



## STRIKE AT THE HEART OF PRESS FREEDOM

Anti-clockwise from top right: A mob vandalises the inside as fire burns outside a Prothom Alo building in Karwan Bazar on Thursday night. Later, they also looted valuables. Yesterday, employees of Prothom Alo, including the Editor and Publisher Matiur Rahman, formed a human chain in front of their office to protest the attack, vandalism, and arson. Charred debris lay strewn across the ground and first floors of The Daily Star Centre on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue after a mob torched the building early yesterday. The attackers also vandalised and looted the upper floors. Yesterday, Editor and Publisher Mahfuz Anam inspected the damage. PHOTO: STAR



## Unbowed

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Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus spoke to Matiur Rahman and Mahfuz Anam, editors of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star respectively, to express deep sympathy and assure them of government support, the Chief Adviser's Press Wing said.

The protesters blocked a fire service vehicle when it attempted to reach the office, forcing it to retreat and delaying rescue operations, witnesses said. Protesters remained in front of the building from around midnight until about 4:30am. During the four-hour siege, police, army personnel and firefighters tried repeatedly, mostly in vain, to calm the attackers.

"As the fire spread from the ground floor and spiraled upward, 28 of our employees took shelter on the roof and locked the iron door from inside. They were all rescued by members of the army and firefighters around 5:00am today [yesterday]," said Mahmudul Hasan Khan, head of human resources at The Daily Star.

"However, the attackers have caused extensive damage... There is no electricity, water and gas supply in the building at the moment," he said.

The Daily Star could not bring out its print edition yesterday, a first for the 34-year-old paper.

The attack came hours after news broke of the death of Sharif Osman Hadi, a July uprising frontliner and February election aspirant from Dhaka-8, who died around 9:45pm at a hospital in Singapore, one week after being shot in the head in Dhaka's Paltan in broad daylight.

Outside The Daily Star building during the attack, protesters blamed the two newspapers for "setting the ground" for Hadi's killing, calling them "Delhi's lapdog" and "Sheikh Hasina's enabler"—claims that both The Daily Star and Prothom Alo vehemently deny.

"Delhi or Dhaka; Dhaka, Dhaka", "Sycophancy or movement; movement, movement", "We have shed blood; we will shed more," they roared, while demanding punishment for Hadi's killers.

Hearing of the attack, New Age Editor Nurul Kabir, eminent photojournalist Shahidul Alam, National Citizen Party leaders Nahid Islam, Nasiruddin Patwary, Samantha Sharmin, Nahida Neeva and Monira Sharmin, former information adviser Mahfuz Alam, and Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuyain rushed to the spot and

tried to persuade the attackers to stop the violence.

They succeeded on the third attempt, according to a Facebook post by NCP leader Saleh Uddin Sifat. During the chaos, Nurul Kabir was harassed and verbally abused, witnesses said.

A police team led by Inspector General of Police Baharul Alam visited the scene yesterday morning. The full extent of the damage is yet to be determined.

Contacted last night, Tejgaon Police Station Officer-in-Charge Kya Shi Nyu Marma said no one had been detained in connection with the attacks on The Daily Star and Prothom Alo.

NCP Convener Nahid Islam visited The Daily Star office again yesterday. "The incident will be recorded in history as a collective failure," he said.

Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shahidul Alam described the assaults as "one of the country's worst mob attacks and arsons on media outlets".

"To all my friends, I am deeply sorry that I failed you," he wrote on Facebook.

### HOW IT BEGAN

At Prothom Alo's Karwan Bazar headquarters, a parallel assault unfolded as an all-night spree of destruction reduced a four-storey building to ruins.

Around 11:15pm, after news of Sharif Osman Hadi's death spread, a group of 30-35 people marched from Shahbagh to Prothom Alo's office. Their first attempt to attack the building failed after police blocked them.

The group remained outside, chanting slogans and threatening to burn down Prothom Alo and attack anyone associated with it. Some made phone calls asking others to join, searched people's mobile phones, attacked shopkeepers and hawkers in Karwan Bazar, and attempted to kill two individuals who were later rescued by police and local traders.

After nearly 45 minutes, with no reinforcements from Shahbagh, the group moved under the Karwan Bazar metro station and blocked the main road. Meanwhile, some YouTubers and individuals living abroad incited attacks on Prothom Alo through social media.

Eventually, several hundred people from two groups converged and launched a full-scale attack. They hurled bricks and stones, shattered the building's glass façade, broke through the main gate and stormed inside. Furniture, tables, chairs and sofas were thrown down, piled

together and set on fire, one item after another feeding the flames.

The attackers systematically destroyed the building's fire safety system. Fire safety boxes were smashed, extinguishers looted and CCTV cameras vandalised. Another section of the mob carried out floor-by-floor looting, stealing more than 150 computers and laptops, multiple cash lockers, cash and personal belongings on employees' desks. Books were taken from the Prothoma Prokashon showroom.

Nothing remained intact on the ground, first and second floors.

As looting continued, the fire intensified and spread inside the building. The attackers set fires indoors, chanting slogans and celebrating as the flames rose.

By 1:00am, the fire threatened neighbouring buildings and nearby electrical connections. Prothom Alo repeatedly contacted law enforcement agencies and the Fire Service, but road blockades and fear of the mob delayed access.

Around 1:45am, the first Fire Service unit reached the area under the Karwan Bazar metro station but was attacked and forced to retreat.

When a section of the mob moved towards The Daily Star, the crowd thinned. Around 2:00am, the army, police, Rab and BGB secured the road, and at 2:30am, firefighters began operations.

By then, parts of a neighbouring building had already caught fire. Firefighters managed to save surrounding structures and gradually brought the blaze under control.

### EMPLOYEES, FIREFIGHTERS INJURED

Two firefighters – Md Alamgir and Md Shafiqul Alam – were seriously injured by electrocution and admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where they are currently receiving treatment.

Several Prothom Alo employees were injured. One employee, attempting to escape, jumped from the roof to a neighbouring building, fell and sustained serious injuries. He is being treated at the National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery.

Due to the destruction, Prothom Alo's Friday print edition could not be published—the first such disruption in the newspaper's 27-year history. Online operations were also suspended for a prolonged period.

## Unite against all kinds of mob violence: Govt

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"This is a critical moment in our nation's history when we are making a historic democratic transition. We cannot and must not allow it to be derailed by those few who thrive on chaos and reject peace."

The upcoming national election and referendum are not merely political exercises. They are a solemn national commitment. This promise is inseparable from the dream for which Shaheed Sharif Osman Hadi gave his life. Honouring his sacrifice and memory demands restraint, responsibility, and an abiding commitment to reject hatred.

"To the journalists of The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, and New Age: we stand with you. We are deeply sorry for the terror and violence you have endured. The nation has witnessed your courage and tolerance in the face of terror. Attacks on journalists are attacks on truth itself. We promise you full justice," the statement said.

"We wholeheartedly condemn the lynching of a Hindu man in Mymensingh. There is no space for such violence in 'New Bangladesh'. The perpetrators of this heinous crime will not be spared," it added.

At this critical hour, the government called upon every citizen to honour Shaheed Hadi by rejecting and resisting violence, incitement, and hatred.

Meanwhile, Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus spoke by phone on Thursday night with the editors of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star following the brutal attack on the newspapers' offices.

Expressing deep sympathy to Prothom Alo Editor Matiur Rahman and The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam, he said the shocking assault on the institutions and their journalists had deeply saddened him and assured that the government stands by them.

Calling the incident an attack on free media and a serious setback to democratic progress and independent journalism, the chief adviser assured full security and necessary support for the editors and their organisations, and said he would meet them soon, said the chief adviser's press wing in a press release yesterday.

## Osman Hadi brought home

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In Sylhet, around a hundred protesters gathered at Chowhatta after Juma prayers, demanding that those responsible for Hadi's killing be brought back from India and punished.

Speakers alleged the killing had been carried out "at the behest of India" and blamed the Awami League and its affiliated bodies, particularly the banned Chhatra League.

Protests were also held in Patuakhali and Bandarban, Feni, Barguna, Faridpur, Sherpur, Khulna, Narayanganj, Jhalakathi, Sunamganj, Tangail and Lakshmipur.

Meanwhile, Transparency

International Bangladesh (TIB) has slammed the government for its failure to to arrest all those involved in Hadi's murder.

The interim government cannot evade responsibility. We demand swift and exemplary punishment of Osman Hadi's killers," TIB said.

In a statement, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust also demanded a proper investigation into the shooting and killing of Hadi and punishment of those responsible.

BNP, Jamaat, Islami Andolon, Gono Forum, a faction of the Jatiya Party, and Chhatra Dal, mourned the death of Hadi and demanded justice for his murder.

## A dark day

FROM PAGE 1  
developments at Shahbagh followed by a procession towards Prothom Alo offices in Karwan Bazar, TDS management had called all the authorities concerned and they had duly promised all help. We are thankful to the authorities for their assistance on the ground. However, we also note with concern that a better coordinated response would have meant less trauma for our trapped colleagues who spent several hours in grave uncertainty in a mortal fear.

Even while we remember Sharif Osman Hadi's role in the July uprising as one of its frontline activists and are deeply saddened by his untimely demise, we note with concern that certain elements and quarters have exploited the public anger to incite mobs against two newspapers that have always stood for objective journalism. It appears that this is another attempt at creating an environment of instability in the country to derail the forthcoming election. We further point out with grave apprehension that this attack on newspapers will reflect badly on Bangladesh's freedom of speech and erode the country's image across the globe.

We urge the government to take necessary steps to investigate this incident, identify the culprits as well as their instigators, and bring them to book. This senseless act of violence against certain institutions that had

nothing to do with Hadi's shooting, which we categorically condemn, must be dealt with in all seriousness.

Thankful as we are, we cannot help but take note of the government's relaxed attitude towards the safety and security of news outlets despite previous threats and efforts to disrupt their operations. Both The Daily Star and Prothom Alo have been under repeated threats from different quarters but they were neither dealt with seriously nor investigated. We express our sincerest gratitude to all those who came forward to support us in solidarity despite grave risks – some braving physical assault.

This attack of Thursday night that continued through the early hours of Friday is not merely an attack on two newspapers. It is an attack on independent journalism, freedom of speech, and the sanctity of private property. This must not be taken lightly.

We take this opportunity to reaffirm our readers, our advocates as well as our detractors, that we shall continue. We shall continue with unabashed conviction in democracy and freedom of speech. We shall continue with unflinching commitment to hold power to account. We shall continue with unrelenting dedication to independent and objective journalism.