JULY 13, 2024

Protesters announce march towards Bangabhaban

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On July 13, 2024, the Students Against Discrimination announced a fresh set of protest programmes, shifting their strategy from blockades to processions and symbolic marches. At a press conference held at Dhaka University, the organisers declared that students would march towards the Bangabhaban the following day to submit a memorandum to President Mohammed Shahabuddin.

Organisers of Students Against Discrimination movement hold a press conference in front of the Dhaka University Central Library on July 13, 2024, announcing fresh programmes to press home their demand for quota reform in government jobs. PHOTO: FILE/COURTESY OF PROTHOM ALO

Alongside this, students across the country would continue boycotting classes and examinations and submit memorandums to their respective deputy commissioners, urging them to forward the demands to the president.

Hasnat Abdullah, a student of Dhaka University and one of the coordinators of the movement, addressed the media, stating, "Tomorrow, we will march towards Bangabhaban. Students in districts will submit memorandums to their DCs as part of the coordinated programme."

Another organiser, Nahid Islam, criticised the government for its inaction and attempts at repression. "The government is making plans and preparations to suppress our movement. We have been protesting peacefully. It should have resolved the crisis through dialogue with students from the beginning. If anything goes wrong, the government must bear full responsibility," he said.

Amid these announcements, student leaders also turned their attention to Cumilla, where tensions had escalated following police firing on protesting students on July 11, 2024.

Student coordinator Sarjis Alam, speaking at the press briefing, said, "Today, we—student representatives from Dhaka University, Jagannath University, Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, and the Seven Colleges—visited Cumilla University. What happened there overshadowed all other incidents."

He added that they had gone there to hear directly from the protesting students and observe the situation firsthand. "We held a nearly two-hour-long meeting with police officials at the office of the superintendent of police. We made it clear that the students' concerns must be addressed, not silenced."

In another development, police filed a case with Shahbagh Police Station against unnamed protesters, accusing them of vandalising police vehicles and assaulting law enforcers during the Shahbagh demonstration on July 11. The case was filed by Khalilur Rahman, a driver with the transport department of Rajarbagh Police Lines.

Meanwhile, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) additional commissioner of the Detective Branch, Harun Or Rashid, said the police were investigating whether infiltrators were attempting to hijack the movement and steer it in a different direction.

Inside the ruling party, concerns appeared to be growing. During informal discussions held at the Awami League president's political office in Dhanmondi, some leaders reportedly acknowledged a growing wave of public support for the student protests. They warned that any further police crackdown would only deepen anti-government sentiment.

Man sent to jail over attack on Chandpur Khatib

Victim transferred to hospital in Dhaka

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A man was sent to jail yesterday over the machete attack on a Khatib inside a mosque in Chandpur on Friday.

A Khatib is an Islamic cleric who delivers khutbahs (religious sermons) before Jummah prayers.

The victim, ANM Nurur Rahman, was attacked inside Mollahbari Jame Masjid in Professor Para of Chandpur Sadar shortly after prayers ended on Friday, said Md Bahar Mia, officer-in-charge of Chandpur Sadar Model Police Station.

He said one Billal Hossain was reportedly angered by remarks made by the Khatib during an earlier sermon, which is why he attacked Nurur Rahman after Jummah prayers that day.

At the time, only a few people were present inside the mosque as the prayers had just ended. Billal attempted to flee but was caught by locals. Meanwhile, the injured Khatib was rushed to Chandpur General Hospital, the OC added.

After police were informed, they rescued Billal from the enraged crowd and took him into custody.

Nurur Rahman's elder son Afnan Taki filed an attempted murder case against Billal with Chandpur Sadar Model Police Station yesterday morning.

"After receiving the complaint, we sent him to court," the OC said.

Contacted, Chandpur Court Police Inspector Shahidullah said the court sent the accused to jail after recording his statement.

"We sought a seven-day remand for the accused. But he has voluntarily confessed to his offence, and so the court has sent him to jail," said Abdul Quader, assistant public prosecutor.

Meanwhile, the victim was transferred to Dhaka's Holy Family Hospital on Friday night, and his condition has shown slight improvement, said Nurur's younger son Raihan.

BNP struggles to rein in the rogues

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In a large party, there will always be a few bad people, but the party cannot be held responsible for their crimes," he said.

MEASURES FAILING?

BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed said the party has adopted a zero-tolerance policy for breaches of discipline. "We, as a party, have decided in principle to take drastic action whenever a party member is involved in any disciplinary violation. Where possible, we are also handing them over to the law. Additionally, we call upon the government to deal with these matters strictly," he told The Daily Star.

Activists of the BNP and its affiliated organisations allegedly became involved in a string of violent and criminal incidents at the local level following the ouster of the Awami League regime through a mass uprising in August last year.

In response, the BNP claims to have taken disciplinary action like expulsion against more than 5,000 members, ranging from central leaders to grassroots activists. But those measures seem to be inadequate.

According to a report released last week by Human Rights Support Society, at least 529 incidents of political violence took place across the country between January and June this year, leaving 79 people dead and over 4,124 injured.

Of these, 302 incidents resulted from BNP's internal feuds, which left 2,834 injured and 54 dead. Over 140 of the other incidents involved clashes between BNP activists and members of other parties.

The report found most of the violence occurred over establishing local dominance, taking revenge, disputes over party committees, extortion, and grabbing land or property.

Prof Dilara Choudhury of Jahangirnagar University's political science department said, "The BNP is not solely responsible for such incidents." She pointed to the country's fragile law and order situation as a contributing factor.

Despite the party's tough rhetoric, she noted, the BNP often targets only those directly involved in misconduct while ignoring the local leaders under whose watch such activities occur.

Echoing this, writer and political analyst Mohiuddin Ahmad said the problem is hardly unique to the BNP. "The condition of all major political parties is more or less the same," he said.

"Whichever party is in power, or appears likely to come to power, tends to attract a group of miscreants. Everyone knows this; it's not even an open secret anymore. And without them, the party doesn't function and can't be run."

NO CHAIN OF COMMAND?

BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman has repeatedly asserted that the party is taking the strongest possible action against members involved in wrongdoing.

"The BNP is the only party that does not stay in denial -- that is, if someone from our party is involved in wrongdoing, we take action against them," he said during a virtual address from London on February 22.

Days later, at an extended party meeting on February 27, Tarique instructed leaders to stay away from criminal activities. During that same session, at least 105 party leaders spoke of ongoing issues within the organisation, including extortion, land grabbing, and tender manipulation.

But the warnings appear to have had little effect. Between March and June this year, 35 BNP members were killed and 1,105 injured in 409 incidents of internal conflict, according to rights group ASK.

The continued unrest points to a deeper organisational problem, namely, the absence of a functioning chain of command, say analysts.

"Tarique Rahman has taken responsibility and is now leading the party. But distance is a factor. He is leading from afar," said Mohammad Mojibur Rahman, a teacher at Dhaka University.

"While he issues stern warnings in his speeches, I believe that if he were present in the country and able to directly control the chain of command, such incidents would have been less frequent."

Face-to-face interaction, he added, plays a critical role in maintaining party discipline. "Direct communication matters to both leaders and activists as it helps ensure a proper chain of command. I wouldn't say there's no control at all, but managing such a large organisation is never easy."

Mojibur warned that continued internal unrest, if left unchecked, could erode public trust and negatively impact the party's prospects in the upcoming national election.

'CLEANUP CAMPAIGN'

BNP leader Salahuddin said the party has launched a "cleanup campaign" to get rid of its rogue members, spanning from district leadership down to the grassroots.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Salahuddin described how the social fabric was damaged during the Awami League rule, where state power was maintained through a culture of fear. "That toxic culture has seeped into every tier of society. Those same elements may have infiltrated various political parties or may be used by someone or the other. This cannot be changed overnight."

To address this, he said, strict instructions have been issued to scrutinise the party ranks carefully and to identify anyone involved in misconduct. "For this, we are conducting a survey from the grassroots level."

He also alleged exploitation of political blame games. "Whenever something happens, the BNP's name is immediately dragged into it. Many such incidents later turn out to be false," he said.

Pointing to a perceived double standard, Salahuddin added, "You don't really see anyone speaking out the same way about incidents like the killing of a Jubo Dal activist in Khulna or the stabbing of an imam inside a mosque."

On accusations levelled at the BNP without inquiry, he cited the Muradnagar incident as an example. "On the first day, it was alleged that BNP was involved. Investigation showed that the incident was actually a dispute between two brothers, and one of them was affiliated with the Chhatra League."

Students, people rally nationwide

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said every murder in the country is backed by political patronage and added that without political shelter, incidents of murder, attack, and lawsuits would not be happening.

Rashidul Islam, president of SAD, accused many BNP leaders of collaborating with the Awami League during autocratic regimes to protect their businesses, saying that no new fascism will be allowed to take root in Bangladesh.

Later around 7:30pm, leaders of SAD brought out a torch procession from Shahbagh, which ended at the Central Shaheed Minar premises with a brief rally.

Addressing the gathering, the leaders called upon people across the country to unite and resist extortion and anarchy carried out by political groups.

Bangladesh Gonotantrik Chhatra Jote also held a separate protest rally and brought out a procession on the DU campus at 4:00pm from TSC.

Leaders of various student bodies under the left-leaning alliance addressed a brief rally after the procession.

Meanwhile, Chhatra Dal held protest rallies at different campuses, including Jahangirnagar University, Rajshahi University, and Jagannath University, demanding exemplary punishment of the perpetrators

Chhatra Shibir's Dhaka city (south) unit held a protest in front of Mitford Hospital, while its Chattogram city unit took out a procession from Muradpur intersection and ended at GEC intersection.

Jamaat-e-Islami's Dhaka city (south) unit organised a rally at the north gate of Baitul Mukarram Mosque.

There, Jamaat Assistant Secretary General Rafiqul Islam Khan said, "After Sheikh Hasina fled, people were assured that no one would have to pay extortion anymore, and no more lives would be lost at the hands of criminals. But now, we see another group, just like the Awami League, has started extortion again. They are brutally killing their party men."

The National Citizen Party-backed youth front Jatiya Jubo Shakti, from a press conference held at their Banglamotor office, claimed Sohag's killing is part of a series of planned acts of terrorism, extortion, and land grabbing by the BNP and its affiliated and associated organisations.

Tarikul Islam, convener of Jubo Shakti, said, "If the BNP stops extortion, then 90 percent of its leaders and activists will no longer support BNP, nor will they remain in the Jubo Dal or Chhatra Dal. Extortion is currently BNP's only source of income.

"The interim government is scared of the BNP. Given the nature of the violent activities BNP is currently involved in across the country, it's impossible to expect any kind of election in this situation."

The Left Democratic Alliance, in a statement yesterday, said, "Shielding perpetrators based on political affiliation, shifting blame onto political parties to evade government accountability, and failing to enforce exemplary punishment have made public safety practically nonexistent."

Islami Andolan Bangladesh Nayeeb-e-Ameer Syed Muhammad Faizlul Karim, while speaking at a programme in Barishal, called the nature of the murder "more atrocious than the killings carried out under Awami fascism".

"The people of Bangladesh are now much more aware. Just as they ousted Awami fascism through the July uprising, they will also overthrow these new fascists."

Hefazat-e-Islam, in a statement, said the BNP, which claims to uphold the ideals and principles of patriotic President Shaheed Ziaur Rahman, must immediately bring its affiliated organisations under control and stop the politics of extortion and violence.

"On the other hand, the interim government must urgently carry out fundamental reforms within the police force to improve law and order. If law and order deteriorate, the interim government cannot avoid responsibility."

BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said some parties are trying to blame the BNP by giving this incident a political dimension.

"We took quick action, expelled those involved, and condemned the incident. Then why are you holding a procession? It's just to get political benefits

"It's the responsibility of the law enforcement agencies to uncover the truth of this incident," he said while inaugurating a free medical camp at Uttara.

Police grapple with surge in crimes

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Experts warned that the situation may worsen if the government fails to take prompt and effective measures to tackle it.

According to PHQ, a total of 1,336 cases of dacoity and robbery were reported across the country in the first six months of this year.

During the same period, police recorded 1,930 murder cases, though over 400 of them were filed over incidents that took place in previous years.

Crimes against women and children also remained a serious concern. From January to June this year, a total of 11,008 cases related to the repression of women and children were filed.

In addition, 515 kidnapping cases were reported in the same period, indicating a growing threat to personal security.

Mob violence remained a disturbing trend. At least 89 people were killed in mob attacks between January and June this year, including 45 in Dhaka alone, according to rights group Ain o Salish Kendra.

Such incidents have continued despite repeated warnings from law enforcement officials and government advisers.

One such case is the recent brutal killing of scrap metal trader Lal Chand alias Sohag in the capital's Mitford area on Wednesday, which has gained widespread attention after a video of the attack went viral on social media, sparking public outrage.

Many criticised how such a barbaric assault could occur in broad daylight and in full view of bystanders, without any intervention.

Amid nationwide outrage over the killing, a group of armed men attacked a business establishment in Pallabi area on Friday, allegedly for not receiving Tk 5 crore extortion.

Meanwhile, in Khulna city, unidentified assailants on Friday severed tendons and shot dead a former Jubo Dal leader in front of his house.

On the same day, in Chandpur, a 75-year-old khatib of a local mosque was hacked with a machete after Juma prayers.

On Friday morning, muggers in the capital's Shyamoli area not only snatched valuables from a man but also took his shirt and shoes.

Just a day before, police recovered the body of a man bearing multiple hack wounds, with his hands cuffed behind his back and legs tied with a scarf, from a roadside in the capital's Mirpur-11 area.

Such violent killings have dominated the headlines consistently.

Apart from the killings, several recent mugging incidents, some taking place in broad daylight, have also rattled people's confidence in the country's law and order.

These incidents kept occurring even as the army remains deployed across the country with magistracy powers to assist in maintaining law and order.

IGP Baharul Alam yesterday said the authorities are yet a find a way to make the force fully operational.

"Our main challenge is making the force 100 percent effective after such a traumatic experience [last year]," he said at an event in Gendaria.

"I'm still not satisfied [with the situation]. We're still in the process [of regaining control]," he said, adding that operations and arrests of known criminals are ongoing.

On political ties to crimes, he said the expulsion of accused individuals from political organisations is a welcome sign.

Meanwhile, Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury defended law enforcers. "If police were inactive, arrests wouldn't have happened in last two days," he said, referring to the Mitford murder.

"There may have been some delays in action, but we acted after verifying information," he said, urging people to contact police instead of taking law into their own hands.

Meanwhile, Rapid Action Battalion Director General AKM Shahidur Rahman said the elite force is focused on regaining public trust following criticism during last year's political unrest. "Gaining public trust is the main task," he said at a press briefing in Karwan Bazar.

Omar Faruk, a professor at the Department of Criminology and Police Science at Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University, said prolonged political misuse of the police has deeply damaged the institution.

"For 15 years, police have been used politically. That damage is hard to reverse," he told The Daily Star. "Police still don't behave like they should in a democratic country."

"I have spoken to several officers. They believe the police are going through a crisis period, and once it's over, the situation will be under control, gradually," he added.

However, he said the government has to arrange training or counselling programmes to help officers adapt to the situation.

He also said curated efforts are needed to rebuild the trust between the force and the people.

RMG sector on edge

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reported, the arrangement would place India on a short list of trading partners that have secured preferential deals with the Trump administration, which has shocked other nations with higher tariffs.

The developments are compounding existing economic anxieties. Faruque Hassan, managing director of the Giant Group, warned of a slowdown in US consumer spending due to high inflation. "It will ultimately impact Bangladeshi exports to the US," he said.

Despite the headwinds, industry leaders in Dhaka are projecting cautious optimism. Mahmud Hasan Khan, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), said he is "very much hopeful that a level playing field of tariff will be ensured," citing the "positive discussion" that took place.

Khan indicated that the BGMEA will sit with the government upon the return of Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin, who led the delegation in Washington, to determine the industry's next steps. "Bangladesh has the capacity to cater to the work orders," Khan said, suggesting that while business may decrease, there is "no reason to panic."

Industry analysts and business leaders argue that Bangladesh is caught in a difficult position: it's facing a trade issue and geopolitical pressure from Washington.

According to Masrur Reaz, chairman of the think tank Policy Exchange, the conditions set by the US Trade Representative are exceptionally difficult to fulfil. He contends that while Bangladesh focused on the commercial aspects of the tariff issue, the negotiations are influenced by a broader US policy to reduce reliance on Chinese raw materials in the global value chain.

"Even if the Trump administration lowers the tariff for Bangladesh, the rate may not be significantly lower than Vietnam, India, and Pakistan," Reaz said. He suggested a "market-based solution," such as sharing the tariff burden among fabric suppliers, manufacturers, and retailers. In the long term, he added, "Bangladesh needs to improve efficiency by reducing the cost of doing business to be more competitive."

Mostafa Abid Khan, a former member of the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission, described the situation as a "double bind," where it is nearly impossible for Dhaka to accept all of the US conditions, yet the threatened 35 percent tariff would be devastating for exports.

"The buyers are already suspending work orders," said Shams Mahmud, managing director of Shasha Denims. He highlighted the immediate financial risk for local suppliers, who fear being left with raw materials purchased through back-to-back letters of credit if orders are cancelled.

Faisal Samad, managing director of Surma Garments, calculated the direct impact, saying business costs would increase by at least 27 percent if the tariffs are not lowered, making it impossible to operate profitably. While negotiations are not over, he said buyers are already demanding greater value addition for future business.

For many, the goal is simply to achieve competitive parity. "If the tariff for Bangladesh is fixed at the level of India, Vietnam, and Pakistan," Mahmud said, "then it would be a win-win situation."

Is the govt backing the wrongdoers?

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Mitford Hospital. His body was also crushed by large chunks of concrete. Later, his battered and broken body was left on the street as onlookers watched in horror.

"Should we assume that those trying to incite mob violence and unrest are being secretly supported or pampered by the government or some officials in the administration?" he said.

Tarique made the remarks while virtually exchanging views with the families of the 142 martyrs of the July uprising.

"A wrongdoer is a wrongdoer. Justice must be served according to the law irrespective of his/her political identity," he said, adding that BNP and its affiliated organisations have been vocal about this.

The BNP leader said people across the country are asking why the authorities remain silent and why proper legal action is not being taken against those trying to create chaos.

The Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal organised the event at a city hotel to mark the first anniversary of the July-August mass uprising and to honour the memory of the martyrs of Chhatra Dal.

During the event, family members of the victims called for justice and demanded that those responsible for the killings be held accountable.

Tarique urged the families of the martyrs to raise their voices over the delays in the trials of those responsible for the killing of their loved ones.

He also asked them to remain vigilant against those trying to delay justice.

The BNP leader assured that if his party returns to power, it will prioritise ensuring the trials of those who killed innocent people during the mass uprising and democratic movement.