

**Bangladesh**

# Bangladeshi students allege police torture after protests crackdown

More than 150 reported dead and thousands injured as peaceful demonstrations turn violent



📍 Nahid Islam, a Dhaka University student, says he was picked up by police last week, tortured and left unconscious by the side of the road. Photograph: Munir Uz Zaman/AFP/Getty Images

**Redwan Ahmed in Dhaka and Hannah Ellis-Petersen in Delhi**

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Student activists in [Bangladesh](#) have alleged they were abducted and tortured during a violent police crackdown on the protests that have swept the country and led to the arrest of thousands of political opponents and government critics.

Nahid Islam, a Dhaka University student and one of the main organisers of the protest movement, which has been fighting against “discriminatory” quotas for government jobs, said he was picked up by police late last week, tortured and left unconscious on the side of the road.

Islam alleged that more than 20 officers who identified themselves as police arrived at 3am on Saturday and put him inside a car, where he was blindfolded and handcuffed. He said several other student protest organisers were also picked up by police, with four still reported missing.

“They took me somewhere I couldn’t recognise and then put me in a room where they started to question me and later torture me, first mentally and then physically,” said Islam. “They kept asking me: why are we protesting, who is behind this, what is our agenda, why we are not at talks with the government.”

The protests began on university campuses in early July, led by students outraged at the re-introduction of quotas for government jobs, which reserve 30% for the descendants of those who fought in the 1971 Bangladesh independence war.

With the country suffering an economic downturn and high youth unemployment, government jobs are widely seen as the most secure form of employment. However, the quota system, widely deemed to “unfair”, means they are rarely granted on merit.

While the demonstrations began peacefully, they began to turn violent last week after pro-government groups were accused of

attacking the protesters with weapons and police began to use teargas, rubber bullets and stun grenades.

The crackdown led to violence across the country as student protesters fought back against the riot police, often armed only with crude weapons, and university campuses became war zones. Police were accused by witnesses of firing live ammunition at protesters and have been blamed for a large numbers of deaths. Unofficial figures have put the death toll at more than 150, while thousands are thought to have been injured.

On Sunday, [the supreme court overturned the ruling](#) and scaled back the quotas, meaning only 5% will now go to descendants of freedom fighters. It has led to a pause in the protests and violence, although the country is still under an internet and social media blackout and a strict curfew, with the military patrolling the streets and police granted powers to “shoot on site”.

This week, the prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, sought to place the blame for the unrest - some of the worst the country has seen under her government - on the opposition Bangladesh National party (BNP), which has faced a crackdown under her rule.

In a meeting broadcast on Monday, Hasina claimed to have deployed police and paramilitary forces to “protect” the students and called the violence “the attacks of the militants”.

About 2,000 people have so far been arrested, mostly members and the top leadership of the BNP along with several student organisers, as Hasina’s government is accused of trying to shift the blame for the violence and fatalities away from state agencies. A BNP spokesperson said that about 1,500 party members had been detained.

Islam described how once he was in police detention, officers began a game of mental torture, threatening to create fake charges against him, label him as a terrorist and “disappear” him so his family would not know his whereabouts.

Then, he alleged, the physical abuse began. “They used metal rods and started beating on my joints, on my shoulders and particularly on my left leg. That leg has the most severe injuries. At some point I fell unconscious to the unbearable pain.” He said that when he awoke he found himself lying by the roadside in the capital, Dhaka.

Islam was disparaging of Hasina’s claims she tried to have a dialogue with the students, alleging that the authorities instead resorted to violence to try to shut them down, a widely documented tactic deployed by her government against critics over her 15 years in power.

He was among the organisers who said that the protests had not shut down after Monday’s supreme court verdict, but were on pause as they waited for the government to respond to several of their demands, including for the new reduced quota to be affirmed by parliament and for compensation be given to families of those killed in the violence.

Speaking on Tuesday afternoon, Hasib al-Islam, another student organiser, said students were extending their ultimatum to the government for another 48 hours, during which time they would hold off all further protest.

Al-Islam said: “In this time we demand the authorities restore the internet in the country, withdraw the curfew, reopen the universities and ensure the safety of the students and the protesters, including the safe return of the four protest coordinators who allegedly are missing.”

The Bangladeshi Nobel peace prize laureate, Muhammad Yunus, urged “world leaders and the United Nations to do everything within their powers to end the violence”, adding that “young people are being killed at random every day”.

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