

# Bangladeshi teachers end “fast-unto-death”

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Several thousand Bangladeshi teachers, who began a “fast-unto-death” on December 31 at the National Press Club in the capital of Dhaka, called off their protest on Friday January 5.

“Over the past 12 years, I have been working without any pay and living in inhumane conditions,” said Sohrab Hossain, one of the teachers. “It is better to die here than return home with empty hands,” he told a representative of the European Pressphoto Agency last week.

Since December 26, thousands of teachers have been engaged in a round-the-clock sit-in protest outside the Press Club despite shivering cold temperatures. When the sit-in failed to secure their demands, they began a hunger strike five days later. Their chief demand was to gain coverage under the government’s Monthly Payment Order (MPO) system.

Over the course of the six-day hunger strike 117 of the teachers required hospitalization.

Nearly 80,000 Bangladeshi teachers and employees at 6,000 government-recognized schools work without government pay, house rent or medical allowance. And this state of affairs has existed, according to the protestors, for 15 or even 20 years in some cases.

Sohrab said he received just over \$12 a month at the madrasa school where he works, requiring him to take on private classes and employment at a store in the evenings to survive. Those who gain access to the MPO system receive the country’s minimum wage of \$137 a month from the government, reported *news4europe*.

On Friday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina promised to meet these demands. Non-MPO Educational Institutions’ Teachers and Employees Federation Secretary Binoy Bhushan Roy accepted the prime minister’s assurances and shut down the protests. The acting president of the Federation Golam Mahmaudunnabi Dollar declared, “We believed that she [the prime minister] would listen to us. We are

going home today.”

Earlier in the week, the group had rebuffed offers by the Education Minister Nurul Nahid, stating that the government had falsely promised job regularization 22 times in the past, without doing so. Prime Minister Hasina’s Awami League coalition faces national elections at the end of 2018 or early 2019.

Mohiuddin Alamgir noted in the Bangladesh paper *New Age*, “Teachers from primary schools to colleges have frequently been observing hunger strikes, abstaining from work, holding sit-ins and taking part in processions over the last couple of months and have warned of continuation of such demonstrations until their demands were met.”

There are three basic educational systems in Bangladesh. The majority are public schools, followed by private English medium schools, and religious-based Madrassas.

According to a 2016 report “Educational System in Bangladesh,” a major factor “discouraging” teachers is the “lack of the most basic facilities such as chairs and tables, water, electricity, and even toilets are absent in many schools outside the city corporation areas. In many cases there are even no buildings. Five percent of schools do not have toilet facilities in Bangladesh while another 14% have to make do with just one.” The report also pointed to the high class sizes, an average of 54 students to one teacher in public schools and slightly lower ratios in private schools and madrassas.

The government’s promised increases in education spending have not materialized. Last year the already minuscule spending on education and health (about two percent of the gross domestic product) was cut by 10 percent, despite the claim of a 14 percent increase.

At least 80-110 million Bangladeshi people live on less than \$2 a day, according to the *Financial Express*. The Hasina government has responded to a deteriorating financial situation—declining remittances

from overseas workers, food price rises and lower export growth—by assaulting garment workers striking for higher pay, demanding the removal of Rohingya refugees and pushing a 14-year plan to build 100 cheap labor zones.

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