

# Bangladesh protest organisers vow to resume demonstrations unless leaders are freed

Unrest, Conflict and War

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Student protesters have warned they will be "forced to launch tough protests" from Monday. (AP: Bikas Das)

### In short:

A student group behind protests against the Bangladeshi government has vowed to take to the streets again if its leaders are not released from custody.

Three of Students Against Discrimination's leaders were forcibly discharged from hospital and taken into custody last week.

### What's next?

The student group says it will start protesting again from Monday if the trio remains behind bars.

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A Bangladeshi student group has vowed to resume protests that sparked a lethal police crackdown and nationwide unrest unless several of its leaders are released from custody.

Last week's violence killed at least 205 people, including several police officers, according to an AFP count of police and hospital data, in one of the biggest upheavals of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's 15-year tenure.

Activists in Melbourne, meanwhile, joined a global chorus of Bangladeshi diaspora members in calling for an end to the severe government crackdown and communications blackout.

Army patrols and a nationwide curfew remain in place more than a week after they were imposed, and a police dragnet has scooped up thousands of protesters including at least half a dozen student leaders.

Members of Students Against Discrimination, whose campaign against civil service job quotas precipitated the unrest, threatened on Saturday to end their week-long protest moratorium.

The group's chief Nahid Islam and others "should be freed and the cases against them must be withdrawn", Abdul Hannan Masud told

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reporters in an online briefing.

Mr Masud, who did not disclose his location because he was hiding from authorities, also demanded "visible actions" be taken against government ministers and police officers responsible for the deaths of protesters.

Otherwise, Students Against Discrimination would be "forced to launch tough protests" from Monday, he said.

## From Melbourne to Dhaka, people call for government resignations

Sanam Amin is a prominent climate campaigner from Bangladesh who is studying her PhD at Melbourne Law School.

Witnessing the violence from afar, Ms Amin [organised an open letter](#) calling for the Bangladeshi government to immediately cease its violent crackdown on demonstrators and end a crippling communications blackout that has largely blocked internet access for 170 million Bangladeshis for more than a week.

"We support the students' call for resignation of key figures in the government and police," reads the open letter.



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"We also support the need for commitments for no repercussions for the students and protesters engaged in the protests or their families, and we additionally urge that no one criticising the government should be penalised in any way, as this is a basic tenet of free speech and a truly democratic government would not punish its critics."

As of Monday morning, it had been signed by almost 40 non-government organisations and 120 individuals.

"To paraphrase the words of Aboriginal activists in Queensland from the 1970s, we have come because their liberation is bound up with ours, and we will work together."

In Bangladesh, Mr Islam and two other senior members of the protest group were [forcibly discharged from hospital](#) in the capital Dhaka on Friday and taken away by a group of plain-clothes detectives.



Police fired tear gas shells and rubber bullets to disperse students during protests earlier in July. (AP: Rajib



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He told AFP last week he was being treated at the hospital for injuries police inflicted on him during an earlier round of detention and he said he was in fear for his life.

"I haven't seen him since he was picked up," Mr Islam's mother Momotaz Nahar told reporters outside the national detective agency after unsuccessfully asking officers to allow a visit with him.

**"We are worried about his life," she said. "I want my son back."**

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan has said the men were taken into custody for their own safety but did not confirm if they were formally arrested.

## Government says police were forced to open fire

At least 9,000 people have been arrested nationwide since the unrest began, according to Prothom Alo, Bangladesh's largest daily newspaper.

Mr Khan said 147 people had been killed in clashes so far according to the government's first count, published a day after Students Against Discrimination gave its own preliminary count of 266.

Mr Khan told reporters on Sunday that police had operated with restraint and only fired on demonstrators to protect government buildings.

"Despite the killing of their fellow officers, they showed extreme levels of patience," he said.

"But when they saw that the properties could not be protected, then police were forced to open fire."



The protests saw police officers and soldiers take to the streets to restore order. (Reuters: Mohammad Panir Hossain)

A curfew imposed last weekend remains in force but it has been progressively eased through the week, a sign of the Hasina government's confidence that order is gradually being restored.

One small street rally held in Dhaka on Sunday to demand Hasina's resignation was quickly dispersed by police.

Bangladesh's mobile internet network was restored on Sunday afternoon, 11 days after a nationwide blackout imposed at the height of the unrest.

Fixed-line broadband connections were restored on Tuesday but the vast majority of Bangladesh internet users rely on mobile devices to connect with the world.

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scheme reserving more than half of all government jobs for certain groups.

With about 18 million young Bangladeshis out of work, according to government figures, the move deeply upset graduates facing an acute employment crisis.

Critics say the quota is used to stack public jobs with people loyal to the ruling Awami League Party.

The Supreme Court cut the number of reserved jobs last week but fell short of protesters' demands to scrap the quotas entirely.

Ms Hasina has ruled Bangladesh since 2009. She won her fourth consecutive election in January after a vote without genuine opposition.

their voices properly



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A man inspects his shop which was set on fire during a clash in Dhaka. (AP Rajib Dhar)

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

Protests had remained largely peaceful until attacks on demonstrators by police and pro-government student groups last week.

ABC/AFP

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