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Asia

Bangladesh shuts universities, colleges indefinitely after protests turn deadly



Anti-quota protesters hold placards during a demonstration on Dhaka University campus in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on Jul 16, 2024. (Photo: AFP/Munir Uz Zaman)

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DHAKA: Bangladesh announced it will indefinitely shut down all public and private universities from Wednesday (Jul 17) after protests by students against a quota system for government jobs [turned deadly this week](#), leaving at least six people dead and scores injured.

The South Asian nation has been rocked by [protests for weeks over public sector job quotas](#), which include a 30 per cent reservation for family members of freedom fighters from the 1971 War of Independence from Pakistan.

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The quotas have sparked anger among students who face high youth unemployment rates, with nearly 32 million young Bangladeshis not in work or education out of a total population of 170 million people.

Demonstrations intensified after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina refused to meet the protesters' demands, citing ongoing court proceedings, and labelled those opposing the quota as "razakar" - a term used for those who allegedly collaborated with the Pakistani army during the 1971 war.

The protests turned violent this week when thousands of anti-quota protesters clashed with members of the student wing of the ruling Awami League party across the country. Police used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the protesters.

Six people, including at least three students, were killed during the clashes on

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Tuesday, police said.

"We urgently call on the government of Bangladesh to immediately guarantee the safety of all peaceful protesters and proper treatment of all those injured," Amnesty International said in a post on X.

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Authorities have deployed riot police, along with the Border Guard Bangladesh paramilitary force, at university campuses across the country to maintain law and order.

Late on Tuesday, the University Grants Commission ordered all universities to shut down and instructed students to vacate the premises immediately for security reasons. High schools, colleges and other educational institutions were also shut.

Nahid Islam, the coordinator of the anti-quota protests, said students will hold processions on Wednesday carrying coffins in solidarity with those that lost their lives.

"Many have left the dormitories out of fear due to attacks by cadres of the student league (the student wing of the ruling party)," said a female student of Dhaka University, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal.

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"Still, many students remain, especially in the men's dormitories. Those of us currently staying in the dorms are not leaving easily."

Police raided the headquarters of the main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), in Dhaka around midnight on Tuesday and arrested seven activists, including a former leader of its student wing.

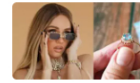
Harun Or Rashid, the head of police's detective branch, said they recovered 100 crude bombs and several bottles of petrol during the raid that was conducted after a bus was set on fire near the BNP office.

Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, the senior joint secretary of BNP, condemned the raid and said the government planted the recovered items to discredit the anti-quota protests.

The protests are the first significant challenge to Hasina's government since she secured a fourth consecutive term in January in an election boycotted by the BNP.

Experts attribute the unrest to stagnant job growth in the private sector, making government jobs, which offer regular wage hikes and other privileges, increasingly desirable.

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Currently, 56 per cent of government jobs in Bangladesh are reserved under various quotas, including 10 per cent for women, 10 per cent for people from underdeveloped districts, 5 per cent for indigenous communities, and 1 per cent for people with disabilities.

Source: Reuters/rl