

Bangladesh: Stop violence against peaceful students protesters demanding reforms in the job reservation system

(Bangkok/Kathmandu, 6 July 2018) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) condemns the violent treatment of student protestors and teachers of universities across Bangladesh. While the protests and violence started in April, the situation has further escalated in the last few days. They are protesting the Government's decision on a quota system, which allocates 56 percent of civil service jobs to the families of veterans from the 1971 war of independence and disadvantaged minorities, leaving only 44 percent for university graduates. While, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced reform to the quota for government jobs on 11 April 2018,¹ students continue their peaceful protests until her announcement is realised in a new policy.

In April, when the protests began, Bangladesh police stormed the campus grounds of Dhaka University, assaulted students, fired rubber bullets and tear gas at them, and injured over a hundred protestors.²

Since 30 June 2018, a new series of assaults is being perpetrated against the students by activists aligned to Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the ruling party, the Awami League. The assault is taking place at universities across the country.³ The police has repeatedly failed to protect the students.

Several students have been brutally assaulted, creating fear among the students and lawless situations across campuses. Those assaulted in the last week include leaders of the protestors, Hasan Al Mamun, Farooq Hassan, and Nurul Haque Nur, who were mercilessly assaulted on the campus of Dhaka University.⁴ Rashed Khan, associated with the Anti-Quota movement, was arrested for Facebook live-streaming protests on 2 July, under section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology Act (ICT Act), and was taken into police custody for five days. The university administration and police reportedly did not take any action against the perpetrators of the violence committed on the university campus.

On 2 July, at least two people were detained at the Jatiya Press Club, in Dhaka, for protesting against the on-going attacks on students. The police assaulted and detained, along with a student, teacher and anthropologist, Prof Rahnema Ahmed. Another professor of Dhaka University, Dr Fahmidul Haq was manhandled and threatened by the police.⁵ Student protestors have also been attacked at other universities, including Rajshahi University and Chittagong University, Bangladesh.

¹<https://www.thedailystar.net/country/prime-minister-sheikh-hasina-addressing-parliament-right-now-1561309>

²<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1681139/3-100-injured-major-student-protests-bangladesh/>

³ <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/why-merciless-beating-1599568>

⁴<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/bcl-men-action-again-1599037>

⁵<https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/police-disperse-citizens-demo-1599550>

Apart from the violent attacks on campuses, the students are also being targeted and threatened online. Female students are threatened with rape and violence on social media, allegedly through fake accounts.⁶

Despite the on-going arbitrary crackdown, students across universities of Bangladesh have continued their protests, demanding immediate action against the activists of BCL, who are audaciously entering campus grounds and assaulting students. On 3 July, at Dhaka University, students formed a human chain, under the banner 'Students against Repression'.⁷

The use of force against the protesters is restricted when it comes to peaceful assembly under international human rights law. In February 2016, two UN Special Rapporteurs in a joint report⁸ recommended that 'force shall not be used unless it is strictly unavoidable, and if applied it must be done in accordance with international human rights law.' The report further clarified that 'States and their law enforcement agencies and officials are obligated under international law to respect and protect, without discrimination, the rights of all those who participate in assemblies, as well as monitors and bystanders. The normative framework governing the use of force includes the principles of legality, precaution, necessity, proportionality and accountability.'

In this context, the attacks on students, teachers, and activists are highly concerning. The university administrations and Bangladesh Police have failed to undertake any of the preventive measures or punitive actions suggested by the Special Rapporteurs. As a result, several activists and supporters of the anti-quota movement are deprived of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. They are also arbitrarily held without due process of law in violation of their right to liberty.

FORUM-ASIA believes that an independent investigation is essential into the series of incidents, focusing particularly on the role of BCL leaders and police to ascertain the proportionality of the force used, and to ascertain accountability for the violence meted out to the protesters. FORUM-ASIA urges the Government to immediately undertake these measures, including a better crowd management system, to prevent further violence and restore law and order

FORUM-ASIA unequivocally condemns the crackdown on peaceful protests and protesters, and further reiterates its call to repeal the ICT Act and its section 57, which have been widely abused to stifle lawful expression in Bangladesh, not only this time, but in the past as well.

⁶<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2018/07/02/protesters-seeking-quota-reforms-come-under-fresh-attacks-in-dhaka>

⁷<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2018/07/04/quota-reform-movement-public-university-students-continue-protest-across-bangladesh>

⁸ http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/31/66

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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