

Bangladesh regime imposes curfew to suppress student protests

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28 August 2007

The military-backed regime in Bangladesh imposed an indefinite curfew in six major cities on August 22 in an attempt to suppress student agitation demanding an end to emergency rule and the withdrawal of all security forces stationed on university campuses. The clampdown covered the capital Dhaka and the main port of Chittagong as well as Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet.

The demonstrations erupted on August 20 after soldiers assaulted students and a teacher involved in a football match at Dhaka University. An army post had been on the campus since the end of last year. After clashes between students and police in Dhaka, the protests spread to other universities and then spilled onto the streets as street vendors, shopkeepers and the urban poor joined in.

Some 1,500 police were dispatched to Dhaka University. Many more were deployed as demonstrations spread elsewhere. Several hundred people were injured as the security forces used baton charges and tear gas to break up the protests. A 35-year-old rickshaw puller was killed in Rajshahi. In all, an estimated 87,000 students participated in the protests, defying the interim regime's emergency laws.

Business in the capital ground to a standstill after the curfew was imposed. All public universities and colleges across the country were shut down. A ban was imposed on media reportage of the protests and mobile phone networks were also closed down. Police were out in force to ensure the curfew was observed. Arrests and beatings were common.

"I was beaten up three times on my way from Sadarghat to Gulistan. They did not even give me a chance to show my ID," Sumon Mohammad told the *Daily Star*. The *New Age* complained that the security forces were harassing journalists and preventing them

from performing their duties. "At least 25 people, including reporters, photographers, general staff and even CNG (rickshaw)-drivers of different newspapers and electronic media establishments were injured."

The curfew was lifted for three hours last Thursday and 14 hours on Friday, but the crackdown continued. On Saturday, authorities announced that 144 arrests had been made. Four university professors, including Anwar Hossain, secretary of Dhaka University's teachers association, and Harun-Or Rashid, the dean of the university's social science faculty, and a student leader were among the detained. Three are accused of "instigating" the unrest.

The US-based Human Rights Watch issued a statement on Saturday condemning human rights violations by the regime. "What sparked these protests is the ongoing repression of emergency rule, and the government's heavy handed response is like oil on a fire," Asia advocacy director Sophie Richardson declared.

The interim regime headed by Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed has no intention of moderating its repressive rule. Having taken power in January amid political turmoil surrounding national elections, the government has, with the backing of the military, imposed emergency rule, postponed elections until the end of 2008 and, in the name of fighting corruption, instigated sweeping detentions.

Human Rights Watch commented: "Since the imposition of emergency rule, Bangladeshi armed forces have been responsible for abuses such as arbitrary detention, torture and deaths in custody. The emergency laws limit access to effective remedies, including the right to bail and the right to challenge the lawfulness of a detention. The authorities have detained more than 250,000 people since the caretaker

government took over in January 2007. Several political leaders are in custody including Awami League leader and former prime minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed. Another former prime minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, is under virtual house arrest.”

Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed publicly blamed the protests on “a conspiracy of vested interests who tried to tarnish the image of the interim government”. However, the regime was clearly shaken by the size and scope of the demonstrations. The army has withdrawn from Dhaka University campus and promised an inquiry into the incident that sparked the opposition.

The main opposition parties—the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP)—condemned the army’s actions but appealed for calm. Awami League acting president Zillur Rahman declared: “Many serious problems can be solved through discussions.” Describing the incident as “very sad”, BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan urged the government “to take immediate steps to resolve the crisis by peaceful means in order to restore academic environment”.

The government and opposition are both concerned about the potential ramifications of the demonstrations. Two previous military dictatorships headed by Ziaur Rahman and Muhammad Ershad collapsed after student protests triggered a widespread opposition movement. Dhaka University is the country’s largest, with 30,000 students and 1,300 teachers, and is well known as a centre of radical activity.

Hostility to the interim government is not limited to students. Rising prices, sackings and the imposition of restructuring measures demanded by the IMF and World Bank have fuelled unrest. Prices for basic food items have jumped by more than 40 percent since last November. The cost of powdered milk is up by 120 percent. The World Bank warned inflation might accelerate in coming months under the impact of widespread flooding. Desperate to find a scapegoat, Finance Adviser Mirza Azizul Islam recently blamed the profit-making of a few wealthy businessmen.

Job losses are also threatening to provoke protests. On August 18, a garment factory at the Dhaka Export Processing Zone sacked 2,602 workers and tightened security to preempt labour unrest. The state-owned Carpeting Jute Mills in Jessore has laid off 368 workers

under the protection of security forces. An official of one of the mills explained that the decision to run the mill with 50 percent workforce was in line with the government’s “reform” measures.

The interim government is committed to imposing further privatisation, downsizing and the closure of state-owned enterprises in line with the demands of foreign capital. The Privatisation Commission has listed some 25 enterprises to be sold off.

Annual flooding has hit rural areas hard, with some 39 districts affected and damage to crops estimated at 20 billion takas (\$US290 million). On August 20, thousands of farmers demanding adequate supplies of fertiliser blocked the Pabna-Rajshahi Highway for more than an hour before security forces dispersed them.

The student protests have provided a glimpse of the political opposition that is building up to the interim regime, its anti-democratic methods and the imposition of austerity measures.



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