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Bangladesh protests leave bloody memories for the families of those killed

By South Asia correspondent Meghna Bali and Bhat Burhan in New Delhi and Tanbirul Miraj Ripon in Dhaka

Demonstrations

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Violent protests in Bangladesh have led to more than 170 people being killed and more than 1,000 injured. (AP: Rajib Dhar)

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A blood-stained identification card is the last memory Mir Mahmudur Rahman has left of his younger brother.

"We didn't clean it yet, we want to keep it like this forever," Mr Rahman, who goes by Dipto, told the ABC from his home in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Warning: This story contains content that may distress some readers.

His brother, 25-year-old MBA student Mir Mahfuzur Rahman, who was known fondly as Mughdo, was wearing the card around his neck when he was shot in the head two weeks ago.

"My mother fainted ... and after seeing him I couldn't [say] anything, I just had to cry," Dipto said.

Mughdo was killed during one of the deadliest uprisings Bangladesh has seen in years.



A harrowing memento the family of Mughdo want to preserve to remember what happened to him. (ABC News: Tanbirul Miraj Ripon)

Killed while helping protesters

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Killed while helping protesters

Frustrated by shortages of stable jobs, students across the country 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.

Protesters wanted to abolish this system, which they said was discriminatory and benefited supporters of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League Party, which led the independence movement.

They want it replaced with a merit-based system.

As the protests spread, mobile internet was cut, a curfew was imposed across the country, and the army and police were deployed.



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

Violence followed clashes between thousands of anti-quota demonstrators and members of the student wing of the Awami League.

Mughdo's family said he was not directly involved in the protests, but would attend them to give out water and biscuits to help students.

"My father warned him, if it turns [political], don't go there. But if you want to help the people, you can help the people," Dipto said.

Dipto said a bullet went through his brother's right ear on July 18, while he was resting on the side of a road during a demonstration.



Mughdo's family are heartbroken by his death. (ABC News: Tanbirul Miraj Ripon)

Government, opposition blame each other

This is the biggest challenge Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has faced since she won an historic fifth term in power in January.

Those elections were boycotted by the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and were also marred by deadly protests.

Last month, Bangladesh's Supreme Court scrapped most of the quotas and ordered 93 per cent of the government jobs to be allocated on



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merit.

But the protests have continued, now reflecting broader frustrations about the economy, corruption and the authoritarian turn under Ms Hasina's government.



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

Many – including Bangladesh's opposition parties – have accused the government of state-sponsored violence.

"We saw indiscriminate firing, security forces used lethal bullets, they also used various weapons from helicopters on ordinary unarmed protesters," Zonayed Saki, politician and chief co-ordinator of the Ganosamhati Andolan party told the ABC.

The government has denied the allegations and instead has blamed opposition parties for the deadly violence.

"At the very beginning there was no police, it was just managed by the people who were protesting for a short period of time, in a very disciplined manner," education minister Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury told the ABC.

"But then, things got out of control when the third force got involved.

"When a government feels that violent means are being used to overthrow the government, then they have to take firm action as would happen in any country."

Last week, UN human rights chief Volker Türk called on the Bangladesh government to disclose full details about the crackdown on protests amid growing accounts of "horrific" violence.

"Latest reports indicate that more than 170 people have been killed and over 1,000 injured, some of whom were denied medical care and many are missing following protests by students and youth movements against government policies," he said.

"The authorities must also provide guarantees of non-recurrence and an assurance there will be no reprisals against those involved in the protests."

Nearly 10,000 people have reportedly been detained on charges of involvement in clashes and destruction of government property.





Police are watching hospitals where injured protesters are being treated. (ABC News: Tanbirul Miraj Ripon)

Government accused of intimidating protesters

Despite the backing of international human rights organisations, many student leaders and victims' families approached by the ABC were fearful of speaking out against Ms Hasina's government.

Hospitals treating injured protesters are under heavy surveillance by police.

Law enforcement officers have also been conducting frequent block raids across Dhaka.

This is when large numbers of law enforcement agency personnel cordon off an area and position themselves at the exit points so no-one can leave.

They then conduct searches of houses and arrest people based on their intelligence.

The idea is to instil fear, said one journalist who did not want to be named.

Student leader Umama Fatehma, who has actively coordinated and campaigned in the ongoing protests, said she wouldn't be intimidated.

She has vowed to continue protesting for as long as it takes to get justice.

"We can't go back to university when our friends and fellows are in jail ... and hundreds were killed in front of our eyes," she told the ABC.

Dipto said despite his brother's apolitical views, he was aware his involvement as a volunteer in the protests could become an issue.

"Till now, there is no pressure on me from the authority or anyone else, but it could be a problem in future," he said.

But he's not too worried.

"We didn't learn to fear anyone apart from our almighty Allah," he said.

"If we can survive by keeping our backbone straight — that's what I call life."

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