

Tense calm, fresh arrests, lingering grief

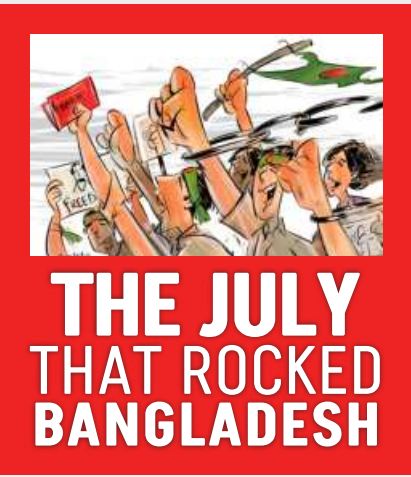
SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

At least 787 more people were arrested in the capital and other districts in the 36 hours leading up to 6:00pm on July 24, in connection with cases filed over violence across the country. Of them, 413 were arrested in Dhaka, while the remaining 374 were detained in eight districts and metropolitan areas, according to police and court sources.

Amid the fragile return of daily life, business and industrial activities cautiously resumed, following days of unrest, internet blackout, and curfew. Yet the scars ran deep.

After five days of disappearance, three student leaders – Asif Mahmud, Abu Bakar Mazumder, and Rifat Rashid – resurfaced. Asif and Bakar wrote on Facebook that they had been blindfolded and dumped in Hatirjheel and Dhanmondi respectively. Neither disclosed who had taken them. Rifat, too, posted on Facebook, claiming he had “narrowly escaped” an enforced disappearance.

Meanwhile, tragedy struck Narayanganj, where six-year-old Riya Gope, who had been shot while playing on the rooftop of her home on July 19, passed away at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) in the morning. Her



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father, Dipak Kumar Gope, had rushed to the rooftop amid clashes to bring her inside when a bullet hit her in the back of the head. Despite surgery, Riya could not be saved.

Riya was among four victims injured in earlier clashes who succumbed to their wounds on July 24. The others included Sajidur Rahman Omar, 22, an IT technician from Demra; Shahjahan, a salesperson from Mohakhali; and



FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Nur Jahan weeps while running behind a prison van that is taking her son, Sheikh Farid, an HSC student, to jail from a Dhaka court on July 24, 2024.

Tuhin Ahmed, 26.

Though inter-district bus services resumed, full normalcy in passenger transport across the capital and country remained elusive. Authorities said Dhaka Metro Rail and the Dhaka Elevated Expressway would remain closed for a few more days. Bangladesh Railway, which had planned to resume limited train services the following day, postponed its decision later that night.

On the political front, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir reiterated that the movement would not end without a political solution. Speaking at a press conference, he stated that common people had joined the student protests out of long-standing frustration.

Jatiya Party Chairman GM Quader accused the government of double standards, pointing out that while officials claimed to have met student demands and ensured their safety, many students remained missing or arrested.

International condemnation also intensified. Human Rights Watch denounced the life sentences handed down by a UAE court to three Bangladeshi nationals who had joined peaceful solidarity protests on July 19. A total of 57 Bangladeshis were reportedly detained, raising serious human rights concerns.

The government restored broadband internet on a trial basis nationwide, but mobile internet remained suspended, and curfew measures continued. Officials hinted that schools and universities might reopen, and curfew might be lifted in most areas after July 26, depending on conditions, as the previous weekend's violence remained fresh in memory.

Jamaat does not want weak polls

Its Ameer Shafiqur tells Sylhet rally

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday said they do not want a weak election or a fragile democracy.

“We want an election that is fair, transparent, and free from muscle power and black money...,” he told a party rally in Sylhet’s Beanibazar.



He hopes that the next national election will be held early next year.

Shafiqur said they understand that delaying the election may cause some complications. “However, we don’t want a premature delivery. A baby born at 10 months and 10 days is naturally healthy and strong. But one born at six months needs to be kept in an incubator and may remain weak for life. We don’t want such a weak election or a fragile democracy.”

Jamaat wants to see democracy built on a strong foundation, he said, adding that reforms are essential for that.

The party has called for holding the local government polls first to reduce public suffering, the Jamaat chief said.

Shafiqur alleged that Tk 26.58 lakh crore had been siphoned off from the country over the past 16 years.

“Those who ruled the country had to flee along with their party members, but no responsible Jamaat leader has fled.”

Breakthrough on EC formation

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Commission’s term.

The Parliament Secretariat will provide logistical and institutional support to the search committee under the Speaker’s direction.

Under the existing Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Appointment Act, 2022, a six-member search committee, led by a judge from the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, nominates potential election commissioners. The president eventually makes the final call.

Prof Riaz said, “This is a historic step forward in our journey toward national consensus.”

The agreement involved major compromises across party lines, he said, adding, “It opens the path for a truly independent and accountable Election Commission.”

BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed noted that the earlier idea of recommending two names per position had been dropped

in favour of a single recommendation per post.

He stressed that the commission’s independence must be backed by a proper appointment process, not just mentioned in the constitution.

Recalling past commissions’ failure to function independently despite being constitutionally mandated, he highlighted the importance of a transparent and accountable commission.

He added, “Our movement’s main goal was to ensure elections under a neutral caretaker government. The nation has now broadly accepted this. All that remains is the legal process.”

“In this context, the progress made on forming an effective, independent, and accountable Election Commission is crucial.”

Salahuddin reiterated the BNP’s stance of constitutionally protecting the EC’s formation. He said appointments to other bodies, such as the Public Service Commission, Comptroller and Auditor General,

Anti-Corruption Commission, and Ombudsman, should be governed by mechanisms under existing laws, not constitutional amendments.

Jamaat-e-Islami’s Nayeab-e-Ameer Syed Abdullah Mohammad Taher called the discussion “constructive and positive”. The new system leaves no room for unilateral presidential discretion, he said.

He added that while the EC’s formation has been agreed upon, talks on other constitutional and statutory bodies will continue.

On the caretaker issue, he said discussions are nearing conclusion and an announcement is expected soon.

Akhtar Hossen, member secretary of the National Citizens Party (NCP), also hailed the agreement, but warned that appointments to other key institutions must also be constitutionally protected.

“In the past, authoritarian regimes gave unchecked appointment powers to the president. Today, we’ve agreed those powers must be limited,” he

said.

“Previously, there was no legal framework for action against commissioners for misconduct or failure. Today, we’ve agreed to legislate such provisions,” he said.

He critiqued BNP’s preference for statutory safeguards over constitutional changes, saying, “Laws can be easily amended or repealed. Without constitutional backing, future governments could undo these reforms. That’s why we insist on embedding the search committee structure in the constitution.”

Akhtar cautioned that if parties attempt to finalise a national charter while bypassing core reforms, the NCP may withdraw from the dialogue.

Earlier in the day, the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal, and Bangladesh JASAD staged a symbolic 10-minute walkout to protest “law enforcement’s action on students and guardians” following the jet crash at Milestone School & College.

13 fighting for life in ICUs

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Asked whether any recommendation had been made to send patients abroad, he said no such decision had been made yet.

A regular school day turned into a devastating tragedy on Monday when a Bangladesh Air Force F-7 BGI jet, suffering a mid-air mechanical failure, crashed into Milestone School & College. The plane struck the ground floor of a two-storey building on the campus. That section of the building housed classrooms for third and fourth grade students. The room hit by the aircraft was used for class three.

The Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) did not release an updated death toll yesterday. On Tuesday, ISPR had put the toll at 31. With the death of another 9-year-old at the burn institute early yesterday, the number rose to 32.

However, the health ministry yesterday said 29 people had died in the tragedy so far. The ministry yesterday blamed the data mismatch on double count of victims.

Sources said six bodies remained unidentified. So far, only one couple has submitted DNA samples to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), according to an official at the Dhaka Civil Surgeon Office.

COMMITTEE FORMED Milestone School & College authorities have formed a six-member committee to determine the exact number of casualties and compile a complete list of the dead, injured, and missing.

“Many students, teachers, staff, and guardians were affected by the incident. Many were injured, and some lost their lives. The committee has been formed to determine the actual number of the dead, injured, and the missing, and to prepare a list with their names and addresses,” read a notice signed by Principal Mohammad Ziaul Alam.

The committee, led by the principal, has been asked to submit its report within three working days.

Other members include Vice Principal (administration) Md Masud Alam, Headteacher Khadija Azhar, Coordinator Lutfunnesa Lopa, guardian representative Moniruzzaman Molla, and two student representatives.

The formation of the committee came a day after students held a protest demanding that the authorities disclose the actual number of victims.

Extraordinary powers

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and spreading fast. But behind them was a quieter resistance.

Garment workers marched after shifts, homemakers handed out saline, retired officers guarded buildings while students hid inside. Elsewhere, teachers, imams, rickshaw pullers and shopkeepers formed a silent safety net, keeping the movement alive in whichever way they could.

Sumaiya, a college student from Cumilla who once shrieked at thunder, found herself on the frontlines by August 2, 2024. “I wasn’t that aware of the quota system.... But when I saw my friends’ siblings return wounded, something in me changed.”

Her father, Mamunur Rahman Chowdhury, 57, was too ill to join but helped in his own way – sitting outside their Mirpur-10 home handing water to protesters.

“When I heard my timid daughter leading chants, I didn’t stop her. This was everyone’s movement.”

As East West and Brac University students joined in, Rampura became one of the bloodiest flashpoints.

Fashion designer Safia Sathi, who lives in the area, recalled sounds of tear gas, stun grenades, and gunfire. “From my window, I saw helicopters dropping things on unarmed protesters.”

When 17-year-old Shamudra, a boy from her neighbourhood, was shot dead, Safia couldn’t stay in. On July 18, she and her friends stepped out with water, bread, and biscuits. “It was the least we could do.”

Suyel Haque, a student from Khilkhet, joined when the movement was still about quota reform. As it escalated, he ended up on the frontlines in Rampura and Uttara.

“On July 18, a civilian offered help near Jamuna Future Park. The next day, a group brought food, bottled water, masks, saline, even toothpaste. Police threw sound grenades, but those people stayed.”

He remembered bottles and biscuits tossed from balconies.

When Chhatra League attacked, the owner of the Vivo Mobile showroom in the area opened his store and gave them Wi-Fi.

In Bhasantek, Café Mama Hotel owner MA Hossain couldn’t join protests but still acted. “From July 18 to 20, I sent about 90 boxes of food to students.”

He was later arrested, taken to Bhasantek Police Station, and accused of aiding protesters. “I had to pay Tk 3 lakh to get out,” he said. Later, plainclothes DB officers picked him up again. “I had to use every contact I had.”

But protesters like Mosharraf Sardar didn’t forget. “For three days straight, we got food from Café Mama Hotel. The staff brought it to Hope International School by CNG.”

In Chattogram, Bahaddarhat and New Market intersection turned into epicentres on July 16.

Mizanur Rahman, a businessman from Riazuddin Bazar, recalled, “They were firing at unarmed students. So, we gave the children over 100 cricket stumps to defend themselves.”

By the month’s end, Mizan and other small traders were supplying water and tiffin cakes. “We communicated with the protesters and delivered the food in secret.”

Protesters at Barishal University still remember 35-year-old Eliza Begum, a widowed mother of two.

Living in Kornokathi village, opposite the campus, she acted without hesitation. “When we heard the protesting students were going hungry, we couldn’t sit idle. On July 18, we cooked rice, lentils, curry and fed it to them. In the evening, we cooked khichuri.”

Student Rabiul Islam said Eliza and others became lifelines. “Despite lockdowns and fear, they eased our

suffering.”

“No one told us to help,” Eliza said. “We just thought of their pain. After all, we all have children too.”

Nazrul Islam, 48, a tea-stall owner in Savar, provided water, bananas and dry food. “From July 19 to August 5, I helped because I wanted a better country – one where I could vote freely.”

His shop was later attacked by AL activists, who accused him of assisting protesters.

Civilians also became medics and stretcher-bearers, with no training or safety.

On July 18, as Dhanmondi-27 turned into a battleground, two young doctors converted their Satmasjid Road garage into a makeshift clinic.

Dr Worthy Jukhrif and Dr Hritisha Aktar Mitheen treated over 100 people in two days. Neighbours brought antiseptics, orsoline, water, and biscuits.

Worthy, a private hospital doctor and health show presenter, saw students huddled below her balcony. “I rushed down. Others, like Dr Mitheen, were already there.”

She vividly remembers a 10-year-old with pellets all over his body. “I treated him, sent him home. Hours later, he returned with another pellet in his forehead. Other protesters later showed me a video of him, lifeless on the street. I still can’t forget that child.”

Mitheen, now pursuing her post-grad, said, “Humanity is what I acted upon. I couldn’t hold back.”

Neighbour Khurshid Jahan said, “While the doctors treated wounds, we brought water, first aid, clothes.”

But soon, their building was under surveillance. Drones flew overhead. Phones were traced. “...I was nervous. But my duty was to humanity,” Mitheen said.

Worthy added, “Blood carries no political identity. The students’ gratitude made it all worthwhile.”

Associate Professor Akhlima Akhtar of Government Nazrul College couldn’t stay silent when students were attacked.

She rushed downstairs when one was cornered. “They called him a terrorist. I asked, ‘Does he have a weapon? What makes him a terrorist?’ Then they turned on me...”

“I don’t know any party. I recognise students. A teacher’s duty is to protect them.”

After Abu Sayed was killed in Rangpur, her grief deepened. “If I had been there, maybe I could’ve saved him.”

Imam Saeed Mohammad Hasan Al-Azhari of Shahjahanpur Railway Jam-e-Masjid, said, “Islam teaches us to stand against injustice. When police tortured students, how could I stay quiet?”

On July 16, he condemned the crackdown from the mosque. By August 3, he was marching with them in Chattogram.

“I got anonymous calls, death threats. My father was warned I’d be ‘taken care of’. Mosque authorities were told to bar me.”

Unflinching, he said, “A just imam must stand with the oppressed. And justice isn’t seasonal.”

A year later, the memories remain. “I still think of that boy I carried to Dhaka Medical,” said Waliullah. “He died. But I can’t forget his face.”

Akhlima still teaches, still faces scrutiny. “Even now, I tell my students – don’t fight with violence. But never surrender your conscience.”

And for many like Safia, the reason for stepping up was simple – “We just didn’t want to see anyone else die.”

Nazrul, the tea-stall owner, was subdued a year on. “I hoped for a better country. It wasn’t good before. But it’s not good now either. I just want a country where we can vote, freely and fairly.”

(Our correspondents from Savar, Barishal and Chattogram contributed to this story)