



EXPLAINER

News | Protests

'It's war now': As Bangladesh quota protests escalate, what's next?

The websites for PM Hasina's office, Bangladesh's central bank have been hacked amid a telecommunications blackout.



By Al Jazeera Staff
19 Jul 2024



Bangladesh has announced a nationwide curfew that will come into effect at the beginning of Saturday amid a [telecommunications blackout](#) that has cut the country of 170 million people off from the rest of the world as clashes between students and security forces have intensified.

Faisal Mahmud, reporting for Al Jazeera from Dhaka, said the army has been deployed on the streets of the Bangladeshi capital.

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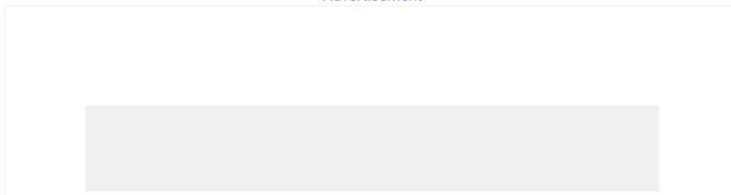
- Bangladesh student protests over jobs escalate, telecoms disrupted
- Bangladesh minister defends gov't response to protests amid calls for probe
- 'We sought rights': Bangladesh on edge after quota protest turns violent
- Photos: Dozens injured in Bangladesh clashes as students protest job quotas

The government has banned public rallies in Dhaka, where buildings were torched during the clashes on Thursday. Students are protesting against [quotas for government jobs](#). At least 19 people had died in the violence this week before Friday. Mahmud said many more were killed in fighting on Friday.

Even after the government shut down phone and internet connectivity, the protests took new forms – including apparent hacking attacks on top government websites.

Here's more about the protests and where they are headed next.

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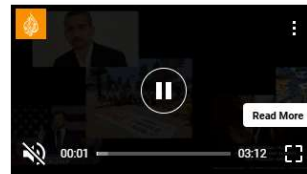
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What's the latest in Bangladesh?

The protests began weeks ago, but violence rose at the start of this week after student protesters were attacked by activists of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party.

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After protesters refused to back down, the government on Wednesday ordered the closure of all universities — the epicentres of the movement against the quotas. But students refused to vacate the campuses in a tense standoff.

Then, on Thursday, that tension exploded into deadly violence. Thousands of students clashed with [armed police](#) in Dhaka. During these clashes, 11 people were killed, including a bus driver and a student, police sources told Al Jazeera. The AFP news agency has reported 39 people have been killed this week — 32 on Thursday alone. Local media said at least 28 have been killed as of Thursday. Al Jazeera has not been able to independently verify these numbers.

On Friday, the violence continued under a blanket block on the internet. By the evening, the government announced a curfew would be enforced from midnight, effectively making any gathering of protesters illegal.



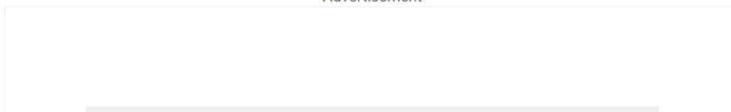
Students take part in anti-quota protests in Dhaka on July 18, 2024 [Munir uz Zaman/AFP]

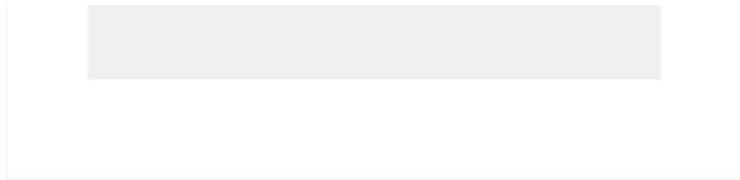
Buildings torched, internet down, bank website hacked

Authorities cut mobile and internet services to quell the [unrest](#) on Thursday. According to the watchdog NetBlocks, the South Asian country has faced a complete, nationwide internet blackout.

The police released a statement accusing protesters of burning and vandalising buildings, including police and government offices. This included the Dhaka headquarters of state broadcaster Bangladesh Television, which remains offline.

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The websites of major news organisations, including The Daily Star and Dhaka Tribune remain offline.

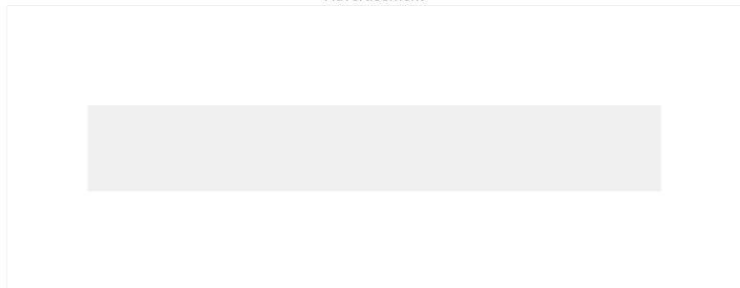
And several official websites in Bangladesh appeared to be hacked by a group that goes by “THE R3SISTANC3”.

The hacked websites include those of the central bank, the prime minister’s office and police.

On the website of the Hasina’s office, a message read, “Stop Killing Students,” and then, in blood-red capital letters: “It’s not a protest anymore. It’s a war now.”

Details of the alleged hacks are not known. The central bank and police sites remained inaccessible when Al Jazeera tried to reach them.

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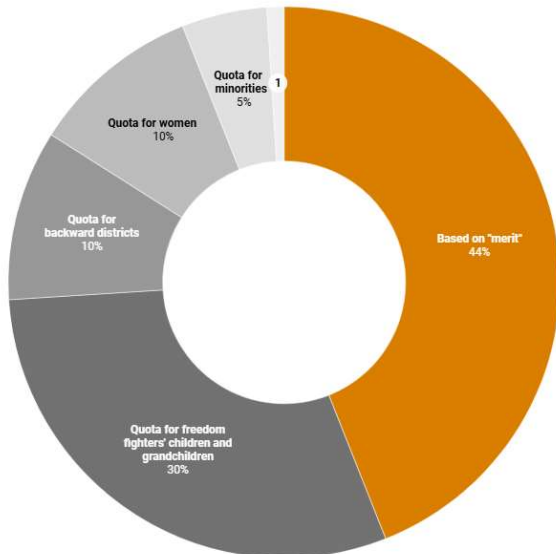
Why are students protesting Bangladesh's quota system?

University students across Bangladesh are calling for the [job quota system](#) to be reformed. Under the system, more than half of much sought-after government jobs are reserved

The protests erupted after June 5 when the High Court ordered the reinstatement of the 30 percent quota for descendants of veterans who participated in the war of independence from Pakistan in 1971.

Bangladesh's job quota system

Bangladesh's quota system reserves more than half of well-paid civil service posts, totalling hundreds of thousands of government jobs, for specific groups, including children of fighters in the country's 1971 war of independence from Pakistan.



1 Quota for physically challenged





The quota system has been in place since 1972 and was abolished by Hasina in 2018 as a result of student protests before the court brought it back in June.

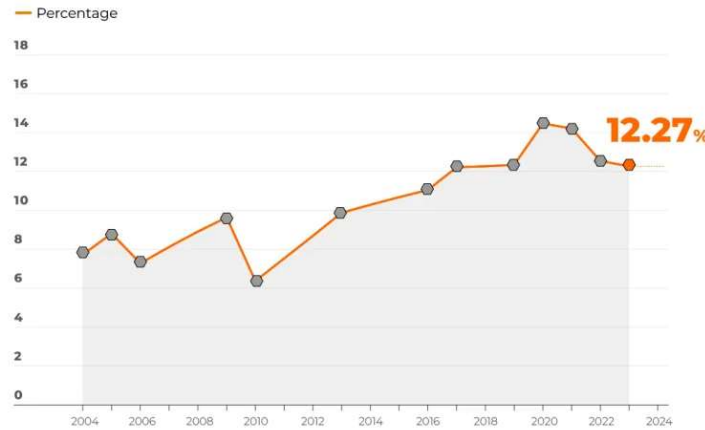
The students argue the reserved jobs for veterans benefit a small group of people affiliated with the Awami League, which led the movement for independence.

Unemployment is [rampant in Bangladesh](#), where 40 percent of youth are neither working nor in university.

BANGLADESH

Youth unemployment rate in Bangladesh

The youth unemployment rate in Bangladesh decreased by 0.3 percentage points (-2.39 percent) in 2023 compared with the previous year. The youth unemployment refers to the share of the total workforce aged 15 to 24 that is currently without work.



Source: Statista, World Bank | July 17, 2024



What's next?

The Supreme Court suspended the High Court's reinstatement of the quotas after a government appeal. It has set August 7 as the date when it will hear the government's challenge to the High Court ruling.

Hasina's government says it agrees with students on doing away with the quota, a position it is expected to reiterate before the Supreme Court. But student protesters are demanding a legal amendment against the quotas. They say they don't trust the government.

How has Hasina responded?

On Wednesday, Hasina called for patience and urged the students to wait for the Supreme Court's decision.

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The same day, the prime minister also announced a judicial probe to investigate the killings that have taken place.

On Sunday, Hasina had implied that the protesters were "[Razakars](#)", an offensive term

for those who collaborated with Pakistan during the 1971 war. That comparison drew further ire from protesters.

How has the international community responded?

- On Monday, US Department of State spokesman Matt Miller criticised the violence against protesters. “The freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are essential building blocks of any thriving democracy, and we condemn any violence against peaceful protesters,” Miller said. The State Department has since then repeated it is concerned about the violence in Bangladesh.
- United Nations chief Antonio Guterres has called for “restraint from all sides”, according to a news briefing on Thursday by his spokesman Stephane Dujarric. “We call upon Bangladesh authorities to work with its young population, find solutions to the ongoing challenges and catalyse their energy towards the country’s growth and development.”
- On Wednesday, Amnesty International condemned authorities in Bangladesh. “Bangladeshi authorities used unlawful force against student protesters and failed to ensure their protection,” the international human rights group said.
- “Amnesty International strongly condemns the killing of student Abu Sayed and the attacks against quota reform protesters across the country,” said Taqbir Huda, regional researcher for South Asia at Amnesty International.
- On Friday, a group called Activists of All India Democratic Students’ Organisation (AIDSO) gathered in New Delhi to express solidarity with the protesting students in Bangladesh.



Activists of AIDSO shout slogans in solidarity with protesting students in Bangladesh in New Delhi, India [AP Photo]

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA

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