

Tales of female martyrs of the July uprising

FARID UDDIN RONY

Women played a significant role in the July uprising. In the past decade, no other movement saw such a spontaneous presence of women on the streets. From actively participating in protests to strategising and coordinating activities, women contributed at every level. They not only led and organised the student movement but also provided support in various ways—medical professionals treated the wounded, while working mothers and homemakers supplied water to protesters on the streets. A report from the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in December last year mentioned 11 female martyrs. Today we are telling the stories of five of them. We will tell the stories of five more tomorrow.

NAFISA HOSSAIN MARWA



Nafisa Hossain Marwa was 17 years old, a Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinee studying at Sahazuddin Sarkar Higher Secondary School in Tongi. As the quota protest spread in educational institutions across the country, Nafisa and her friends created a Messenger group to discuss plans and took to the streets daily. On the streets, she was a leader.

Her father ran a small tea stall. Their family lived in a tiny one-room rented house in Tongi. Her father would leave early in the morning and return home around 10 or 11 at night. Before he came home, Nafisa would already be back, so he never knew she was out protesting. Her mother had been working in Kuwait for the past two years. Her only younger sister lived with their grandmother in Savar.

One day, her father heard from a neighbour that Nafisa had been attending protests. That night, he scolded her. Then, on July 28, 2024, Nafisa told him she was going to her uncle's house in Savar. Since the protests had already caused HSC exams to be postponed, her father did not object. He figured that her uncles would likely prevent her from joining the movement.

But even there, she stayed in touch with her friends over the phone and went out to protest daily. Her uncles forbade her, but she refused to listen.

On August 3, in the afternoon, she sent her father a selfie from a protest. Seeing the photo, he was furious and called her immediately. He scolded her:

"I sent you there to be safe, and you're out on the streets?"

On the morning of August 5, she got ready to go out again. This time, her younger uncle tried to stop her, but she was determined. She managed to slip out unnoticed and joined the long march alongside Jahangirnagar University students in Savar.

At 2:30pm, Nafisa called her father and said, "Abbu, Hasina has fled."

Her father, irritated, retorted, "What does it matter to your father if Hasina has fled? Your father is just a tea seller. If something happens to you, who will take care of you?"

Nafisa reassured him, "Nothing

else will happen, Abbu. Hasina has fled. I'm with the senior brothers and sisters from the university."

Her father ordered her to return home immediately.

But Nafisa replied, "There's no time to turn back now, Abbu. Whatever Allah has in store for me will happen."

Just minutes after her call with her father, as their group moved past the Savar Model Mosque area, the police, along with Chhatra League and Jubo League activists, launched a coordinated attack. Police fired shots to disperse the protesters. Nafisa, who was at the front of the march, was struck by a bullet. She was rushed to LabZone Hospital.

Meanwhile, her father called to check if she was on her way home. But no one answered. Moments later, his phone rang. When he picked up, a young male voice on the other end asked, "Are you related to her?"

"I'm her father."

"Come to LabZone Hospital immediately. She has been shot."

From there, she was taken to Enam Medical College Hospital. On the way, due to excessive blood loss, Nafisa succumbed to her injuries.

She was laid to rest in her ancestral home in Ishadnagar.

NAIMA SULTANA



Naima Sultana was 16 years old, a tenth-grade science student at Milestone School. She had a passion for art, spending her free time sketching. During the early days of the quota reform movement, she drew protest posters and slogans at home.

On July 18, 2024, the day before her death, several students and civilians were killed by police gunfire in Uttara. That night, as she was designing posters and chatting with her mother, she suddenly told her mother that if she got killed, she should tell people that her daughter became a martyr. Her mother scolded her.

The family lived in a rented apartment in Sector 7, Uttara. Naima lived with her mother and two siblings, while her father, a rural physician, frequently travelled between their village and the city.

On July 19, 2024, around 4:00pm, violence erupted near Uttara Adhunik Medical College as police and Awami League affiliates clashed

with protesters. Armed members of the student and youth wings of the then ruling party, alongside some police officers, stormed nearby alleys and opened fire indiscriminately.

Naima was in her room painting protest posters with slogans like "Boycott Chhatra League" and "We Demand Quota Reform." Drawn by the commotion outside, she stepped out of the room and went to their balcony, and turned on her phone's camera to capture the events below. The police fired at her almost immediately. A bullet pierced her head, entering from one side and exiting through the other. She collapsed instantly, her brain scattering across the floor. She could utter only one word: "Ma..."

Hearing the sound, her mother and elder sister rushed to the balcony and found her lying in a pool of blood. Her mother fainted at the sight, while her sister's screams alerted neighbours and protesters below. She had died before she was taken to the hospital.

She was buried in her ancestral home in Amuakanda village, Matlab Uttar, Chandpur, on July 20.

"She was excellent in her studies and wanted to become a doctor. When her mother forbade her from joining the protests, she protested in her own way—by making artwork and sharing them on Facebook. When the internet was shut down, she called her friends and teachers to learn where the protests would be the next day so she could plan to join them," said her father.

SUMAIYA AKTER



Sumaiya Akter was 20 years old. She lived with her mother in Chittagong Road, along with her two-and-a-half-month-old baby. The protest site was right next to their home. They could see everything from their house.

It was Saturday, July 20, 2024. The afternoon was tense. Her mother was preparing for the Asr prayer. Sumaiya had just put her baby to sleep. Suddenly, shouts, screams, and the sound of gunfire erupted from the protest site. Sumaiya turned to her mother and said, "Everyone's watching. I'll go and take a look too."

She stepped onto the balcony to see what was happening outside. Moments later, her mother heard a faint scream.

"I looked around in all directions.

When I looked forward, I saw my daughter collapsing, tilting forward. I wondered if it was just fear. I rushed to hold her. Then I saw—just like water spills when you press a tap—blood was pouring from her head. I screamed for help."

A bullet had pierced through the balcony railing and struck Sumaiya's head. Family members and neighbours carried her downstairs, but they couldn't find a vehicle to take her to the hospital. No one was willing to drive through the protest site to get to a medical facility.

Eventually, they managed to take her to a hospital in an auto-rickshaw, but she died on her way.

When the family attempted to take her body to their ancestral home in Mehendiganj, Barishal, they faced obstacles along the way. Ultimately, she was buried in Siddhirganj Pul area.

SHAHINUR BEGUM



Shahinur Begum, 57, went out for a walk towards Kajla Bridge after offering Fajr prayers on July 22, 2024. She was accompanied by two or three other women.

Around 8:30am, she was shot in Kajla. She lay on the road for nearly an hour before her daughters came to know about it. She was first taken to a hospital in Shanir Akhra, and then to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The person who rescued her transported her on a van. She needed an immediate surgery, and her family was called from her phone.

"When I arrived, my mother was lying in the hospital. The man who brought her in must have been sent by Allah like an angel. Otherwise, she would have remained on the street for an hour with no one to help. I heard she was writhing in pain the entire time."

Doctors insisted on immediate surgery and an ICU admission, but the daughter struggled to secure an ICU bed. "I can't even describe it. Just thinking about it makes my chest feel like it's going to explode. I begged everyone for an ICU bed for my mother, but nothing worked. We only got an ICU bed three days later. She remained in Dhaka Medical College Hospital for one month and nine days. But she never spoke a single word. Only her arms and legs moved."

The daughter broke down in tears but then continued, "If we had gotten an ICU bed on the first day, maybe we could have heard her last words. My mother always prepared iftar for us during Ramadan. This year, she's gone."

Shahinur Begum lived in Shanir Akhra with her five children. Her husband was paralysed and bedridden. She ran a fish business to support her family. After her death, the family lost everything and was forced to leave the city, returning to their village in Cumilla.

RIYA GOPE



Riya Gope was just six and a half years old. She had only recently started school and would have turned seven this year. The family lived in a top floor apartment of a five storey building in Nayamati, Narayanganj Sadar.

On July 19, 2024, Bangladesh was in turmoil. Protests erupted nationwide over the killing of students. That morning, protesters clashed repeatedly with police near the DIT area in front of Riya's home. The family watched the events unfold from their rooftop. By noon, they came downstairs for lunch. After eating, Riya went back up to play with other children.

Around midday, another wave of clashes broke out, with police using helicopters to fire tear gas and live rounds at protesters. Alarmed by the noise, Riya's father ran upstairs to bring her back inside. As he reached the rooftop, he saw the helicopter firing at the crowd below. As soon as he lifted Riya in his arms to take her inside, a bullet struck her head. She went limp instantly.

"There are no words to describe that moment. I don't want to relive it. She was our only daughter," her father, Dipak Kumar Gope, said.

Riya succumbed to her injuries on July 24, after battling for life for five days at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Her father, Dipak, worked as a manager at a local construction materials store. Her mother was a homemaker. After five years of marriage, Riya had been born, bringing immense joy to the family. "She was always cheerful and mischievous, lighting up our home. Everyone adored her," her father said.

IAEA team visits Rooppur nuclear plant

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

A team of experts from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) started observing and monitoring the preparation work of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant yesterday before the plant starts operation.

This is a pre-visit of the IAEA experts at the country's first nuclear power plant in Pabna, said Zahedul Hasan, project director of the Rooppur plant.

The 12-member team headed by Yury Martynenko reached the project site Saturday night and began their inspection the next morning and will continue until March 13 to observe all the preparation work, officials said.

IAEA experts and project officials held a meeting yesterday.

Project Director Zahedul Hasan said that there are a series of steps that need to be taken before starting operation at the power plant.

He said, "We have almost completed necessary structural and equipment work at Unit-1. The IAEA team will monitor the entire preparation before it goes into operation."

"During their five day visit, the experts will observe and monitor the structural, technical, and equipment-related preparation and documentation. Following their reports, we will go for the next step," he added.

The construction and installation work at Unit-1 of the plant has almost been completed, but generating power from the nuclear plant is still far away, he added.

"Before starting power generation through machinery, we have to check the power transmission facility and perform other necessary tests. We need two months to finish the series of tests," the official said.

He added, "After completing the series of tests, we will go ahead with loading fuel and process the assembled fuel in the reactor building, which needs another three months."

Four get life for gang rape

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

A Bandarban court yesterday sentenced four men to life imprisonment for raping a teenage girl in 2021.

The convicted Md Rashed, 23, Md Kayser, 22, Omar Faruq, 18, and Md Hanif, 24, have each been fined Tk 1 lakh, in default of which they will have to serve an additional six months in jail.

Public Prosecutor (PP) Mohammad Ismail said Md Kayser, who was in police custody, has been sent to jail, while the other three convicts are absconding. "Action will be taken to apprehend them."

Judge Zebunnahar Ayesha of the Bandarban Women and Child Repression Prevention Tribunal delivered the verdict in the morning.

According to the case details, the incident occurred in a remote hilly area of Bhaggyakul in Bandarban on the night of February 2, 2021.

Hearing the victim's screams, locals rushed to the spot, rescued the girl, caught three of the rapists—Rashed, Kayser, and Omar Faruq—and handed them over to the police.

The girl later filed a rape case against them at the Bandarban Police Station.

Rashed and Omar Faruq were later released on bail.

Govt promises speedy probe and trial

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Regarding recent incidents of mob violence, the law adviser said the government took measures to tackle such acts of vigilantism and moral policing. Arrests have been made, and further actions are ongoing, according to him.

The advisers spoke about the procession brought out by banned outfit Hizb ut-Tahrir on Friday in the Baitul Mukarram area. The government would take a "zero tolerance" stance against such groups, they said.

"There is no way a banned organisation can conduct such political activities. Our law enforcers are alert about this," said Home Adviser Jahangir.

He also said the government was committed to ensuring law and order during Ramadan.

The law enforcement agencies set up nearly 50 search and frisk checkpoints at key places in the capital, and increased patrol teams in crime-prone areas, according to him.

A joint force comprised of the army, police, and the Border Guard Bangladesh was conducting operations in those areas while home ministry officials were tasked with monitoring the increased patrolling,

said Jahangir.

ARREST MOBS INSTANTLY
Speaking at the briefing, Adviser Mahfuj said that from now on, anyone involved in whipping up mobs or creating any kind of disorder will be arrested directly from the spot, reports UNB.

He mentioned that discussions had taken place in the Chief Adviser's Office regarding incidents of violence and harassment against women in various locations.

He added, "The law is blind; it will not consider the criminal's caste, ethnicity, or gender, whether they are male or female. Whoever conducts mob justice—whether religious or non-religious—they will be brought under the law from today onwards."

He also said, "Any place where 'mob justice' incidents have occurred, we will take necessary legal actions or handle matters from our side through proper legal procedures.

"Mob justice, robberies, property seizures, and other social issues that have caused instability and anarchy in society will now be met with a zero-tolerance approach."

"Our intelligence agencies are active in monitoring any disturbances or incidents of mob justice from

the past seven to eight months. We have instructed them to take a more proactive approach in keeping everything under surveillance.

"From today onwards, we will collect all the information collectively, and any criminal will be arrested on the spot. We will not wait for one more day," the adviser added.

Mahfuj further said programmes will be organised in collaboration with the cultural affairs ministry to raise awareness against violence and harassment of women and children.

"Additionally, we are considering monitoring media coverage of issues related to law and order, mob justice, militancy, and other potential issues to ensure they are presented properly in the media," he said.

"We will sit with the media outlets to discuss how they will focus on these issues. Our ministry will try to reorganise this establishment to ensure the public gets accurate information."

The adviser added, "For the past 6-7 months, there has been a communication war against this government, both within Bangladesh and from India. From now on, we will enter into a counter-communication war."

This is the highest level of injustice: HC

FROM PAGE 1

The HC also ordered the authorities concerned to ensure the health care, security, and welfare of the eight-year-old child and her elder sister.

The HC further directed the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, inspector general of police, and Dhaka metropolitan police commissioner to remove the name, photos, and videos of the child from all news and social media outlets in 24 hours and to take legal action against those who are responsible for circulating those in three days.

The officials concerned have been ordered to submit reports after complying with the directives to the HC by March 17, Deputy Attorney General Tamim Khan told The Daily Star.

The HC bench issued the directives following a writ petition moved by Supreme Court lawyers Hamidul Misbah and Syed Mahsib Hossain seeking necessary directives to this effect.

The third grader was visiting her elder sister's house in Magura town as her school was closed for Ramadan when she was raped there early Wednesday.

Police arrested her sister's husband, father-in-law, brother-in-law, and

mother-in-law following the incident. They were later sent to jail.

Three of them were accused in the rape case, and the father-in-law, the prime accused, was shown arrested under Section 54 as he was detained before filing the rape case.

Meanwhile, Magura police were unable to bring the arrested to court for a scheduled remand hearing due to security concerns arising from protesters blocking the court's main gate.

Md Alauddin, inspector (investigation) of Magura Sadar Police Station, said, "Investigators have submitted an application seeking a seven-day remand for the accused. The remand hearing has been postponed."

"Once the situation calms down, the accused will be taken to court under strict security," added Alauddin, also the case investigating officer.

Earlier, students took out a procession from the Magura Government Hossain Shaheed Suhrawardy College campus around 11:00am, demanding the highest punishment of the rapists.

Subsequently, they reached the main gate of the Magura Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court and continued their protest.

Later, on the assurance of the army, they left around 2:30pm and blocked

the Dhaka-Khulna highway at the Bhaynar intersection.

The girl is currently undergoing treatment at the ICU of the Combined Military Hospital (CMH).

Citing doctors, her mother told this newspaper yesterday that the child was still in critical condition and that she has yet to regain consciousness.

"The doctors here are trying to improve her condition. They pumped water out of her lungs and gave her blood today. They have found a blockage in one of the arteries in her neck and found internal injuries to her brain. They say she might need surgery."

Cop uses police car for robbery

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Authorities recovered 16 bhoori (tola) of gold jewellery, seven laptops, 28 mobile phones, 53 cartons of cigarettes, a large quantity of cosmetics, cans of powdered milk, and clothing from the suspects.

Additionally, a private car, a pair of handcuffs, and a walkie-talkie were seized.

The victim, Jashim Uddin, a resident of the New Market area, filed a case with Ruggan Police Station today, the OC added.