to the other. We hoped on the off chance that we would happen upon some interesting bit of news since most other journalists would not venture out tonight, having spent a

hectic, draining day.

**The first night of curfew**

The first stop was close to the Khilgaon flyover, where we took photos of the clear night and the empty streets. There were a few ambulances and trucks on the road. The rickshaws around the Khilgaon railgate area seemed to be in a hurry.

Some trains were sitting idle on the rail tracks at the Kamlapur Railway Station because the tracks were damaged at several points in the last few days.

Then we rode towards Dhaka University campus, which was the heart of the campaign like so many other movements against dictators and autocrats. All the entry points – Shahbag, Doel Chattar, Jagannath Hall and Nilkhet – were heavily guarded by law enforcers. The only way we could get in was through Fuller Road which goes right past the vice chancellor's bungalow. There were a few police constables beside the VC's residence. But we joked that it was unlikely he was sleeping in the house that night.

We went past the residential halls

through M a l l C h a t t a r, which had become a battlefield two days ago when the government decided to shut down the campus. The empty roads and the brick chips bore silent testimony to the processions and slogans, and the pitched battles students fought.

At around 2.30am, we went back to the office to pick up Sukanta Halder, another colleague who did not want to miss out either. Our chief reporter, Pinaki Roy, a veteran of another bout curfews from back in 2007, was asleep on a sofa not risking a ride home fearing he might be barred from leaving home.

With Sukanta riding pillion with one of us, we headed towards the Dhaka Medical College Hospital. We went into the morgue to see if anyone was waiting for the body of their kin. We did not find anybody there, though. However, the guards said there would be similar cases at other hospitals.



The night gradually began to turn grey. We were riding through an upscale residential area of Dhanmondi at that time. Along with Mohammadpur, this area had become a battlefield just the day before. The pavements had cracked tiles and the streets were strewn with burnt cars, buses and pick-up vans.

We first came across an olive patrol car around 6:05am in front of the national parliament. On our way to Jahangir Gate, we found that the army jeeps and vans had started deploying soldiers at different places in the city. Then we encountered our first security check at the Bijoy Sarani intersection. It seemed our luck ran out for the night.

Then my phone rang.

**Nahid is abducted**

The caller, a mutual acquaintance, delivered urgent news: Nahid Islam, a key coordinator of the student protests, had been taken by law enforcers from a house in Sabujbagh. Nahid, now a key adviser to the interim government, had been a prominent face of the movement, issuing statements and leading the charge against the quota system. This was the break we had been waiting for.

I asked him for a specific location, if not the address so that I could go there and talk to people for the story. Although in this day and age news was a 24-hour business, it ground to a halt in Bangladesh because the internet had been shut down. The news item would only reach the readers in the following day's newspaper which was another 24 hours away.

We were confused at first. We did not know which route to take, to get to that spot in Sabujbagh. The shortest route was through Hatirheel and Banasree. But since we had been covering the protests in that area the previous day, we knew that it would be near impossible to ride through that area since the protesters had put up barricades felling trees on the road. We

decided to still try our luck.

It was around 7:30am by the time we made it to the spot. But no one answered the door. We knocked several times. We could see faces peeping at us from the corners of their balconies and go back inside. Everyone was terrified. We shouted we were journalists trying to find what had happened to no avail.

Then we proceeded to talk to some of the locals. We spoke to the night guards in the area and also the imam of the local mosque. They confirmed that Nahid was in that house last night and some 25-30 law enforcers in plainclothes, including a woman, had come in four cars. They had stormed the building breaking the locks at the entrance. Witnesses said someone had in fact scaled the boundary wall to get in and break into the main entrance.

One witness had even more details saying that the lock at the collapsible gate was too strong and the law enforcers needed heavier equipment. They had to wait for another unit to arrive with the equipment before they could break into the building and carry out their search.

Nahid was apparently on the roof and was taken into custody from there. The contingent left after about half an hour.

This was a major story. Nahid had been one of the faces of the student protest since it began just about three weeks ago. He had issued statements and announced programmes on behalf of the student protesters. We went home to rest up and came to work around noon to file the story of a leading student leader being 'allegedly' detained.

**Two black cars**

But something that a witness had said kept bothering me. One of the night guards we had spoken to said two black cars had joined other SUVs and microbuses during the night-time raid. Since no one had admitted to detaining the student coordinator, pinpointing the agency behind his detention if not abduction, would still be a substantial piece of information.

So, the next day, things being quiet due to the curfew, I went back and scouted the streets around the house from where Nahid had been taken away. I tried to identify CCTV cameras of nearby buildings that might have proof of the abduction.

SEE PAGE S3

## ECHOES OF AUGUST 5

# Gunfire and grit on Dhaka street

SAJJAD HOSSAIN

It was Monday, August 5, at exactly 10:46 in the morning when my phone rang. On the other end was a student from Jahangirnagar University, his voice trembling with fear and urgency. "Please, brother, save me. I'm hiding in a room at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. We gathered at Shaheed Minar, but the police fired on us. Many of my friends are hurt. Please come!"

The day before, students had announced a road march to Dhaka from across the country, in a bid to force the government to resign. Without a second thought, I headed straight to DMCH. As I walked from Bangla Motor, the silence was unsettling. No cars, no people – just empty roads stretching ahead.

Approaching the Intercontinental Hotel, I noticed three armored personnel carriers (APCs) and several army vehicles blocking the road, guarded by around 30 heavily armed soldiers forming a barricade. The sheer display of force was intimidating.

I took a detour through back streets and eventually reached Shahbagh. There, another APC and soldiers were stopping and questioning everyone. After showing my ID and curfew pass, I was allowed to proceed toward the Dhaka University campus.

By 11:05am, I arrived at Shaheed Minar, where around 50 armed police officers stood in formation. One officer was trying to rally the others, reminding them, "We must not forget – they attacked our officers. We have to stay strong."

I tried calling the JU student, but

network issues made it impossible to get through. The tension in the air was palpable. I could feel that something big was about to unfold.

Soon, word spread that a group of teachers had gathered nearby at the Raju Memorial Sculpture. Along with other journalists, I made my way there. Despite a drizzle that started around 11:15am, more than two



dozen teachers stood firm, holding banners, speaking to a small crowd.

After about ten minutes, the police approached and asked the teachers to wrap up their event quickly. The teachers then moved toward the vice-chancellor's office, shadowed by a heavy police presence.

Just after noon, news broke that a massive crowd was marching from Jatrabari towards Shaheed Minar. I joined a few other journalists, and we headed in that direction.

As we neared Curzon Hall, the

sharp cracks of gunfire pierced the air, growing louder with each step toward Chankharpul. The police, stationed at Chankharpul, were firing at protesters.

We rushed toward Dhaka Medical College's emergency gate, as the gunfire intensified.

Inside the hospital, heavily armed policemen stood guard near the emergency ward, while students huddled inside, seeking refuge. The police fired several rounds at the hospital entrance before leaving the area. I managed to speak to a few of the students, who told me that two bodies from Jatrabari had been brought to the morgue.

At 1:04pm, I, along with other journalists, made my way to the morgue and saw the two bodies, their faces still covered with blood. I took notes on their identities and the circumstances before moving on.

As we left the morgue, a group of police suddenly pointed their guns in our direction, shouting, "Raise both hands and come forward!" We cautiously approached, holding up our ID cards. After a tense moment, they allowed us to continue on our way.

By 1:45pm, I was back near the Raju sculpture, where small groups of protesters had gathered, chanting that Sheikh Hasina had fled. I stood by the tea stalls at TSC, recording the scene as it unfolded. Then, suddenly, more than two dozen police and Ansar personnel passed by. A few people from the protest began throwing stones and bricks at them, and others armed with sticks joined the fray.

SEE PAGE S3

# DU, 'laasher michhil', and an uprising

MASHFIQ MIZAN

A child steps onto the street from an alley – only to be shot dead in an instant. A college student lies lifeless in a pool of blood at a city hospital, his phone vibrating with calls from "Maa". And a "laasher michhil" (procession of bodies) on the streets of Dhaka.

These are only fragments of scenes I reported while covering the July uprising.

When the quota reform protests erupted in July, I was in Kurigram covering floods, watching from afar as Sheikh Hasina branded the students "Razakars" [traitors]. Students came out in protest against this pervasive culture of tagging.

Bangladesh Chhatra League, the now-banned student wing of Awami League, swooped on protesters on July 15.

As I saw the blood-soaked faces of female students of Dhaka University, and scenes of BCL thugs attacking injured protesters even at hospitals, I knew something bigger was coming.

I called my desk editor, boarded a train, and reached Dhaka on July 16 – the day Abu Sayed was killed in Rangpur.

This was no longer just about quota reform.

There's a saying: whoever controls the DU dormitories controls the country. Passing Ruqayyah Hall at 11:00pm that night, I heard commotion – the women had revolted, driving out BCL. Soon, all female dorms followed, then the men's.

By dawn, DU was free of BCL. That afternoon, students found



themselves surrounded – police, Rab, BGB closed in, unleashing shotgun pellets, tear gas, and sound grenades. And of course there were BCL members.

Forced to abandon their campus in tears, some chanted, "If police enter our campus, we'll enter parliament."

That night, just when I thought it was all over, I heard a procession trying to enter DU through Chankharpool – fired upon, they moved to Jatrabari, where locals joined.

The next day, with private university students and people from all walks of life joining, the movement became a mass uprising. Jatrabari and Rampura turned into battlegrounds, fierce battles also took place in Uttara, Mirpur and Dhanmondi.

History was being written in blood.

July 19 was one of the bloodiest days. Unarmed protesters were shot down one after another at Rampura, Banasree, Badda, Jatrabari and beyond. Bullets also

rained down from Rab choppers.

In the evening, bodies flooded Dhaka Medical College Hospital, filling the two morgues. Bodies were piled on top of one another. Parents searched for their missing children among the dead. The injured poured in by the hundreds, with floors soaked in blood, and doctors struggling to hold back tears.

It wasn't a warzone – there weren't any invading or occupying forces involved, this was Dhaka, where the government was carrying out a mass killing against its own people.

The college student whose phone rang endlessly with calls from "Maa" was Samudra, killed as BGB opened fire near Rampura's BTV centre.

I interviewed his mother a week later, she asked, "Did he die instantly? Or did he suffer? What were his last words?"

I had no answer.

Covering Rampura and Banasree on July 19, I counted 13 bodies within just an hour.

SEE PAGE S3