

Crackdown deepens, grief grows

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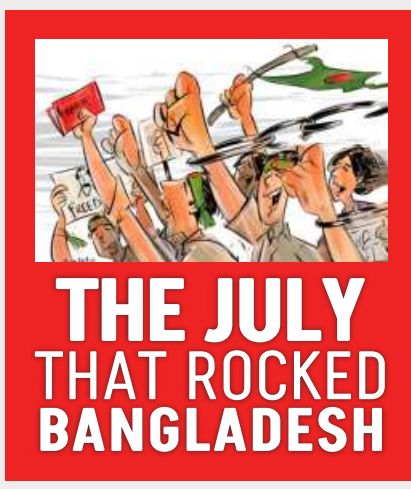
As Bangladesh reeled from days of unrest, the government intensified its crackdown. By 6:00pm on July 26, 2024, at least 738 more people had been arrested in the capital and several other districts in connection with the ongoing violence. This brought the total number of arrests over the past seven days to over 5,522, including many leaders of the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami.

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) alone detained 2,357 individuals in 209 cases filed at various police stations, citing allegations of violence, vandalism, and arson targeting government establishments and other institutions. Of these, 148 were arrested on July 26.

Among the most notable detentions were three key organisers of the quota reform protests – Nahid Islam, Asif Mahmud, and Abu Baker Majumder – who were picked up by police from a city hospital where two of them were receiving treatment.

Junaed Alam Sharker, additional deputy commissioner of the Detective Branch of DMP, claimed the three had sought police protection and were taken into DB custody. "We will interrogate them about the incidents that took place in the last two days," he said.

Tragically, four more individuals who had suffered bullet wounds during the previous week died at hospitals in Dhaka within the 48 hours leading up to July 26, 2024. The deceased were identified as Imtiaz Ahmed Dalim, 20, a student of Southeast University;



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Mainuddin, 25, a madrasa student; Sohail Rana, 20; and Yeasin, 17.

Meanwhile, international voices of concern grew louder. United Nations experts issued a statement urging the Bangladesh government to ensure accountability for human rights violations, immediately halt the violent crackdown on protesters and political opponents, and fully restore access to the internet and social media platforms.

Then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, during a visit to Dhaka Medical College Hospital around 4:30pm, condemned the recent violence and called for strict punishment for those responsible. She reiterated her appeal to the public to help identify those responsible for the attacks, calling the acts "heinous."

In a counter-statement, BNP



Members of various cultural and social organisations brought out a procession from in front of the Jatiya Press Club on the morning of July 26, 2024, demanding fair and impartial investigations -- under the United Nations -- into the violence and killings linked to the quota reform protests.

FILE PHOTO

Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir called for national unity among all democratic political and socio-cultural organisations to demand the resignation of the government. "At this critical moment of the nation, the aim of the unity will be restoration of democracy and voting rights," he stated.

Public outcry also took shape in other forms. Around 11:00am, a group of cultural and social organisations held a protest rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club, demanding an impartial UN-led investigation into the deaths, false cases, and indiscriminate arrests. They gathered under the banner "Protesting Cultural and Social Organisation."

From abroad, fifty academics under the banner of Bangladesh Communication Scholars in North

America (BCSNA) issued a statement expressing deep concern over the crackdown. They declared solidarity with the student protesters and demanded justice for the deaths of unarmed civilians. The group also called for an end to ongoing legal harassment and repression.

Adding to the chorus of concern, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) called on the Bangladesh authorities to investigate the killings of three journalists and the ongoing attacks on reporters covering the protests.

As the day came to a close, Bangladesh remained locked in crisis -- its streets tense, its hospitals full, and its institutions under siege. While the state hardened its stance, voices from home and abroad continued to demand truth, accountability, and justice.

INDIA'S RAJASTHAN School roof collapse kills 7 children

17 injured; dozens feared trapped

REUTERS, New Delhi

At least seven children were killed and 17 injured in India's western state of Rajasthan after the roof of a school building collapsed yesterday, local media reported, with dozens still feared trapped under the rubble.

A local police officer, who declined to be named, told Reuters the school building was old and the roof might have fallen in as a result of heavy rainfall in the region.

"There were 25-30 children in the room when the roof fell after the morning prayers," Rajasthan education minister, Madan Dilawar, told AajTak news channel.

Visuals from news channels showed locals gathered around the site of the collapse. Distressed family members could be heard crying as authorities used a crane to remove the debris.

Local media reported that 32 students had been pulled out safely, but rescue operations were ongoing.

Musk's Starlink network suffers rare global outage

Internal software failure blamed

REUTERS

SpaceX's Starlink suffered one of its biggest international outages on Thursday when an internal software failure knocked tens of thousands of users offline, a rare disruption for Elon Musk's powerful satellite internet system.

Users in the US and Europe began experiencing the outage at around 3:00 pm EDT (19:00 GMT), according to Downdetector, a crowdsourced outage tracker that said as many as 61,000 user reports to the site were made.

Starlink, which has more than 6 million users across roughly 140 countries and territories, later acknowledged the outage on its X account and said "we are actively implementing a solution."

Two-thirds of 206 accused absconding 2 Bangladeshis shot dead

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uprising, said that most of the accused in the Tayem murder case remain at large, with some having fled the country.

"If they are not arrested, who will be tried? This is nothing but a mockery in the name of justice," Rabiul, also general secretary of the July 24 Shaheed Family Society, told The Daily Star.

Zartaj Parveen, mother of slain 17-year-old Shafiq Uddin Ahnaf, echoed his frustration.

"A murder case was filed with Mirpur police but no arrests have been made," she said alleging that though she provided police with addresses of some of her son's killers, no action was taken.

Refuting the allegation of foot-dragging on the probe, Mohammad Sajjad Rummon, officer-in-charge of Mirpur Model Police Station, said, "We will arrest whoever the accused are."

CHARGES FRAMED IN TWO CASES
Following the AL government's fall on August 5 last year, the ICT-1 was reconstituted on October 14 to try those involved in crimes against humanity committed during the July uprising. The ICT-2 was formed in May this year to speed up proceedings and deal with the growing number of cases.

ICT-1 has already framed charges in two cases related to crimes against humanity, while charges have been pressed in two more similar cases

pending with ICT-2.

On July 10, ICT-1 framed charges against Hasina, ex-home minister Asaduzzaman and former inspector general of police Chowdhury Abdullah Al-Mamun in a case over murder, attempted murder, torture, and the use of lethal weapons during the mass uprising.

It will hear opening statements of the prosecution and the defence on August 3 and begin recording witness testimonies the following day, marking the start of the first-ever trial in a case over July atrocities.

Hasina is facing two more cases -- one over alleged involvement in enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, and the other over the killings during the 2013 Hefazat-e-Islam rally at Shapla Chattar in Motijheel.

She has already been sentenced to six months' simple imprisonment by the ICT-1 for contempt of court over her remarks during a conversation with a party leader, which the tribunal deemed obstructive to judicial proceedings.

The same tribunal on July 14 framed charges against former Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Habibur Rahman and seven ex-police personnel in the case over the killing of six people in Chankharpool during the uprising.

It fixed August 10 for hearing the prosecution's opening statements, and will start taking depositions from

witnesses the following day.

Besides, charges have been pressed in two other cases -- one over the murder of Begum Rokeya University student Abu Sayed in Rangpur and the other over the shooting of six protesters and the burning of their bodies in Ashulia.

Contacted, Chief Prosecutor Tajul Islam said the trial proceedings in four cases have already begun while probe reports in another five to seven cases are likely to be submitted by this month.

He further said that if trials in these cases begin on time, the tribunals could dispose of most of them within the next six months.

Since August 5 last year, 429 complaints have been lodged with the ICT's investigation agency.

The complainants include family members of 115 slain protesters and 63 others injured during the mass uprising. Besides, 214 victims and family members of enforced disappearances filed complaints, said ICT prosecutors.

According to standard procedure, a complaint is initially lodged with the chief prosecutor's office or the ICT's investigation agency. If the allegation is found to have prima facie credibility, a "miscellaneous" case is recorded in the tribunal's registry. An investigation report is then submitted and, if approved, charges are framed, converting the "miscellaneous" case into a regular one.

Procedure, which bars gathering, were imposed.

The ASK cited prison officials saying 150 detainees were transferred to other districts due to overcrowding.

On July 21, the Gopalganj District Jail had 751 detainees, despite having a capacity to house 348.

Prison officials told ASK that a mob attacked the jail on July 16 around 3:00pm, damaging its perimeter, guardroom, and visitor areas, and attempted to breach the armoury.

Jail guards fired 80 rounds of warning shots to deter the attackers, the report said, citing prison officials. The army later brought the situation under control.

The ASK team reportedly faced rude behaviour from the officer-in-charge at Gopalganj Sadar Police Station when they went there to get his account regarding the incident.

The district's superintendent of police said security forces exercised "maximum restraint" and did not use lethal weapons, although evidence suggests otherwise, according to the ASK report.

He confirmed the deployment of APCs and acknowledged arresting 177 people as of July 20, some under section 54 of the CrPC, which allows arrest on suspicion.

ASK said its attempts to meet with army officials were unsuccessful.

On July 22, when they approached Captain Sakib near the DC office, he declined to speak, citing VIP duties.

Later, ASK attempted to contact him by phone, as he suggested, but also failed.

2 Bangladeshis shot dead by BSF at Feni border

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Iftokhar Hasan Bhuiyan, resident medical officer at the health complex, said Millat had suffered two bullet wounds, while Afsar was hit by one bullet.

Yasin, who was also shot, fell into a bush and remained undiscovered initially.

He was later detained by the BSF and taken to Bilonia Hospital in India, where he died.

The critically injured Afsar was transferred to Chattogram Medical College Hospital for advanced treatment.

Lt Col Mohammad Mosharrif Hossain, commanding officer of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) Battalion-4 in Feni, told The Daily Star, "In the morning, we were informed that one person had been

killed and another injured by BSF gunfire.

"Around noon, one of our sources reported that another individual had also been killed and taken away by the BSF. When we contacted the BSF, they acknowledged the incident and confirmed that the body was at an Indian hospital."

He added, "We strongly protested the incident and called for a flag meeting."

A meeting was later held with the BSF in the afternoon. The BGB demanded the immediate return of the deceased's body at that time.

The BSF said the body would be handed over after completing some formalities.

As a result, another flag meeting was scheduled for today, said the commanding officer.

Thailand warns of war with Cambodia

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reporters in Bangkok. Thailand also declared martial law in eight of its districts bordering Cambodia.

Fighting resumed in three areas around 4:00 am yesterday, the Thai army said, with Cambodian forces firing heavy weapons, field artillery, and BM-21 rocket systems, and Thai troops responding "with appropriate supporting fire".

But in the afternoon, foreign ministry spokesman Nikorndej Balankura told AFP there were signs the fighting was easing off, and said Thailand was open to talks, possibly aided by Malaysia.

"We are ready, if Cambodia would like to settle this matter via diplomatic channels, bilaterally, or even through Malaysia, we are ready to do that. But so far we have not had any response," Nikorndej told AFP.

Malaysia currently holds the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) regional bloc, of which Thailand and Cambodia are both members.

Cambodia has stayed tight-lipped about its casualty numbers, but

AFP journalists saw four wounded soldiers and three civilians receiving treatment at a hospital in Oddar Meanchey.

The soldiers said they were injured during the fighting on Thursday, while the civilians said they were hit by shrapnel.

In the Cambodian town of Samraong, 20 kilometres (12 miles) from the border, AFP journalists saw families speeding away in vehicles with their children and belongings as gunfire erupted.

"I live very close to the border. We are scared," Pro Bak, 41, told AFP. He was taking his wife and children to a Buddhist temple to seek refuge.

The fighting marks a dramatic escalation in a long-running dispute between the neighbours -- both popular destinations for millions of foreign tourists -- over their shared 800-kilometre (500-mile) frontier.

Dozens of kilometres in several areas are contested and fighting broke out between 2008 and 2011, leaving at least 28 people dead and tens of thousands displaced.

ASK finds serious rights violations

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professionals, law enforcers and hospital authorities, as well as prison officials during their investigation.

Pointing to the involvement of multiple law enforcement agencies, the rights group reiterated its demand for justice for the victims and accountability for the perpetrators.

ASK said such state actions "undermine democratic freedoms and fuel fear among ordinary citizens", many of whom have since fled their homes.

Describing the incident, the report said on July 16, around 10:30am, over 50-60 people chanting "Joy Bangla" slogans began vandalising chairs at the NCP rally venue.

NCP supporters, about 150-200 in number, retreated towards the deputy commissioner's (DC) office. The alleged attackers' group fled the scene following police action.

Security was tightened with police and army deployment, and NCP central leaders arrived at the venue under heavy escort around 1:00pm, said the report.

As long as the leaders finished their speeches, which included "derogatory remarks against Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League", violence erupted in different parts of the city, it added.

Awami League supporters began pelting stones at security personnel, leading to the law enforcers using stun grenades, tear gas, and live ammunition, the ASK report said, citing eye-witnesses.

Witnesses confirmed to the ASK delegation that while the attackers used stones and crude weapons, no firearms were seen among them.

However, law enforcers fired live bullets indiscriminately, the report said.

Of those injured by bullets, four were declared dead at Gopalganj General Hospital, while a fifth victim, Ramzan Munshi, died later at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Families of the deceased -- Imon Talukder, 17, Ramzan Kazi, 18, Deepto Saha, 25, Sohail Molla, 32, and Ramzan Munshi -- alleged that the bodies were hurriedly handed over by the hospital authorities with pressure to bury or cremate them without post-mortem examination.

Except for Ramzan Munshi, none of the dead bodies initially underwent a postmortem.

Witnesses and family members told ASK that Imon, who worked at a crockery shop and had no political affiliation, had been brutally beaten, even stomped on the face, by security forces.

The report said footage of violence targeting Imon circulated widely online.

His family confirmed visible bullet wounds and injuries on his face and body.

After media outcry over the lack of autopsies, on July 20, police reportedly contacted families, excluding Deepto Saha's, to exhume the bodies for postmortem examinations.

On July 21, ASK representatives were present during the exhumation

and inquest of Imon and Ramzan Kazi.

Families called the process a form of secondary harassment and reiterated their demand for justice.

One injured person said during an interview at the hospital that he was shot in the stomach and hand while riding a motorised rickshaw to work.

His finger was amputated as a result. He, too, claimed to have no political affiliation.

The ASK report said that 18 children had been arrested by July 21, some under the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009.

Family members claimed these minors had no connection to the clashes.

By July 21, a total of eight cases had been filed related to the violence, with 5,400 persons charged, of whom 358 were named, including three women and 32 members of the Hindu minority community.

Three of the cases were filed under the Anti-Terrorism Act, one under the Special Powers Act, 1974, and others under penal codes.

Police filed cases over the deaths of Ramzan Kazi and Deepto, saying the victims' families declined to file complaints.

However, ASK said family members denied being contacted by police for legal proceedings.

The report also said there were arbitrary arrests of civilians, even from areas unaffected by the clashes. Accusations of extortion by threatening arrest also surfaced.

Following the violence, a curfew and Section 144 of the Code of Criminal



People flee their homes near the Cambodia-Thailand border in Oddar Meanchey province yesterday, as the two countries exchange heavy artillery fire for a second consecutive day.

PHOTO: AFP