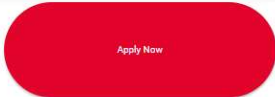


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Bangladesh imposes curfew after dozens killed in anti-government protests

Schools and universities have been closed indefinitely, and authorities have cut mobile internet services nationwide, citing the need to curb disinformation.

4 min 21



Student protests escalate in Bangladesh 0:27

Thousands of anti-government protesters clashed with police on July 18 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. (Video: Reuters)



By Gerry Shih

Updated July 19, 2024 at 3:04 p.m. EDT | Published July 19, 2024 at 10:13 a.m. EDT

NEW DELHI — Bangladesh announced a nationwide curfew on Friday evening after clashes between police and various student groups killed dozens of people amid a violent backlash to a new policy to reserve a portion of government jobs for descendants of the nation’s freedom fighters.

In the capital, Dhaka, protesters attacked the state television headquarters and set fire to police booths Thursday as they called for a “complete shutdown” of the country. Running street battles between security forces using rubber bullets and tear gas and crudely armed protesters forced life in several neighborhoods to a halt, with streets emptying of traffic and even the cabinet canceling its meetings, Bangladeshi media reported.

More than 150 students were being treated at a Dhaka hospital for injuries after being hit by rubber bullets, Agence France-Presse reported. There were also reports of clashes between protesters agitating against the job quotas and the student wing of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s ruling party, the Awami League.

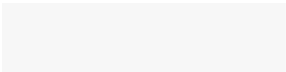
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Nayeemul Islam Khan, a spokesperson for Hasina, told AFP on Friday that the military will also be deployed to enforce the curfew, which began immediately. Hasina has backed the new policy on government jobs.

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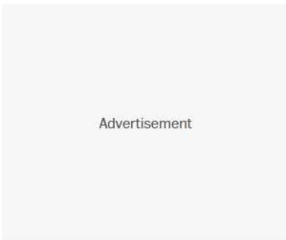


Schools and universities have been closed indefinitely since before the curfew, and authorities have cut mobile internet services nationwide, citing the need to curb disinformation. NetBlocks, an internet monitoring group, said live network data showed the country plunged into a near-total internet shutdown late Thursday. The websites for several leading Bangladeshi newspapers were either not updated since Thursday or altogether inaccessible. Television channels have also been taken off the air.








An injured woman is assisted in the Mirpur area of Dhaka on Thursday as demonstrators clash with police during the ongoing job quota protests. (Monirul Alam/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

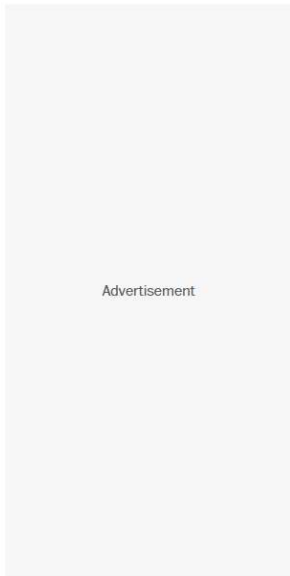
As of late Thursday, before communications were fully severed, news outlets reported conflicting numbers of casualties, although most put the number of dead in the dozens. The leading newspaper, Prothom Alo, reported 29 killed and 1,500 injured Thursday, while AFP put the day's death toll at 32, citing a police spokesman.



The protests, which have simmered for weeks but ratcheted sharply in recent days, represent the most serious challenge to Hasina, 76, and her Awami League in years. Hasina's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, helped form the Awami League in 1949, which led the country's bloody independence struggle against Pakistan in 1971. Hasina has argued that families who participated in the liberation war should be compensated with jobs, but her critics say the program unfairly benefits families close to the Awami League at a time of economic distress.

Although Hasina has been credited with boosting Bangladesh's textile export industry and improving public infrastructure over her more than two decades in power, the country has recently been racked by inflation

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topping 9 percent and stagnant growth. Government positions are often seen as the most secure and coveted option by young jobseekers, but more than half of the slots are reserved for various groups, including residents in remote areas and women.

The 30 percent quota for the descendants of freedom fighters existed until 2018, when it was canceled by the Hasina government amid violent protests. Last month, a Bangladeshi court reinstated the policy, and Hasina continued to argue in its favor.



Protesters cross paths with riot police on Thursday. (Rajib Dhar/AP)

At a news conference Sunday, Hasina said she was open to lowering the quota but argued that some form of the policy should exist. She used a politically charged term — “razakar,” referring to the violent mobs that collaborated with the Pakistani army in 1971 — in a comment that reverberated around the country and led to student groups hitting the streets in anger.

“Why do they have so much resentment toward the freedom fighters?” Hasina asked. “If the grandchildren of freedom fighters don’t get quota benefits, should the grandchildren of razakars get them?”

Protesters vandalize vehicles on Thursday. (AFP/Getty Images)

Hasina has won every election since 2009, including several that have been criticized as unfair, and has come under criticism for her increasingly heavy-handed leadership style. (She also led the country from 1996 to 2001.) In the run-up to the most recent election in January, her government jailed thousands of opposition figures and won unopposed after rival parties boycotted the polls.

The Supreme Court has temporarily suspended the quota policy and said it would make a ruling on its legality on Aug. 7. During her last public appearance Wednesday, Hasina pleaded for “patience” and said she believed “our students will get justice from the court.”

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