

Transport sector targeted: Teenagers bring parts of Bangladesh to a halt with bus death protests

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Nationwide student protests enter fifth day, causing government to shut down thousands of high schools.

Tens of thousands of students, many of them teenagers, have brought areas of Bangladesh to a near-standstill during five days of protests following the deaths of two teenagers killed by a speeding bus.

Bangladeshi authorities have been forced to shut thousands of high schools across the country due to the demonstrations, which saw thousands of people, mostly students in their mid-teens, block major intersections in the capital of Dhaka as they marched through the streets chanting “we want justice” and checking people’s drivers’ licences.

Police armed with shields and batons have been called in to deal with the protesters, with some reports of vehicles being vandalised.

Bangladesh’s transport sector is widely seen as corrupt, unregulated and dangerous. News that a boy and girl were killed on the roadside on Sunday by a speeding bus spread rapidly on social media they became a catalyst for an outpouring of anger.

More than 4,200 pedestrians were killed in road accidents in Bangladesh in 2017, a 25% increase from 2016, according to private research group the National Committee to Protect Shipping, Roads and Railways.

In some parts of Dhaka students occupying major intersections checked licence plates and demanded to see driver identification and registration documents.

“We don’t want any vehicles without licences on the streets. Those unfit to drive should not get licences, and we don’t want underage motorists driving public transport,” said one protester, Mohammad Sifat.

US and Australian embassies warned of significant delays as a result of the protests across Dhaka and elsewhere as many residents were forced to walk across the congested capital to offices and workplaces.

But some joined the students, frustrated at the government’s inability to tackle Dhaka’s notoriously dangerous roads.

“I support this movement and sincerely hope it will shake out corruption in the system,” Yunus Ali, a businessman, said at a busy demonstration.

Shajahan Khan, a government minister with ties to powerful transport unions, also triggered fresh outrage when he questioned why there was such an uproar over the two Dhaka children but no reaction when 33 people were killed in an Indian bus crash the day before.

There have been widespread social media demands for the resignation of Khan, who later apologised for his comments.

The home minister Asaduzzaman Khan on Wednesday promised that the government would launch a public transport safety campaign and urged the protesters to go home. "People are suffering and we don't want this," he said.

Agence France-Presse

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Bangladesh: Mass student protests after deadly road accident

Bangladesh shuts down high schools as tens of thousands of students take to streets after two teens were killed by bus.

Tens of thousands of students in Bangladesh have rallied for a fifth consecutive day after two teenagers were killed by a speeding bus.

The demonstrators, mostly students in their mid-teens, chanted "we want justice" on Thursday as they defied pouring rain to march in the capital, Dhaka, bringing traffic to a standstill.

Anger has not subdued since a bus racing for passengers killed Diya Khanam Mim and Abdul Karim Rajib on the roadside on Sunday.

According to local reports, the protests appeared to be spontaneous and disorganised, with the students not appearing to have any spokespersons or leadership.

"We've never seen this unprecedented number of students [in the streets]," said Al Jazeera's Tanvir Chowdhury, reporting from Dhaka, adding that the protesters were supported by their guardians.

Chowdhury said the students are calling for major reforms.

"Overall, there is a general frustration among the public because there is no room for demonstration or free expression," he said.

"Students don't seem [to be] moving out of the street anytime soon, unless most of their demands are met," he added.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina consoled the parents of the two teens who lost their lives and said she would stand by the families with all possible means, according to press secretary Ihsanul Karim.

"I have no language to console you as I can feel the pain of losing near and dear one ... In one night I

lost all members of my family,” he quoted her as saying during talks with the family members.

Corrupt and dangerous

Bangladesh’s transport sector is widely perceived as corrupt, unregulated and dangerous.

Meanwhile, a comment by Shajahan Khan, a government minister with ties transport unions, triggered fresh outrage.

“A road crash has claimed 33 lives in India’s Maharashtra; but do they talk about it the way we do?” he asked.

After these remarks, there were immediate demands for his resignation despite the minister later offering an apology.

The education ministry shut down high schools in an effort to quell unrest, promising students their demands for reforms to road safety would be considered.

“They should have taken our demands seriously, but they didn’t,” Imran Ahmed, a protesting student, said.

Authorities say more than 300 vehicles have been vandalised since the protests started.

“We don’t want any vehicles without licences on the streets. Those unfit to drive should not get licences, and we don’t want underage motorists driving public transport,” protester Mohammad Sifat told AFP news agency.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan on Wednesday promised that the government would launch a public transport safety campaign and urged the protesters to go home.

“People are suffering and we don’t want this,” he said.

According to the National Committee to Protect Shipping, Roads and Railways, a private research group, more than 4,200 pedestrians were killed in road accidents last year, a 25 percent increase from 2016.

Protests are expected to resume on Friday.

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/bangladesh-mass-student-protests-deadly-road-accident-180802174519088.html>
