

# Bangladesh imposes nationwide curfew as deadly protests over government jobs escalate

Civil Unrest

Sat 20 Jul



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Bangladeshi police attempt to disperse crowds and enforce a nationwide curfew amid unrest over a lack of job opportunities.

### In short:

Bangladesh has imposed a curfew across the country and deployed the army amid widening student-led protests.

The protests broke out over student anger against quotas that set aside 30 per cent of government jobs for the families of those who fought for independence from Pakistan.

### What's next?

The United Nations rights chief has called for an investigation into protester deaths from police firing.

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Bangladesh has announced the imposition of a curfew and the deployment of military forces after police failed to quell days of deadly unrest that has spread throughout the country.

This week's clashes between student demonstrators and police have killed at least 110 people, and pose a momentous challenge to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's autocratic government after 15 years in office.

The Dhaka Medical College Hospital received 27 dead bodies between 5pm and 7pm, local time, on Friday.

Local police have not issued a casualty toll.

"The rising death toll is a shocking indictment of the absolute intolerance shown by the Bangladeshi authorities to protest and dissent," Babu Ram Pant, the deputy regional director for South Asia at Amnesty International, says.



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The unrest has been fuelled by high unemployment among young people. (Reuters: Mohammad Ponir Hossain)

"The government has decided to impose a curfew and deploy the military in aid of the civilian authorities," Ms Hasina's press secretary, Nayeemul Islam Khan, told AFP.

He added that the curfew would take immediate effect.

Members of the military were given orders to shoot on sight if needed.

Police in the capital, Dhaka, earlier took the drastic step of banning all public gatherings for the day — a first since protests began — in an effort to forestall more violence.

"We've banned all rallies, processions and public gatherings in Dhaka today," police chief Habibur Rahman told AFP, adding the move was necessary to ensure "public safety".

That, however, did not stop another round of confrontations between police and protesters around the sprawling megacity of 20 million people, despite an internet shutdown aimed at frustrating the organisation of rallies.

Internet and text message services have been suspended since Thursday, with most overseas telephone calls failing to connect and websites and social media channels from Bangladesh-based media organisations unable to update.

The internet shutdown meant many people could not top up their electricity meters, leaving them without power.

"To take a country of nearly 170 million people off the Internet is a drastic step, one we haven't seen since the likes of the Egyptian revolution of 2011," John Heidemann, chief scientist of the networking and cybersecurity division at USC Viterbi's Information Sciences Institute, says.

The protests initially broke out over student anger against quotas that set aside 30 per cent of government jobs for the families of those who fought for independence from Pakistan.

For five days, police have fired tear gas, rubber bullets and hurled sound grenades to scatter protesters throwing bricks and setting fire to vehicles.

Tarique Rahman, the acting chairman of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, says many opposition leaders, activists and students have been arrested since violence broke out.

Neighbouring India says nearly 1,000 Indian students have returned home since the violence began.

Protesters told Reuters in a text message that leading student coordinator Nahid Islam was arrested at 2am on Saturday.



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**At least 64 dead in Bangladesh amid student protests**



Continued demonstrations over government jobs quotas see the death toll climb to at least 64 as student protesters attempt a 'complete shutdown' of Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka.



Protesters called for Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to step down. (Reuters: Mohammad Ponir Hossain/File Photo)

The curfew was lifted for two hours on Saturday, starting at noon, so people could shop for supplies.

Those venturing out had their identification cards inspected by army personnel at check points.

TV footage showed troops had set up roadblocks and bunkers using sandbags across strategic locations of Dhaka.

It will last until 10am local time on Sunday, with the government set to decide on its next course of action.

Ms Hasina has dropped plans to leave on Sunday for diplomatic visits to Spain and Brazil due to the protests, the office of Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud says.

The unrest has been fuelled by high unemployment among young people, who make up nearly a fifth of a population of 170 million.

Some analysts say the violence is now also being driven by wider economic woes, such as high inflation and shrinking reserves of foreign exchange.

"Our protest will continue," Sarwar Tushar, who joined a march in the capital and sustained minor injuries when it was violently dispersed by police, told AFP.

**"We want the immediate resignation of Sheikh Hasina. The government is responsible for the killings."**

Student protesters stormed a jail in the central Bangladeshi district of Narsingdi and freed **more than 850** inmates before setting the facility on fire, a police officer told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"I don't know the number of inmates, but it would be in the hundreds," he added.

## Dozens killed by police fire

At least 52 people were killed in the capital on Friday, according to a list drawn up by the Dhaka Medical College Hospital and seen by AFP.

Police fire was the cause of more than half of the deaths reported so far this week, based on descriptions given to AFP by hospital staff.

UN human rights chief Volker Turk said the attacks on student protesters were "shocking and unacceptable".

"There must be impartial, prompt and exhaustive investigations into these attacks, and those responsible held to account," he said in a statement.





The UN's human rights chief said the attacks on student protesters were "shocking and unacceptable". (Reuters: Mohammad Ponir Hossain)

The capital's police force earlier said protesters had on Thursday torched, vandalised and carried out "destructive activities" on numerous police and government offices.

Among them was the Dhaka headquarters of state broadcaster Bangladesh Television, which remains offline after hundreds of incensed students stormed the premises and set fire to a building.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police spokesman Faruk Hossain told AFP that officers had arrested Ruhul Kabir Rizvi Ahmed, one of the top leaders of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

## 'Symbol of a rigged system'

Near-daily marches this month have called for an end to a quota system that reserves more than half of civil service posts for specific groups, including children of veterans from the country's 1971 liberation war against Pakistan.

Ms Hasina's government scrapped the quota system in 2018, but a court reinstated it last month.

The Supreme Court suspended the decision after a government appeal and will hear the case on Sunday after agreeing to bring forward a hearing previously scheduled for August 7.

Critics say the scheme benefits children of pro-government groups that back Ms Hasina, 76, who has ruled the country since 2009 and won her fourth consecutive election in January after a vote without genuine opposition.

Ms Hasina's government is accused by rights groups of misusing state institutions to entrench its hold on power and stamp out dissent, including by the extrajudicial killing of opposition activists.

Her administration this week ordered schools and universities to close indefinitely as police stepped up efforts to bring the deteriorating law and order situation under control.

**"This is an eruption of the simmering discontent of a youth population built over years," Ali Riaz, a politics professor at Illinois State University, told AFP.**

"The job quotas became the symbol of a system which is rigged and stacked against them by the regime."

AFP/Reuters

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