



[Joint Statement] Bangladesh: Cease violence against student protestors, uphold the right to peaceful assembly

The The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and Front Line Defenders (FLD) are deeply concerned over the violence and excessive use of force and firearms by security forces against student human rights defenders and university students [protesting](#) against Bangladesh's quota system in government jobs.

In Bangladesh, 30 per cent of first and second-class government jobs are reserved for the children and grandchildren of 'freedom fighters' who fought for the country's independence from Pakistan in 1971.

This crackdown has resulted in more than thousands of injured protestors and at least [39 deaths](#), including many students and a journalist.

Student-led anti-quota protests

The quota system was abolished in 2018 following widespread protests. However, on 5 June 2024, it was [reinstated](#) by the Bangladesh High Court.

In response to the reinstatement, protests erupted across Bangladeshi universities, with students demanding the cancellation of the High Court order and calling the quota system discriminatory.

Student protestors argue that the quota system benefits supporters of the ruling Awami League party and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who was re-elected amid a [crackdown on the political opposition](#), an [election boycott and low voter turnout](#).

Students demand a shift towards a merit-based system while retaining quotas for ethnic minorities and persons with disabilities. Despite the top court [temporarily](#) suspending the quotas, protestors vow to push on until the scheme is fully reformed.

Violence against protestors

The protests broke out on 1 July 2024, quickly spreading across university campuses. Members of the [Bangladesh Chhatra League \(BCL\)](#)—the Awami League's student wing—reportedly attacked protestors with sticks, bricks, crude bombs, and iron rods with impunity.

The violent attacks were caught on camera, showing harrowing images of [stick-wielding men](#) assaulting [women student activists](#).

A group of Awami League supporters also [stormed](#) the emergency department of Dhaka Medical College Hospital on 15 July where injured students were being treated, disrupting medical services and causing widespread panic among medical staff and patients.

Meanwhile, the police reportedly used [shotgun pellets](#), teargas shells, and [sound grenades](#) against protestors. They allegedly [shot unarmed protestors](#), leaving at least seven persons dead, including three students.

[Journalists](#) covering the protests have also been injured.

[Four](#) people, including [Akhtar Hossain](#), the former leader of Dhaka University Central Students' Union, were detained by the police when they attempted to stage a sit-in in support of the student protests and to condemn the killings.

The police also raided the headquarters of the lead opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and arrested [seven](#) members of its student wing.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called the protestors '*Razakars*,' referring to Pakistani collaborators in the 1971 genocide. According to student leaders, Hasina's comments [encouraged](#) BCL members to attack protestors.

Intimidation, internet disruption

Earlier, there were [reports of targeted internet disruptions](#) affecting students from Dhaka University, Rajshahi University and Jahangirnagar University. However, on 18 July, mobile [internet](#) services were shut down in most of the country, to the [extent](#) of complete loss of connectivity.

Students have been [threatened](#) with suspension and expulsion for simply participating in the protests. College authorities have allegedly instructed students to avoid sharing information on social media.

These actions directly violate students' right to protest and the freedoms of peaceful assembly, association, and expression. As the protests intensify, the government has ordered schools and universities to [shut down](#) until further notice.

Call to action

FORUM-ASIA and FLD urge the Government of Bangladesh to uphold people's fundamental rights and freedoms, particularly peaceful assembly, association, and expression.

The violent repression of student protests in Bangladesh undermines the country's constitutional protections, including Article 37 which guarantees the right to peaceful assembly. Additionally, it violates Bangladesh's international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which the country is a state party.

We urge the government to safeguard protestors and student HRDs from threats, reprisals, and violence. Likewise, the government must respect people's right to peaceful protest. The state must refrain from sponsoring or facilitating any attacks

against protestors and must ensure that all state bodies, including the police and paramilitary forces, exercise utmost restraint.

The use of excessive force and firearms, including shooting at unarmed protestors, is a blatant disregard for the right to life and appears to be a “shoot to kill” approach in dealing with protests. Internet shutdowns and social media restrictions infringe upon people’s freedom of expression and right to access information.

We call for a prompt, independent and impartial investigation into these violations. Perpetrators should be held to account and victims and their families should be afforded reparations.

Please note that the situation is evolving, and this statement is based on information and updates available as of 19 July 2024, 10 AM Bangladesh time. We are actively monitoring developments and will provide further updates as necessary.

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The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)

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Front Line Defenders was founded in Dublin in 2001 with the specific aim of protecting human rights defenders at risk (HRDs), people who work, non-violently, for any or all of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Front Line Defenders addresses the protection needs identified by HRDs themselves. Front Line Defenders maintains its headquarters in Dublin, an EU Office in Brussels, and regionally-based field staff in the Americas, Asia, Africa, Europe & Central Asia, and the Middle East. www.frontlinedefenders.org

For media inquiries, please contact:

- Communication and Media Programme, FORUM-ASIA, communication@forum-asia.org