

Bangladesh's violent unrest devastating for diaspora in Canberra

By Lottie Twyford By Ali El Zein Demonstrations

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Shamaruh Mirza says the protests have had a large impact on Australia's Bangladeshi community. (ABC News: Ian Cutmore)

In short:

Violent demonstrations in Bangladesh are taking an emotional toll on the Australian diaspora.

In Canberra, some community members have told the ABC they are stressed and upset, and have been unable to contact their families and loved ones.

What's next?

Bangladeshi Australians in Canberra want to raise greater awareness about what is going on.

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As Bangladesh grapples with the fallout from violent civil unrest, Canberra's local Bangladeshi community has been left reeling.

More than 2,500 people have been arrested in the country and almost 170 million people have been cut off from the internet, making contacting loved ones and family from afar nearly impossible.

The death toll has proven impossible to count properly but at least 195 people have been killed, according to an AFP news agency count of victims reported by police and hospitals.

Student-led protests began in June over a quota scheme reserving a portion of government jobs for certain candidates.

As they spread, a curfew was imposed across the country, and the army and police were deployed.

Speaking from Australia's capital, Shamaruh Mirza — a local community leader and founder of a not-for-profit organisation — said the weeks since the student protests first kicked off had had a huge impact on the diaspora in Canberra.

Dr Mirza said she was struggling to care for her daughter beyond carrying out necessities like feeding her, and she had needed to take

What is behind Bangladesh's deadly protests?



Here's what has caused mass death, 2,500 arrests and a country of 171 million people to go without internet for almost a week.

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time off work.

She said sleeping had become impossible, and Bangladesh's internet blackout, in particular, had been extremely stressful.

"We were not ... able to contact our parents, our family members, our friends," Dr Mirza said.

With social media hit-and-miss, Dr Mirza was reliant on phone calls to contact her aging parents in Dhaka.

But she said when she got through on a standard phone call, their voices on the other end of the line were heavily distorted and she struggled to understand what they were saying.

"I just got relief that, yes, I heard their voice ... so you can imagine the intensity of our ... [relief] that, yes, they are alive," she said.

"I heard the voice ... we could not talk fully. I just wanted to ask her, 'What's the situation?' They could not say, because they're all under extreme pressure."

Dr Mirza said her parents were worried about their communication, and they spoke about mundane topics such as the weather instead of the unfolding situation.

Mental health, sleep, and care all being impacted



Dr Shamaruh Mirza (right) says sleeping has become impossible for her since the Bangladeshi student protests began. (ABC News: Ian Cutmore)

Dr Mirza told the ABC the stress was taking a toll on her and her family. She said it was impacting her mental health and she once even had to resort to taking sleeping pills in order to get some rest.

She worried it was also likely to lead to intergenerational trauma, including on her 11-year-old daughter.

"She does see how we are acting, how we are behaving, how our day-to-day normal life has been impacted. It's absolutely abnormal now," Dr Mirza said.

Normal life for Dr Mirza and her family has effectively been put on hold as she struggles to function productively both in and outside work. She has now taken some leave.

But Dr Mirza said her employer had been very supportive and had encouraged her to take time off to look after herself.

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Bangladeshi-Australian Nazmul Hasan has lived in Canberra for over 16 years. (ABC News: Ian Cutmore)

Bangladeshi Australian man and multicultural community leader Nazmul Hasan said he had been experiencing similar stress and upset.

He described himself as "devastated", "disgusted" and "helpless" as he witnessed the violence unfolding in Bangladesh.

Like Dr Mirza, the IT worker has been unable to concentrate at work and has been having sleepless nights where he has been staying up, worrying about his loved ones.

"My performance for the last seven, eight days was really poor at work," he explained.

Mr Hasan said he was particularly worried about his mother, who had travelled to the capital Dhaka for medical treatment.

He has also struggled to contact family members due to what he described as a "communications blackout".

"I could not talk to anybody," he said.

"I called somebody yesterday. They could hear me but I couldn't hear them.

"I don't know how my family members are feeling, what they are doing. I do not know."

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Protests held in Canberra outside Bangladeshi embassy



Solidarity protests have spread around the world, including to New York's Time Square. (Reuters: Kent J. Edwards)

Some members of Canberra's Bangladeshi community have been organising protests outside the front of the Bangladesh High Commission in recent days.

Dr Mirza said the aim was to raise awareness of what was going on.

"Just be with us, you know, and listen to us and understand where we

Just be with us, you know, and listen to us and understand where we are coming from and also speak up for justice," she urged.

Mr Hasan agreed, saying it was important the Australian and international community knew what was happening in Bangladesh.

"I think every human being has the right to know what's happening there. I think the truth has to come out," he said.

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