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Toll in Bangladesh protests tops 100 as Dhaka falls quiet under curfew

Dhaka and several other Bangladeshi cities have been engulfed by protests in opposition to a new policy reserving a portion of government jobs for certain groups.

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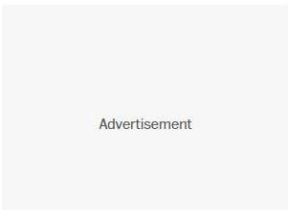
Bangladeshi soldiers stand guard along a road on Saturday after the implementation of a curfew and the deployment of military forces in Dhaka, which followed days of unrest over government job quotas across the country. (Munir Uz Zaman/AFP/Getty Images)

By Azad Majumder and [Rebecca Tan](#)
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DHAKA, Bangladesh — Life in the Bangladeshi capital ground to a halt Saturday as the government enforced a curfew to quell violent clashes between student protesters and security forces.

Shops and businesses were closed and roads were largely empty in the typically congested city of 10 million people, save for military and paramilitary personnel on patrol. Late on Saturday, scattered street battles were reported across Dhaka. Sweeping restrictions on the internet imposed on Thursday remained in place.

According to a Washington Post tally of hospital and police reports, at least 110 people have been killed in the demonstrations over the past four days — the most of any protests in Bangladesh in over a decade. Police forces said several of their personnel are among the dead. Thousands of others have been wounded.



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The U.N. humans rights chief, Volker Türk, on Friday called the violence “shocking and unacceptable” and urged restraint. There needs to be “impartial, prompt and exhaustive investigations” into the attacks against students, he said, adding that he was especially worried about the actions of the government’s paramilitary police units, “which have long track records of violations.”

Dhaka and several other major Bangladeshi cities have been engulfed this past week by protests against a new governmental policy of reserving a portion of civil service jobs for specific groups, including descendants of the nation’s freedom fighters. The quota system, which the protesters see as unfair, has fueled explosive anger toward the government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, which has deployed increasingly draconian methods to quell the unrest.

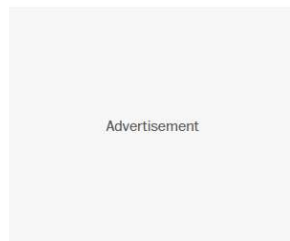


Leaders of the student protest movement told reporters they met with government officials Saturday to convey a list of demands, including an overhaul of the job quota system, the resignation of certain cabinet ministers, and immediate trials for those responsible for the killing of students.

The government must release student protesters who have been arrested, Abdullah Saleheen, a student activist, said in an interview. “Until that happens our protests will continue,” he added.


Calls on Saturday from The Post to the Bangladeshi Foreign Ministry and Home Affairs Ministry, as well as the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, went unanswered.


In an alert Saturday, the embassy described the situation as “extremely volatile and unpredictable,” advising staff to shelter in place. “The Bangladeshi Army has been deployed nationwide. ... Guns, tear gas, and other weapons have been used in the vicinity of the U.S. Embassy,” the alert said.




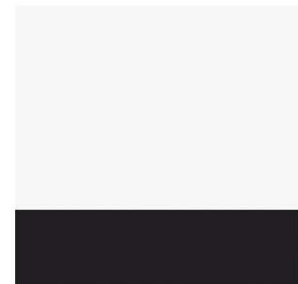
Earlier Friday, the State Department issued a travel advisory for Bangladesh, urging U.S. citizens to reconsider travel “due to civil unrest” in Dhaka.

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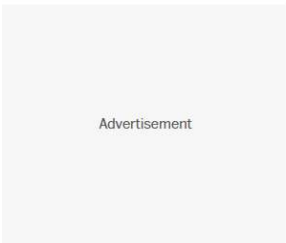
On Friday, protesters stormed a jail in the district of Narsingdi, northeast of the capital, freeing hundreds of inmates. Police posts across Dhaka were set on fire as paramilitary and military forces deployed tear gas, rubber bullets and smoke bombs to disperse large crowds.



Protesters in Dhaka on Thursday. (Mohammad Ponir Hossain/Reuters)

At the end of the night, the government announced a nationwide curfew, ordering people to stay home until 10 a.m. Sunday local time. There was a two-hour window on Saturday from noon to 2 p.m. for public movement.

Internet services have been shut down and mobile services disrupted in a near-total “blackout” that has left many of the country’s 170 million people unreachable. Banks have reported disruptions in operations.



Bangladeshi officials say they have slowed internet connectivity to stop the spread of misinformation. But in a letter, a coalition of more than 300 digital rights groups said it is likely to have the opposite effect by reducing people’s ability to counteract misinformation and spurring panic. “Government agencies have a duty to ensure that people can access open, secure, and unrestricted internet when they need it the most,” the #KeepItOn coalition wrote.

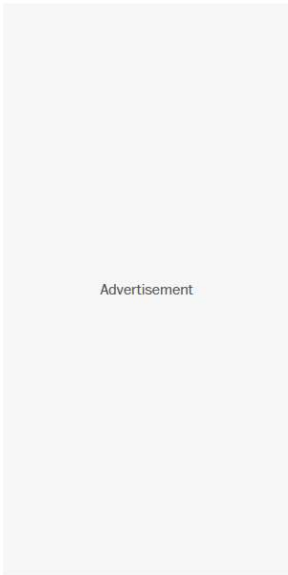
Another digital rights advocacy group, the Asia Internet Coalition, urged Bangladesh “to consider the serious impact of its action on its people and the country’s reputation as an investment destination.”

Several of the biggest companies in the textile industry, a major contributor to Bangladesh’s economy, said they would close their factories on Sunday. Hasina has canceled a planned trip to Europe to deal with the unrest, her office said.

Tan reported from Singapore. Sammy Westfall in Washington contributed to this report.

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By Rebecca Tan
Rebecca Tan is the Southeast Asia Bureau Chief, covering 12 countries in a rapidly evolving part of the world. She was a Livingston Award finalist for her reporting on conflict in Myanmar and was previously part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize in public service for coverage of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. [X](#) @rebtanhs



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