

# General strikes in Bangladesh demand government's resignation

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Two general strikes or hartals demanding the resignation of the ruling Awami League government brought Bangladesh to a standstill twice in just five days--on October 19 and 22. The strike action organised by a seven party opposition coalition led by Bangladesh National Party (BNP) paralysed transport, educational institutions, shops, markets, banks and finance houses in the country's major cities.

At least four people were killed and 400 injured as a result of large-scale clashes between pro-hartal demonstrators with police and anti-hartal groups. A number of people were seriously injured as a result of bomb attacks. A teenage boy was fighting for his life in hospital on October 22 after what the *Daily Star* newspaper described as 'a brutal police torture'.

The police, backed by hundreds of paramilitary guards, mobilised in force to try to stop marches and demonstrations. Using guns, tear gas, water cannons, clubs and batons, they attacked supporters of the hartal and defended opponents of the strike. Hundreds of people were arrested over the two strike days.

The strikes were called by the BNP and its allies in protest at the government's 'repression' and 'undemocratic methods'. In turn, the ruling Awami League has accused the BNP of provoking the strike action to divert attention away from a trial under way into the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's first prime minister, in August 1975 during a coup by a section of the armed forces. The current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is one of his daughters.

The Awami League has repeatedly accused the BNP of involvement in the murder. In opposition, Hasina did not hesitate to use general strikes to destabilise the then BNP government, pledging to fight corruption and to take action against her father's killers. As a result of the current trial into the killings, many opposition leaders

and anti-government supporters have been arrested, questioned and jailed. The BNP claims that the government is using the trial as a pretext to persecute and torture its political opponents.

But underlying the widespread support for the strikes is the country's deepening economic and social crisis, which has been compounded by this year's devastating flooding. There is widespread anger at the lack of flood relief. Crops, homes and livestock destroyed in the recent floods have not replaced. Damaged roads and other infrastructure are still to be repaired. Many people do not have adequate food and medicine. Over 650 have died and half million are suffering from malnutrition and flood related diseases such as diarrhea, respiratory and skin disorders.

Tens of thousands of workers have lost their jobs and income as many industries badly affected by the flooding cannot resume operations. In the last week 25,000 handloom units in Khulna district closed down--the region once produced 60 percent of the country's spun and woven products.

The social misery has been compounded by plans to devalue the currency for the third time this year. Furthermore, as a condition of receiving financial aid from the IMF, the government has introduced a number of new taxes and charges claiming they are necessary to provide funds for the 'post flood rehabilitation program'. It expects to raise \$US62 million through a tax on communication bills, interest from saving certificates, and charges on new and renewed passports and the lodging of any documents for registration.

Despite their apparent disagreements, both major capitalist parties--the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party--agree with the IMF demands for so-called free market policies to open up the country to international investment. Within the next

few weeks, the government plans to announce its 'modern industrial policy' to attract investors by offering incentives, enabling the establishment of private export processing zones and abolishing various tariff and non-tariff trade barriers. Already 63 British companies have set up operations within Bangladesh and another 45 have registered expressions of interest.

In calling for more foreign investment, Tofael Ahmed, Minister for Commerce and Industry, said: 'We have political differences with the opposition, but we are united with them in the economic front'. The following day, in the midst of the strike, BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia responded at the closing ceremony of the Bangladesh Textile Exposition (BATEXPO) saying: 'We do not have any intention to execute such programs which may hinder economic and social development or create obstacles to a better future for the people. As the chief of the main opposition party, I want to assure garment exporters and all industrialists that I would provide them with all kinds of co-operation for the continued development of the industrial sector.'

The BNP has delayed any further anti-government strikes, marches and rallies until November 4, saying it does not want to interfere with the current world cricket tournament in Dhaka.

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