

# Crackdown worsens, thousands accused

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By July 28, more than 2.13 lakh people—most of them unnamed—had been accused in nearly 200 cases filed with police stations across the capital in connection with the recent violence centring the quota reform movement.

Almost all the cases were filed by the police themselves. Records showed that in at least 16 of those cases, between 5,000 and 10,000 individuals had been accused. Over the preceding 12 days, law enforcement agencies arrested more than 2,500 people, including political leaders, activists, and students, from various parts of Dhaka, according to court documents.

However, the actual numbers of arrests and cases were likely much higher, with police continuing raids across different neighbourhoods of the capital.

The country had witnessed violence on an unprecedented scale in the week prior. What began as peaceful demonstrations turned deadly on July 15, when members of the Chhatra League attacked protesting students on several university campuses. In the days that followed, the violence escalated across Dhaka and beyond, resulting in the deaths of at least 162 individuals.

Amid these developments, six organisers of the quota reform movement—held in custody by the Detective Branch (DB) of police—announced the withdrawal of their protest programmes. The announcement was made via a video message circulated to media outlets from the DB office on Minto Road in the capital.

Nahid Islam, one of the key organisers, appeared in the video alongside five other coordinators. However, the statement drew immediate rejection from another coordinator, Abdul Kader, who accused the DB of coercion.

Speaking through WhatsApp, Kader strongly condemned the “scripted statement” and claimed it had been made “at gunpoint at the DB office.” He declared that protest rallies would be held across the country the following day and reaffirmed the movement’s commitment to its demands.

Meanwhile, a seventh organiser was also allegedly picked up by DB officers. According to his younger sister, Umme Khair Hridi, around 4:00am, eight to

ten men in plain clothes—identifying themselves as DB officials—detained Arif Sohel, a student of international relations at Jahangirnagar University, from his home near the campus.

Then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina vowed to bring those responsible for the recent violence to justice. While distributing financial assistance to the families of 34 victims at Gono Bhaban—including Abu Sayeed, a student of Rangpur’s Begum Rokeya University—she said, “My effort will be to find those involved in these murders. They must be punished.”

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan provided the first official death toll during a press briefing at the Secretariat, stating that at least 147 people had lost



Jhunu Begum, 65, wails outside a Narayanganj court after her grandson Arif Hossain, 19, was taken away in a prison van. She pleaded that he was innocent and not involved in politics.

PHOTO: FILE



## THE JULY THAT ROCKED BANGLADESH

JULY 28, 2024

their lives in the violence related to the quota reform protests. The victims, he said, included students, professionals, law enforcement officers, and Awami League leaders and activists.

In a statement, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) assured the international community that those responsible for the violence would be brought to justice based on evidence. It emphasised that no reprisal or harassment would be tolerated against protesting students or innocent civilians. Law enforcement agencies, it said, had been given clear instructions in this regard.

Meanwhile, mobile internet was partially restored after more than ten days. However, major social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube remained inaccessible.

## MILESTONE JET CRASH Health ministry revises death toll down to 33

### 4 critically injured receiving treatment at burn institute ICU; 2 more released

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The health ministry revised down the Milestone jet crash death toll twice in six and a half hours yesterday, putting the number at 33—two less than the previous day’s count.

Four critically injured survivors were being treated at the National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery, which released two other people injured in the crash yesterday, bringing the total number of discharged patients in the incident to four.

The latest discharged patients are Kazi Amzad Said, 20, and Sabuja Begum, 40, the institute’s Director Prof Dr Nasir Uddin said at a press briefing around 3:00pm.

Amzad was injured while trying to rescue others during the crash, while Sabuja Begum worked as a caregiver (Aya) at the school.

#### TOLL REVISION

The ministry revised the death count at 10:17am for the first time. Through its public relation officer, the ministry gave a second revised number at 4:50pm.

In the first revision announced on Facebook, the ministry said the update followed a correction from the Combined Military Hospital (CMH).

According to the CMH, its morgue received 15 body bags on July 21, the day of the crash. Turag police conducted inquest on 11 full bodies, two partial bodies, and body parts from five others. Based on DNA analysis, five additional individuals

SEE PAGE 8 COL 1

## Parties agree to cap PM's term at 10yrs

FROM PAGE 1  
accountability, and public service orientation within the force.

In the proposal presented in the morning session, the consensus commission said the the police commission will be led by a chairperson, who must be a retired judge of the Appellate Division and not over 75 years old. The member secretary will be a retired police officer, not older than 62 and who had served at least at the additional inspector general rank.

In addition to these two, the commission will have seven other members, one representative of the leader of the house, one representative of the leader of the opposition in parliament, one representative of the Speaker, and one representative of the deputy Speaker (from the opposition).

Other members will include a retired government official who had served as a secretary or ranks above, a retired judge who served at least as a district judge, and a human rights activist with a minimum of 10 years of experience in a registered human rights organisation, either domestic or international. At least two of the commission members must be women.

Key objectives of the police commission will be to ensure that the police can carry out its duties competently and within the bounds of the law.

The commission will also serve as a mechanism to resolve complaints raised by police members themselves as well as those filed by citizens against police personnel.

#### BASIC PRINCIPLES

The four parties that opposed the proposal on basic principles of the state are the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (BASAD), Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (Marxist), and Bangladesh Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Bangladesh Jasad).

In the proposal, the consensus commission said that regardless of which fundamental principles remain

in the constitution, “equality, human dignity, social justice, democracy, and religious freedom and harmony” must be included as core constitutional principles.

In its counter proposal, CPB General Secretary Ruhin Hossain Prince suggested that “equality, human dignity, social justice, and religious freedom and harmony” could be added to the four principles in the 1972 constitution: nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism.

During the discussion, BASAD General Secretary Bazlur Rashid Firoz and BASAD (Marxist) leader Masud Rana voiced their support for the CPB’s stance.

They asserted that they would not accept any form of consensus, even one accompanied by a note of dissent, and warned they would withdraw from the process if any decisions were made regarding the basic principles.

Firoz reminded Prof Riaz that he had defined “consensus” as “an agreement that must include all parties”.

Speaking to reporters during the lunch break, Prince said, “It’s not possible to achieve national consensus on the fundamental principles of the constitution through this process, as participants represent diverse ideological backgrounds. The matter must be placed before the people. Political parties should declare their positions publicly, and the people should decide.”

Prince further warned that manipulating or altering the constitution’s core principles by dint of majority would constitute a betrayal of its Liberation War roots.

“If this continues, our regular participation in the commission’s dialogue will be at risk,” he said, warning that such moves could derail the entire consensus-building effort.

Several political parties, including the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, NCP, and Khelafat Majlis, expressed support for the commission’s proposal.

On state principles, BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin

Ahmed said his party disagrees with the current version adopted through the 15th amendment to the constitution and prefers the earlier one under the 5th amendment, but has no objection to adding “equality, human dignity, social justice, and religious harmony” as proposed.

Jamaat wants to restore “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah” as a core principle of the constitution, said party Assistant Secretary General Maulana Rafiqul Islam Khan.

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Chairman Shahadat Hossain Selim said, “Most political parties agree that a return to the 1972 constitution is not practical, as socialism has become globally outdated.”

NCP Member Secretary Akhter Hossen also welcomed the proposal, saying, “We support the commission’s draft and do not wish to revisit past ideological debates.”

On June 25, the consensus commission placed new proposals regarding basic principles of the constitution. The Constitution Reform Commission had previously proposed “equality, human dignity, social justice, democracy, and pluralism” as the basic principles of the constitution.

Due to the division among the parties, the revised version has now replaced “pluralism” with “religious freedom and communal harmony”.

The BNP, Jamaat, and several other Islamist parties were against “pluralism” as a basic principle.

#### WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

No consensus was reached on the final topic of the day: women’s representation in parliament.

The commission proposed maintaining the existing 50 reserved seats for women and requested political parties to nominate women candidates in at least one-fourth or one-fifth of the 300 general seats.

The BNP proposed that parties nominate women in at least 5 percent of the 300 general seats in the next election, and gradually raise it to 10 percent.

“This would ensure 80 seats for women when combined with the existing 50 reserved seats. This can begin as a gentleman’s agreement and be formalised later through constitutional amendment,” Salauddin said.

Rafiqul said Jamaat supports a 400-seat parliament with 300 general and 100 women’s seats, with women’s representation determined proportionally based on party votes under a proportional representation (PR) system.

On July 14, the commission proposed abolishment of the current system of reserving seats for women. It recommended that parties contesting for at least 25 constituencies nominate women in one third of these seats under the first past the post system, where the highest vote-getter wins.

This issue has been discussed repeatedly during the reform talks, but parties remained divided.

Initially, the commission had proposed increasing the number of reserved seats for women from 50 to 100 and suggested direct elections to these seats.

In his opening speech yesterday, Prof Riaz said a preliminary draft of the National Charter will be sent to political parties tomorrow and it would not be discussed during the dialogue unless there were significant objections.

“If there are fundamental disagreements, we will bring it into the discussion. Otherwise, we will not. Any feedback from your side will be incorporated. The preliminary charter will include background, context, and areas of commitment,” he added.

He also informed that a specific day would be allocated in the dialogue to officially sign the National Charter.

The commission aims to conclude the dialogue by July 31.

So far, consensus has been reached on 12 issues. Discussions on seven remain incomplete, while three topics have not been talked about yet, Riaz said.

## Road crashes, deaths

FROM PAGE 1

thousands of people, mostly students, demonstrated for over a week, demanding safer roads.

On July 29, 2018, two students were killed after being run over by a bus, which was racing with another, in the capital’s Kurmitola, sparking an unprecedented movement across the country for safe roads.

Following the movement, the then government enacted the Road Transport Act 2018 and promised different initiatives but those were not implemented fully.

At least 2,943 people were killed in 3,039 road crashes in the first six months of this year, according to BRTA data. The number of deaths and road crashes was 5,480 and 5,856 last year.

However, the number of road crashes and deaths reported by various non-governmental organisations is higher.

Transport expert Prof Shamsul Hoque said the BRTA, as the regulatory body, lacks the capacity and professionalism to enforce laws and regulations due to its structural weaknesses.

“BRTA is a very weak agency. Its shortcomings have contributed to the growing problems in the transport sector, and resolving them has now become extremely difficult,” he told The Daily Star on Saturday.

He said while discussions on road safety are ongoing, new challenges—such as a sharp increase in the number of motorcycles and three-wheelers—have added to the existing issues, making roads even more hazardous.

Responding to a question, Prof Shamsul, also the director of Buet’s Accident Research Institute, said it is very unfortunate that no visible positive change has taken place, even after the political changeover last year. BRTA had an opportunity to bring changes but failed to capitalise on it, he added.

BRTA Chairman Abu Momtaz Saad Uddin Ahmed could not be contacted for comments.

Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, adviser to the road transport and bridges ministry, said the government is working to gradually implement the laws and directives.

He said a pilot project is already underway on a route to operate buses under a franchise system, where all drivers and staff must be formally appointed.

In addition, they have launched a drive against outdated vehicles, but transport owners and workers have threatened to go on strike in response.

“In reality, they [transport owners and workers] take a stand against the initiative,” he told this correspondent yesterday.

He added that the authorities would hold talks with transport leaders to resolve the issues, as public suffering would rise if vehicles are taken off the roads.

#### NON-EXECUTED LAWS, DIRECTIVES

The Road Transport Act 2018, which came into effect in November 2019, clearly states that no one can be recruited as a driver without being issued an appointment letter by the transport owner.

A high-powered taskforce, formed during the previous government

to reduce road crashes and restore discipline in the transport sector, repeatedly decided in its meetings that transport workers must be provided with appointment letters.

However, both the law and the taskforce’s decisions have largely been ignored.

Instead of issuing appointment letters or setting a fixed salary structure, many transport owners continue to hire drivers on a daily basis and pay them based on the number of trips.

As a result, especially in the capital, drivers often engage in reckless competition to pick up more passengers and earn more fare, a practice widely seen as a major contributor to crashes.

When the road transport act was enacted in September 2018, it also incorporated a demerit points system for driving licences aimed at curbing traffic rules violations and improving road safety.

Under the system, each driver would be allotted 12 points, with one or two points deducted for each violation. A licence would be revoked if all points were lost.

Nearly seven years have passed, yet the system has not been implemented. A BRTA official said the system is almost ready and that they have already held discussions with police, but it has not been introduced.

In May last year, the government introduced the Motor Vehicle Speed Limit Guideline 2024, aiming to curb speeding, one of the leading causes of road crashes.

According to the guideline, which came into effect the same month, the speed limit for cars, buses, and minibuses on expressways is set at 80km per hour, while it is 60kmph for motorcycles and 50kmph for trucks.

On the national highways, the limit is 70kmph for cars, buses, and minibuses, 50kmph for motorcycles, and 45kmph for trucks and articulated lorries.

Anyone violating these limits faces punitive action under the road transport act, including up to three months’ imprisonment, a Tk 10,000 fine, or both.

However, the guideline has largely been ignored over the past year, with limited enforcement seen only on select roads like the Dhaka-Mawa Expressway, Dhaka Elevated Expressway, and Dhaka-Chittagong highway.

The operation of locally made, slow-moving three-wheelers alongside high speed vehicles on highways is widely regarded as a major cause of road crashes. This concern has been reflected in reports by various road crash probe bodies and non-government organisations that compile road crash data.

In August 2015, the road transport and bridges ministry imposed a ban on three-wheelers on 22 major highways to help reduce road crashes.

The High Court in January 2017 came into effect on such improvised three-wheelers on highways across the country to reduce the number of road crashes.

However, these vehicles remain on highways—backed by influential individuals who see them as an easy way to make a quick profit.