

Curfew begins amid rising death toll

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The first day of the nationwide curfew, imposed late on the night of July 19, was marked by widespread unrest and violence that left at least 21 people dead and scores injured across Dhaka and other parts of the country.

Most of the victims were hit by bullets, hospital sources confirmed.

The curfew was declared following days of deadly clashes over the quota reform movement. In a late-night announcement, the government deployed army personnel to assist the civil administration.

Army troops were seen patrolling major points of the capital and key locations in other districts from early morning.

Despite the curfew, thousands of demonstrators — students and non-students alike — took to the streets across the country. They brought out processions, blocked roads and highways, and set fire to tyres and wooden planks.

In Dhaka, nine people were reported killed.

One of the most intense flashpoints was Jatrabari, where protesters blocked the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway with parked trucks and covered vans.

Police responded with gunfire, teargas shells, and sound grenades. The protesters fought back, hurling bricks and setting barricades ablaze. Witnesses said helicopters hovered at low altitude, firing teargas canisters from the air.

In Mohammadpur, a large crowd attempted to march to the local police station. Police responded with bullets, sound grenades, and teargas to disperse the crowd there too. Agitators regrouped near Mohammadpur Bus Stand and blocked roads from there to Birbandh.

Members of the Armed Police Battalion, BGB, and army arrived



THE JULY THAT ROCKED BANGLADESH

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around 5:15pm, triggering a severe clash. By 6:30pm, gunfire and stone throwing continued. Protesters, including women, children, and students, had also blocked Sat Masjid Road and key intersections from Dhamondi 15 to Shankar.

In Mirpur-10, law enforcers fired teargas and bullets as demonstrators blocked Rokeya Sarani from Kazipara to Benarshi Palli. Protesters also clashed with law enforcers at Mouchak-Rampura, where parts of the road remained blocked since July 18.

In Savar, five people were killed in separate incidents. Kurban Ali, a 55-year-old poultry trader, was shot in the throat while inside his shop during a clash.

Rickshaw puller Roni, 27, and Mehedi, 24, a mason, were both shot dead later in the day. Thirteen-year-old Saad Mohammad Khan, a sixth grader, was killed while watching the protests.

In Narayanganj, sporadic clashes broke out from Signboard to Kanchpur. Sound grenades were hurled from

helicopters. Three young men — Sajal, Shahin, and Hridoy — were declared dead at Sugondha Hospital.

Meanwhile, Minarul, 25, a garment worker, died of a gunshot wound to the abdomen. Around 50 others were injured and admitted to local hospitals.

In Mymensingh's Gouripur upazila, three people were killed, and at least 30 injured, including 12 police personnel, during violent confrontations. In Phulpur, a pedestrian named Saiful Islam was killed in a clash.

Similar incidents of violence were reported in Kishoreganj, Narsingdi, Sylhet, and Gazipur.

In Narsingdi, demonstrators torched the Panchadhana Muktijoddha Complex and a highway police outpost in Shibpur. In Sylhet, protesters tried to block the Sylhet-Sunamganj Highway. In Gazipur, police boxes were vandalised at Board Bazar and Chandana intersection.



Armed security personnel patrol the tense stretch near Jatrabari toll plaza on the Mayor Mohammad Hanif Flyover in Dhaka, hours after violence erupted there on July 20, 2024.

FILE PHOTO

Meanwhile, differences emerged between two factions of the quota protest leadership over demands and strategy.

One group, represented by Hasnat Abdullah, Sarjis Alam, and Hasib Al Islam, placed an eight-point demand

in a meeting with ministers at the State Guesthouse Padma on July 19 night. These included financial compensation, legal immunity for protesters, and withdrawal of law enforcement from campuses.

However, another group rejected the meeting as a personal initiative and released a separate nine-point demand, which included an apology from the prime minister and the resignation of ministers Obaidul Quader and Asaduzzaman Khan.

The internet blackout continued for the third day, severely affecting digital services including mobile banking, online payments, and communication. Protest leaders alleged that the government was using the blackout to spread misinformation and divide the movement.

Separately, the Detective Branch arrested BNP Standing Committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury from his Banani residence at night.

Earlier in the day, a Dhaka court placed BNP leaders Nazrul Islam Khan and Ruhul Kabir Rizvi on one day remands in connection with cases related to the violence.

In response to the unrest, the government declared July 20 and July 21 as public holidays for all government, semi-government, autonomous, and non-government institutions, except those providing emergency services.

The Supreme Court also scaled back its operations, with lower courts functioning under limited magistrates, and the Appellate and High Court Divisions holding shortened sessions.

As curfew gripped the nation and the death toll continued to rise, the streets of Bangladesh echoed with a chilling message: the demands of the people would not be silenced by force, and the battle for justice had crossed a point of no return.

'Almighty will serve justice'

FROM PAGE 12

Another victim, Ramzan Munshi, who was shifted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, died in the early hours of Friday.

A violent clash involving Awami League followers and law enforcers over an NCP rally at Gopalganj Municipal Park also left around 50 injured, including 10 policemen.

"I don't even know who shot him; against whom should I file a case?" said Sanjay Saha, elder brother of Dipto Saha.

Talking to The Daily Star at their Udayan Road residence in Gopalganj town yesterday, Sanjay said, "We tried everything to save him, but couldn't. He died on the operating table at Gopalganj General Hospital."

He said he carried Dipto's body on his shoulder to their home and later cremated him at the municipal crematorium that evening.

Recalling the incident, Sanjay, who runs a readymade garment shop in the town's Chourangi area, said he told his younger brother to return home as the situation turned violent around 2:00pm. "When I was returning home, taking a different route, I heard Dipto was shot."

Dipto's mother, Vibha Rani Saha, was barely able to speak before she said, "The Almighty will serve justice for my son's murder."

Like the Sahas, Ramzan's family has also chosen not to file a case.

Ramzan's brother, Jamal Munshi, said Ramzan's body was brought home from Dhaka after a post-mortem at DMCH and buried on Friday night.

Regarding filing a case, Jamal said, "What good would it do? It won't bring back my brother. And we don't know who to accuse. We leave it to Allah."

Ramzan's uncle, Kalim Munshi, said, "No one helped when my nephew was shot. What's the point of filing a case now?"

The families of the other two victims, Imon Talukdar and Sohel Mollah, expressed similar sentiments.

Gopalganj Sadar Police Station Officer in Charge Mir Mohammad Sajedur Rahman yesterday said, "None of the victims' family members have approached us regarding filing a case."

Meanwhile, police filed another case on Friday night with the Gopalganj Sadar Police Station over the violence, bringing the total number of cases in connection with the incident to four.

The case, filed under the Anti-Terrorism Act, has 54 named and 350 unnamed accused — all allegedly Awami League activists. The charges include attacking police, vandalising and setting vehicles on fire, blocking roads, and engaging in anti-state activities, said the OC.

In the four cases, police accused 345 named and 2,650 unnamed persons and have arrested 306 people so far.

Besides, the ongoing curfew imposed in Gopalganj since Wednesday has been extended by another 12 hours till 6:00am today.

Gopalganj Deputy Commissioner Muhammad Kamruzzaman made the announcement yesterday.

This time our fight is against corruption

FROM PAGE 1

The party organised the programme to press for a seven-point demand that includes a level playing field for a free, fair, neutral, and peaceful election.

The other demands include the trial of perpetrators behind all incidents of genocide, implementation of basic reforms, the July Charter and Declaration, rehabilitation of families of those martyred or injured in the July uprising, holding national elections under a proportional representation system, and ensuring the voting rights of over one crore expatriates.

Thousands of Jamaat supporters from different parts of the country gathered at the rally venue. They came in processions with banners in their hands and chanted slogans. Many came in buses, launches and trains, with some arriving the night before. The gathering spilt over to surrounding roads and Ramma Park. Volunteers were deployed to control the crowd so that vehicular movement can remain manageable.

Speaking to The Daily Star, several Jamaat leaders said the rally marks a turning point for the party as it prepares for the 13th parliamentary election slated for next year.

Following the fall of the Awami League government on August 5 last year, many parties, including the BNP and Islami Andolan, held large rallies. Jamaat had staged only one rally at Purana Paltan, demanding the release of its leader ATM Azharul Islam. Azharul had been sentenced to death for crimes against humanity during the 1971 Liberation War, but was later acquitted.

"We will not carry out or tolerate acts of corruption or extortion. This is the Bangladesh we want," he added.

"Even though my body did not cooperate, it was Allah's will that I could still speak. I want to say that our struggle is not for a specific class of people. I stand for street cleaners, tea garden workers, rickshaw pullers, and farmers," he said.

Shafiqur demanded justice for all political killings, including the October 28, 2006, incidents, the Paltan killings, Shapla Chattar killings, the Pilkhana carnage, and the 2024 killings.

"There will be no stability unless justice is ensured. These people did

not die for nothing," he said.

The Jamaat chief criticised the existing state system, saying, "If the old system remains, why did they give their lives? Bring them back if you can. You can't. So, we need a new system and a new Bangladesh."

Shafiqur was later rushed to a hospital. A Jamaat leader, later in a text message, told this newspaper that Shafiqur's blood pressure and sugar levels were normal.

Jamaat Secretary General Mia Golam Parwar said the turnout was a response to years of repression. "Jamaat is the most oppressed political group in Bangladesh," he said.

He urged party activists to ensure the safety of all religious communities during festivals.

Calling for unity based on the holy Quran and Sunnah, he encouraged the youth to vote for the Jamaat to establish a welfare-oriented Islamic state.

Jamaat leader Azharul demanded justice for the 10 executed Jamaat leaders.

"I was sentenced to death, but Allah saved me," said Azharul, who spent 14 years in prison. "Our leaders were punished for demanding Islamic rule."

He added that only Allah's law can bring real change to Bangladesh.

Jamaat Nayeb-e-Ameer Syed Abdullah Mohammad Taher said the Jamaat opposes all forms of terrorism. "There is no place for extremism in Islam," he said.

"Militancy will not rise in Bangladesh, whether Islamic or political. Jamaat will resist it, if necessary," he added.

Taher said the Awami League is "gone case" and has no future. "They are irrelevant now," he said.

Speaking on reforms, he said that some parties support it in principle but resist during meetings. "Reform benefits everyone. Those who oppose it have hidden motives."

He urged the government to formulate the July Charter and Declaration soon.

Supporting a proportional representation system, Taher said, "Under PR, no one can seize the centre. Votes cannot be bought with money. That's why those with bad intentions oppose it."

"Some ask how these reforms will be legal. They say it will be done by the next parliament. Does that mean they are sure they will win? Or are they planning to seize control?"

He said such rhetoric confuses the public. "Jamaat wants the people to win the election. Those the people vote for should win. InshaAllah, the pro-Bangladesh forces will triumph."

The rally was attended by leaders of various parties, including the National Citizen Party, Gono Odikhar Parishad, Hefajat-e-Islam, and Islami Andolan Bangladesh. The BNP said it was not invited, but a Jamaat leader claimed to have invited all parties, including the BNP.

Nearly 6,000 uniformed volunteers were deployed at 20 points across the venue. Fifteen medical booths were set up with beds, doctors, emergency medicines and ambulances.

[Our Dhaka University Correspondent Mahathir Mohammed also contributed to this report]

Focus will be on

FROM PAGE 1

Until now, one or two UN officials under the UN Resident Coordinator were responsible for reporting on human rights issues in Bangladesh. According to UN officials, a separate OHCHR office will now be set up with more staff.

Since last August, the UN Human Rights Office's engagement with Bangladesh has increased significantly. It has been working with various stakeholders to advance rights reforms and conduct a comprehensive fact-finding inquiry into the deadly repression of mass protests.

However, some leftist and rightist political parties have harshly criticised the opening of the OHCHR mission.

Criticising the lack of public discussion on the MoU's terms, Communist Party of Bangladesh Secretary Rubin Hossain Prince said the UN's rights offices historically reflect imperialist interests.

Rightist political party Hefajat-e-Islam, in a statement yesterday, strongly protested the signing of the MoU.

"The government cannot unilaterally decide on such a sensitive issue by ignoring the opinions and concerns of its citizens. If the agreement is not scrapped immediately, we will be forced to take stern action," it said.

"A subservient UN human rights office, acting on behalf of American interests, cannot be allowed in this country," it added.

Mamunul Haque, ameer of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, said yesterday that only an elected government has the authority to make any decision on opening such a mission in Bangladesh.

He also said his party will resist any attempt to establish foreign dominance in the country.

The CAO, in a statement yesterday, said the mission's objective is to support the promotion and protection of human rights in the country by

providing training and technical assistance to government institutions and civil society organisations.

"Its objective is to help Bangladesh fulfil its national and international human rights obligations through capacity-building, legal support, and institutional strengthening," it added.

However, the statement said the government is aware of some groups' reservations about the opening of the mission.

"Bangladesh is a society deeply rooted in its cultural and religious traditions. We have received feedback from citizens who opined that any international partnership should respect these values," it said.

The CAO said the OHCHR mission will concentrate on tackling and preventing severe human rights abuses, such as those carried out by the previous government, and ensuring accountability for violations.

"We expect that the mission will always demonstrate transparency and maintain close cooperation with local stakeholders," the statement said.

The Chief Adviser's Office said the government retains sovereign authority to withdraw from the agreement if the partnership no longer aligns with national interests.

It is worth noting that if such an office had existed during the previous administration, when extrajudicial killings and public massacres occurred with impunity, many of those crimes might have been properly investigated, documented, and prosecuted, it said.

The CAO statement said, "Our commitment to human rights today must be rooted in justice, not ideology."

"The government considers this partnership an opportunity to strengthen our institutions and enhance protections for our citizens, guided by our values, shaped by our laws, and accountable to our people," it added.

Are they creating instability

FROM PAGE 1

aspirations. We believe in democracy, and we want democracy. We will not hand the country back to fascism. Our people want to return to a democratic system, and we all agree on that goal.

There may be differences, but those can be resolved by going back to the people.

Fakhrul called on the interim government to act swiftly on three key issues: reforms, a national charter, and elections.

"The sooner we move forward on these issues, the better it will be for the country. The more you delay, the more complicated the situation becomes."

He warned that those who opposed the July uprising and democracy are regrouping to "destroy the democratic process