

Government-backed thugs attack student protests in Bangladesh

By Pradeep Ramanayake
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Bangladesh police and government-backed thugs brutally assaulted students in Dhaka who were protesting over the death of two students by a speeding privately-operated bus on July 29. The two teenagers—a girl and a boy—were killed when the vehicle, which attempted to overtake another bus, rammed into students waiting at a bus stop. At least seven other youth were badly injured.

Protests involving thousands of teenage students, some as young as 13, erupted in the city and continued for nine days, drawing in high school and university students. The unrest follows demonstrations in April by university students demanding reform of the civil service employment quota system.

Students demanded better road safety rules and denounced the government, blaming the country's notoriously corrupt driving license and vehicle registration systems for the thousands of road deaths each year. Over 7,390 people—or around 20 per day—lost their lives in road accidents last year, according to the non-government Passengers Welfare Association.

Students began stopping trucks, buses and cars, demanding to see the drivers' licenses and checking if the vehicles were registered and roadworthy, bringing traffic to a virtual standstill in parts of the capital.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League-led government responded by mobilising hundreds of police, who attacked the students. Last Saturday, riot police repeatedly used tear gas and rubber bullets, and baton-charged demonstrators.

These attacks turned even more violent when armed thugs from the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the Awami League's youth organisation, surrounded groups of students and began clubbing them while the police watched on. Police fired tear gas into university

and college premises, targeting students trying to escape. Photographers, television camera crews and journalists reporting the attacks were also assaulted.

When video footage and photographs began appearing on the Internet showing bleeding and badly injured students and exposing the BCL attacks, the government shut down mobile communications and Internet services in parts of Dhaka.

Hundreds of students were injured and hospitalised. Abdus Shabbir, an emergency room doctor, told the AFP news agency he had treated more than 115 students since Saturday, including numbers who “were in very bad condition.”

On Sunday, Prime Minister Hasina ordered the students to end their action and demanded “all guardians and parents to keep their children at home.” Interior Minister Asaduzzaman Khan denounced the protests as “a conspiracy to make the government inoperative.” Signalling a possible witch hunt against protest organisers, he declared that the government would “take stern action against those conspiring to exploit this by inciting the minors.”

The government this week also approved its Road Transport Act 2018, which boosted jail terms for violations of traffic laws. This is a desperate attempt to dissipate concerns over the country's lax licensing and roadworthy laws. Traffic offenders now can be jailed for five years with no early release, up from three years. The government also promised to consider capital punishment for those responsible for fatal road accidents.

While the student demonstrations ended on Tuesday, police arrested internationally-acclaimed photographer Shahidul Alam during the protests, accusing him of breaching the draconian Information and Communication Technology Act during an Al Jazeera

interview. Alam, who covered the protests and published photographs of the attacks on the students, faces a possible 14-year jail term.

During the interview, Alam pointed out that the demonstrations were not just about road safety but animated by widespread disaffection with the government, including “[the] looting of banks, the gagging of media... extra-judicial killings, the disappearances, the protection money at all levels, [and] corruption in education.”

Hasina’s government, which faces national elections later this year, is increasingly resorting to police-state methods and the mobilisation of thugs to crack down on any sign of political opposition by workers and other oppressed sections. Last month, it deployed police and BCL thugs to suppress students, unemployed graduates and teachers demanding changes to the civil service jobs quota system.

Commenting on this month’s assaults on demonstrators, Amnesty International deputy director for South Asia, Omar Waraich, said: “Repression has been a trademark of this government over the past five years. Whether it is journalists, the opposition or peaceful protesters, dissent has never been tolerated.”

The attacks on students, Internet censorship and persecution of journalists are warnings that Hasina’s administration, unable to contain discontent, is moving increasingly toward dictatorial forms of rule.

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