

# Bangladeshi student protesters recount 'brutal' violence amid government crackdown

By Hannah Jose

Demonstrations

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Bangladeshi students say the media in their country is not showing the full scale of the violence that's been unleashed. (Reuters: Mohammad Panir Hossain)

### In short:

Almost 150 people, mostly demonstrators, have reportedly been killed in clashes with police and military.

The Sheikh Hasina government is accused of using excessive force against student protesters, but it blames the opposition for fomenting the violence.

### What's next?

The government is expected to roll back its quota system that sparked the protests.

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Students at universities and colleges in Bangladesh say they were "brutally attacked" in clashes with the authorities while innocent bystanders were being killed on their way to buy groceries.

Hospital reports show almost 150 people have died since the student-led protests over government job quotas started last week in the worst violence the country has seen in recent years.

Students, frustrated by shortages of good jobs, have been demanding an end to a quota system that reserved 30 per cent of government jobs for relatives of veterans who fought in Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971.

The students called for a national shutdown and the government has responded with force, deploying the military to get the situation under control.



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The protests have been ongoing since last week, with the death toll rising steadily on each day of violence. (Reuters: Mohammad Panir Hossain)

On Sunday, the country's top court ordered that the veterans' quota be cut to 5 per cent, but a communications blackout and curfew is still in place even though tensions have eased.

Students have accused members of the government-backed student union Chhatra League of attacking and seriously injuring protesters at universities.

**"We were peacefully protesting against the quota, but Chhatra League ambushed us," Riyaz, a student from a university in the capital Dhaka, told the ABC.**

Riyaz asked for his real name and location to be withheld for fear of retribution from the government.

He claimed the country's media was refusing to report on the true extent of the deaths and injuries during the protests.

"We need [international media] very much to keep an eye on us, because the journalists of our country are on the side of the government," he said.

"On 17 July, injured Jahangirnagar University students were being taken to the hospital in an ambulance. The police stopped it in the middle of the road, opened the door and started hitting the injured students with sticks."



An injured protester after a clash with police and Awami League supporters at the Rampura area in Dhaka, Bangladesh on July 18. (Reuters: Anik Rahman)

Another student who wanted to go by the pseudonym Hasan said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had been demonising the protesting students, likening them to the traitors of the country's war with Pakistan for its independence in 1971.

"She mocked us by calling us 'Razakars', a word used only for war criminals of 1971," Hasan told the ABC via email.

"We protested by chanting slogans, and Chhatra League sloganeered back, saying we are not allowed in Bangladesh.

"Then they attacked us with bamboo sticks, some students were severely injured and had to leave the protest to save their own lives.

"They provoked us to also go out with sticks to protect ourselves.

"The worst are in Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka University and other campuses. While I'm writing this, Jahangirnagar's students are being brutally attacked in their residential hall."



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The ABC has approached Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka University and Bangladesh Police for comment.

Students the ABC has spoken to previously have been out of contact since the weekend due to the communication blackout.



In many places, government supporters and police were also attacked by protesters as violence spilled over into the streets. (Reuters: Mohammad Panir Hossain)

## Protests spread to Australia

Meanwhile, Bangladeshi students in Australia are mobilising.

Rafid Alam has been organising protests in Melbourne to draw attention to the violence back home.

"The Bangladeshi government has cut off the internet for the past 72 hours, isolating and killing students, and suppressing their voices," Mr Alam said.

"The Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and police have been firing at unarmed students, even from helicopters."

He suspects the death toll is even higher than what's being reported by international media.

"I have friends and juniors caught up in the protests, and I personally know people affected by the violence," he said.

"Farhan Faiyaaz, a student from Dhaka, is no longer with us. One of my other friends from United International University has been killed by the police.

**"The loss and trauma are very personal and deeply felt among us.**

"Innocent people have also been killed, including those who simply came out to buy groceries and were shot from helicopters."

Rafid added that what the students were protesting for was important — many young people in Bangladesh were struggling to get jobs.

"It is our duty to stand in solidarity with our peers in Bangladesh and advocate for their rights," he said.

"This unjust quota system severely limits opportunities for the majority of students."

## Curfew still in place despite calm

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina blamed the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-e-Islami party's student wing for fomenting the violence, but didn't elaborate on how.

**"When arson terrorism started, the protesting students said they were not involved in it," Ms**

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## Hasina said in an address to business leaders in Dhaka.

"We were forced to impose a curfew to protect the lives and property of the citizens. I never wanted it.

"We will lift the curfew whenever the situation gets better."

She said the BNP were attempting to "create anarchy" in the country for their own political ends.



The protesters have ultimately achieved their aims, as the top court has rolled back the quotas they were objecting to but the curfew remains in place. (Reuters: Mohammad Panir Hossain)

The BNP has publicly supported the protests, saying they would do what they could to make the shutdown a success.

For their part, the protesters have a long list of demands of the government, including the resignation of the leadership of the three main universities that were worst-affected and that officers who have killed students be charged.

They are also asking for the prohibition of partisan student politics on campuses and a guarantee against academic harassment for students who protested.

The Sheikh Hasina government is expected to accept the Supreme Court's ruling to scrap much of the quota system.

Her government had scrapped the system in 2018, but a high court reinstated it this year, sparking the protests.

Protesters say the real death toll is likely to come out once the dust settles.

ABC/Reuters

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