

# Bangladesh: Urgent Dispatch from Dhaka

Monday 22 July 2024, by [ALAM Shahidul](#), [PANDEY Shubhanga](#) (Date first published: 20 July 2024).

**On the evening of 20<sup>th</sup> July, Shahidul Alam communicated a dispatch from Dhaka via WhatsApp to SAAG and other media organizations, briefly getting through the internet shutdown to request that the scale of the brutal violence against student protests in Bangladesh be widely shared. Accompanying this piece was the clipped message: “Hundreds killed. It’s a massacre.”**

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## EDITOR’S NOTE:

*The following is a dispatch from Dhaka by the renowned Bangladeshi photojournalist, educator, and civil-rights activist Shahidul Alam, sent to SAAG and other media organizations via WhatsApp on July 20<sup>th</sup>, as he briefly managed to get past the internet blackout. “Massacre going on. 100s killed. Please get the story out,” Alam said tersely.*

*Bangladesh is witnessing its largest political protests—and the deadliest state repression against political dissent—in its recent history. Since early July 2024, university students across the country have organized in opposition to a Supreme Court verdict that overturned an earlier ban on the deeply divisive policy of reservations in public-sector jobs and higher education. With the decision, Bangladesh was poised to return to a system of quotas that reserved 30 percent or more of government jobs and university admissions for descendants of the 180,000 officially registered freedom fighters, a secure constituency of the ruling Awami League, which led Bangladesh’s 1971 liberation. In response, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s government has unleashed a systematic campaign of police violence against student activists, imposed a nationwide curfew, deployed the military, and initiated a near-total internet shutdown. The number of those killed and injured has escalated; at least 67 protesters were killed on July 19 alone.*

*Alam’s note paints a picture of shocking violence over the last few days but also of a larger social crisis brewing in Sheikh Hasina’s Bangladesh. This is a world of routine torture, extrajudicial killings, social-media surveillance, gangsterization of student politics, and large-scale political corruption, all of it in rude contrast to headlines of soaring macroeconomic growth. Arrested and imprisoned for criticizing the prime minister, Alam is familiar with the state’s capacity for arbitrary violence. To preserve the urgency of his tone, the piece has been only lightly edited.*

—Shubhanga Pandey

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It would be a mistake to see this as simply a demand for more jobs. The quota movement, justified as it is, is simply the tip of the iceberg. A rampant government running roughshod over its people for so very long has led to extreme discontent. The quota issue has merely lit the fuse to this tinderbox. As citizens counted the dead and the injured, the prime minister fiddled, advising attendees at an

aquaculture and seafood conference on tourism prospects in Cox's Bazaar.

The original quota had been designed shortly after independence in 1972 to be an interim arrangement to acknowledge the contribution of freedom fighters who constituted less than 0.25 percent of the population. Since a government known to be incredibly corrupt is responsible for creating the list of freedom fighters, over 50 years later, the 120-fold allocation through a 30 percent quota has become an easy backdoor for party cadres to much sought-after government employment. Confirmation came through of senior Awami Leaguers saying: "Just get through the initial screening, and we'll get you through in the viva," and simultaneously, that the "government jobs will only go to party people."

The resentment had resulted in protests in 2008 and 2013, but it was in 2018 that it gathered steam. When repressive measures failed to quell that unrest, the prime minister, in a moment of rage, overstepped her authority and cancelled the entire system. This had never been a demand of the protesters, who recognised the need for positive discrimination for disadvantaged communities. There are plenty of other reasons for the unrest. The price of essential goods has skyrocketed over the years, and people have their backs against the wall. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister herself publicly announces that her peon has amassed \$40 million and only travels by helicopter. The peon is not the only one to travel by helicopter. Choppers were sent yesterday to rescue police trapped on a rooftop by angry protesters.

## 15<sup>th</sup> July 2024

It was reminiscent of 2018. The police van with water cannons and the long line of policemen standing at the Nilkhet corner on Monday made it abundantly clear that they were prepared. What were they prepared for? Certainly not the defence of unarmed students or the general public. They failed to lift a finger when the students were being attacked. The armed goons of the Chhatra League (CL, the ruling party's student organisation) had been bussed in the previous night along with, apparently, youth gangs and leaders for hire. Their leaders had openly threatened the protesting students. CL was clearly the one the police were on standby to defend. It was CL that quota backdoors were designed to favour.

As it turned out, there was little the unarmed students could do against the helmeted, armed, pro-government forces let loose. The police were content to let the mayhem continue, stepping in only when the ferocity of people's power took the goons aback. We walked past blood and strewn sandals in the streets. People stopped us to say the injured had been taken to Dhaka Medical College Emergency Ward.

CL goons took positions around the ward where some of the injured were being treated while others marched around the wards, weapons in hand, and the police conveniently stayed away. They continued to look away when CL members went inside the ward to beat up injured students.

There was no need to intervene. CL was not in danger. The nation was. Democracy was. Common decency was. The public was in grave danger, but that was not their concern. The fact that the protection of the public was their primary task had never been part of the equation. Several were killed all over the country that day.

"Justice will take its own course" is a common refrain of the law minister. The separation of the judiciary and the executive has never existed in Bangladesh. With this government, it has merged into one. It is used whenever the government wants to play good cop/bad cop. The court enacts government directives. The government takes credit. The blame goes to the court. The quota drama is no exception.

Torture cells in public universities. Suppression of all forms of dissent. Jailing of opposition activists. The extra-judicial killings, the disappearances. India has been given huge concessions, and in return, it has helped prop up this illegal regime in many ways, all of which are causes of anger. Abrar Fahad, the bright BUET student who had critiqued Indian hegemony in social media, was bludgeoned to death on campus by party cadres. The same cadres the quotas would provide back doors for. An entire generation of Bangladeshis is growing up hating India. The Boycott India campaign is gaining steam. Hasina is getting to be a liability, even for our “friendly” neighbour.

## **16<sup>th</sup> July 2024**

In a recent Facebook status, Abu Sayeed, the unarmed student of Begum Rokeya University whom police had pumped four rubber bullets into, had written an ode to his favourite teacher Shamsuzzoha, a chemistry teacher at Rajshahi University, who had died at the hands of the Pakistani army in 1971 while trying to save the lives of his students.

“Yes, you too will die, but while you are alive, don’t be spineless. Support just causes. Come out to the streets. Be a shield for the students. It is then that you will be respected and honoured. Don’t fade away in the annals of time through your death. Stay alive forever. Stay Shamsuzzoha.” No chopper arrived, nor indeed any attempt made at rescuing the hapless student. He became Shamsuzzoha.

The televised murder is an indictment of a rogue government that has long lost its right to rule. The defiant outstretched arms of the young man, a televised murder that will remain etched in public memory. His body shudders after the first bullet, yet he stands defiant. Then another bullet, and another, and yet another. All from close range. The body crouches, then crumples and folds. His outstretched arms as he had faced the police will become the Tiananmen Square moment in Bangladesh’s history.

## **17<sup>th</sup> July 2024**

Border guards of Bangladesh, inept at protecting its citizens from becoming victims of the regular target practicing by Indian Border Security Forces, seem happy to turn their own guns towards unarmed students instead. The police were clearly lying when they claimed they had fired grenades to try and control unruly students. There were only four students at Raju Bhashkorjo. The only ones who had been able to get past the CL and police cordon. They wanted to hold a funeral for Abu Sayeed and other slain friends. When the police started shoving them away, they lay down on the ground in protest. They were surrounded by journalists. The police hurled a sound grenade which sent both the journalists and students scurrying. They then hurled further grenades at the journalists and bystanders left standing. That was when my colleague was injured. The police were the only ones conducting violence. The space was encircled by hundreds of armed police. There were armoured vehicles. Water cannon trucks and even a prison van. I wonder which country has supplied our police with the 48 mm sound grenades (NF24. NENF24BP. MFG: 2022. Bangladesh Police/ BP). The grenade was hurled directly at my colleague. It was the first time she had joined a protest. At least she got to see how brave our police force is.

## **18<sup>th</sup> July 2024**

A group of feminists who had planned to gather at Shahbag to express solidarity with the quota protesters should not have posed a major threat. Police and government goons didn’t allow them to gather, so they regrouped outside the Naripokkho office in Dhanmondi. They were attacked too. Safia Azim was injured, but did not require hospitalisation. The law minister, known for lying

through his teeth, said earlier on BBC that it was the protesters who instigated the violence. Meanwhile, the state-run BTV, the National Television Station, had been set on fire. Mobile data was blocked. Things were escalating. That night Internet went down completely. Rumours spread about the military moving in, fuelled partially by sightings of a convoy of APCs in the streets. Other sightings of 15 helicopters taking off from the Prime Minister's official residence gave fuel to the rumours that the Prime Minister was trying to make a getaway. The sound of shelling and gunfire rang throughout the night.

## 19<sup>th</sup> July 2024

The internet had been down, as had BTV, the national television station. Over 50 have allegedly been killed. Pro-government news outlets describe the protesting students as "miscreants." A throwback to the term used by the Pakistani Army in 1971.

There are other similarities. A flailing tyrant is lashing out to survive against an enraged public that has shaken free of its fear of a repressive regime. The attempt to disrupt the morning protest outside the Parliament Building in memory of Abu Sayeed failed. Far too many protesters had gathered. The Internet had been partially restored, but not BTV.

That's when news of attacks all across the country started pouring in. The leftist leader Zonayed Saki and other party members had been badly beaten in Purana Paltan. Police-backed vigilantes desperately tried to quell the increasingly angry protesters. A desperate government offered a deal. The court would convene on Sunday, and they were prepared to engage in dialogue. "Not over spilled blood," the students replied. Fresh rumours emerged of the military having been given magisterial powers and asked to intervene "in aid to civil power." Ironic.

The people have spoken. The end is nigh.□

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### Shahidul Alam

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### P.S.

SAAG Anthology

[https://www.saaganthology.com/article/urgent-dispatch-from-dhaka?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR35VN64W0iVNlzZtSEeBgJddcgy\\_w5adQ0tol8mHi5hjxe6gy86pUWYkMg\\_aem\\_La-HB1dyroS8O4Gs2lSARw&sfnsn=mo](https://www.saaganthology.com/article/urgent-dispatch-from-dhaka?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR35VN64W0iVNlzZtSEeBgJddcgy_w5adQ0tol8mHi5hjxe6gy86pUWYkMg_aem_La-HB1dyroS8O4Gs2lSARw&sfnsn=mo)