

# Bangladesh: Ensure Accountability for Protest Killings and Violence, Support Survivors

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## **New investigation finds security forces and political party members killed peaceful protesters during Bangladesh's revolution**

(DHAKA, November 12, 2024)—Bangladesh's interim government should ensure accountability for the use of excessive force by Bangladeshi security forces and government vigilantes against protesters in July and August 2024, said Fortify Rights today. The interim government should also support the families of the victims killed and survivors of the violence. Fortify Rights conducted a two-month investigation into the involvement of Bangladesh's security forces and members of the then-ruling Awami League—the political party of the ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina—in protest-related killings and violence in Bangladesh.

*"The architects of violence, including former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, should be held accountable," said John Quinley, Director at Fortify Rights. "The new interim government is taking important steps to support survivors of violence and victims' families. However, to end the culture of impunity, the interim government must ensure accountability and support for victims of past crimes, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture."*

In August and September 2024, Fortify Rights interviewed 44 survivors, eyewitnesses, and others with information on the former government's crackdown on protesters in three cities: Chattogram (also known as Chittagong), Cox's Bazar, and Dhaka, Bangladesh. Fortify Rights documented killings and violence by police, Border Guard Bangladesh, as well as by the Awami League, including its student branch—the Chhatra League—and its youth branch—the Jubo League.

In September 2024, Bangladesh's interim government health ministry recorded more than 1,000 protest-related killings between July and August 2024.

In many of the incidents investigated by Fortify Rights, witnesses described police forces firing live ammunition indiscriminately into crowds of mostly peaceful protesters. Two eyewitnesses told Fortify Rights how they witnessed a group of police officers in the Signboard area of Konapara, Demra in Dhaka shoot and kill Sajedur Rahman Omar, a 22-year-old information technology student studying in Dhaka, on Sunday, July 21. A 20-year-old internet shop worker, who was friends with Sajedur Rahman Omar and was with him when the police shot him, said: "That day, we started our protest at around noon. We were just 60 protesters, mostly students, and some other youth."

Describing the incident, he said:

The police were far away at an unfinished ten-story building. I was surprised they could fire bullets from that far away. ... We didn't think they would fire on us that day, so we moved forward. Then, they fired five or six bullets, and then there was a five-minute pause. Then, they started heavy firing. They just kept firing. We couldn't even move to save the wounded anymore. I only saw my friend hit and fall down. The gunshots were almost continuous. [Sajedur Rahman Omar] was right next to me. I was hiding behind a small wall, and I saw the bullet hit his head, then he fell down, but I couldn't go save him because the firing continued. Another boy pulled me away from the shooting.

According to the 20-year-old witness, the police shot four people, but only Sajedur Rahman Omar was killed.

Another witness, a 22-year-old student who was a life-long friend of Sajedur Rahman Omar and had gone to the protest with him, similarly described how police shot and killed his friend and wounded several others, saying:

At about 1:05 p.m., suddenly, firing started from the tall building about 150 meters [approximately 490 feet] away. [The police] shot about 15 times, and people ran away because of the gunshots. ... Fifteen minutes later, the firing started again; maybe 25 to 30 shots were fired, and we ran away, maybe 30 meters [approximately 98 feet] to be safe. Then we went back to the jetty at the river [dividing the road] when it seemed calmer.

I was telling Omar, the situation isn't good, but he pulled me by the hand and said to stay. Shooting started again, maybe eight rounds this time. I ran away, and Omar was hidden behind other people. I ran into a small street and saw his body lying on the main road. I was looking at him as another four to five shots were fired. Two more people were hit; one in the leg and one grazed in the head. Omar was lying down, and then the firing stopped, and we took him 250 meters [approximately 820 feet] to a rickshaw [to go to the hospital].

The witness said that two government helicopters targeted and dropped teargas and sound grenades on the protesters. Describing the nature of the protest, the witness said: "Before the shooting, the protesters were standing in the road, some holding flags and signs. No one was being violent. No one was throwing stones. I don't know why they fired."

Victims of the crackdown not only included protesters but also bystanders. For example, a 41-year-old woman told Fortify Rights how security forces shot and killed her 16-year-old son, Mohammad Shuvo, in the Dhanmondi #3 area of Dhaka on July 19, 2024, nearby the family's rickshaw repair shop:

At around 3 p.m., near the intersection [in Dhanmondi #3], there was a lot of tear gas fired. I also saw a helicopter shooting in the air. The helicopter was throwing teargas

and shooting live bullets. There were female protesters in the streets calling out their demands. There was one female protester who was injured, and [my son] rescued her. He brought her to the police box at the intersection. I saw my son across the street while this was happening. ... [After], I could see him talking to some protesters across the highway. He was talking to two students who were part of the protest. ... Then, my son was shot in the head. I heard the sound of gunfire.

She continued: "It was 40 to 50 meters [approximately 130 to 160 feet] away. I could see him. I saw a protester holding a t-shirt on his head with blood all over it." The woman then rushed over to her son. "The police were still shooting. The helicopter was shooting. I took off my headscarf and put it on my son. I pressed the fabric onto his wounds."

Photographs on file with Fortify Rights show Mohammad Shuvo with a severe head wound, and medical records confirm that he died from a gunshot wound to the head.

In another incident, Fortify Rights interviewed four people, including two witnesses, who described how police shot in the head another young man, Mahamudur Rahman Shoikot, 19, in an incident in the area of the bus station in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. A shop owner, who regularly played soccer and cricket with the victim and witnessed his killing, said:

Some 25 police advanced towards the Noor Jahan Mosque Mosque, and we fled into the small streets. The police fired birdshot pellets, and some [people] were hit in the eyes. This is when I was hit in the elbow. The police fired so many pellets and bullets that all the buildings around there have bullet marks. At about 3:30 p.m., there was a huge amount of gunfire, and someone fell down, bleeding. I went to see, and the boy [Mahamudur Rahman Shoikot] was bleeding from his head, and he wasn't moving. We realized this wasn't birdshot pellets; it was live bullet fire. We tried to take him to the back street, but he wasn't moving or speaking. He died on the spot.

A student studying electric engineering in Dhaka similarly told Fortify Rights about witnessing the 19-year-old's death, saying:

The bullet hit [Mahamudur Rahman Shoikot] in the head, the middle of the head. When we lifted him from the ground, he was already dead and not moving. I took him to the hospital and came back to the protest. On the way back, I was stopped by some people. I was covered in blood, and they asked me why I was covered in blood, saying, "Are you a protest leader?" They threatened me with the sticks they were holding. They were Awami League. But they let me go, and I went to wash my clothes at the mosque to rinse off the blood.

Relatives of Mahamudur Rahman Shoikot told Fortify Rights they filed a complaint with the police on August 25, 2024, naming the ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and 11 others as responsible. The complaint is on file with Fortify Rights.

A relative told Fortify Rights, "Whoever gave the orders should be held responsible for the killing of Shoikot."

Fortify Rights also visited a hospital in Dhaka where dozens of individuals injured during the protest crackdown remain hospitalized. During the visit, Fortify Rights interviewed six survivors of gunshot wounds, including a 19-year-old fish trader who told Fortify Rights how police in the Dhaka Jatrabari area shot him in the leg after they summarily executed an injured young person who the fish trader was trying to help. He said:

The police started shooting around 70 to 100 meters [about 230 to 328 feet] away, so I ran. They had shotguns firing birdshot and rifles. The police were shooting into the crowd. I ran into a small street. I heard so many gunshots. I felt like my ears would burst. ... I saw a boy lying on the ground. It was a school-aged boy. ... I gave him water. I was holding his head. ... I saw the police come down the street that we were on, and they yelled at me while holding their guns. I said to them, "Give me a chance to give him some water." The police kicked me. After the police kicked me, the boy mustered his energy and threw a brick from the ground at the police. The police were standing right over us. Right after, the police shot him point blank in the head. It was a shotgun that shot him right there. The bone from the boy's skull hit my leg. His brain and blood went everywhere.

The man continued, saying: "The same police who shot the boy shot me in the leg. The police didn't just shoot me but also beat me. The police took off his helmet and beat me on my body."

The police left the man and dead student after residents came out to the street. At the time of the interview, the man had undergone six surgeries on his leg. He said: "I am traumatized. I can't sleep at night. The young boy's face is stained in my memory."

In several killings documented in Dhaka by Fortify Rights, the authorities delayed releasing the bodies of those killed by police for several days. For example, a 30-year-old man described a three-day-long effort to obtain the body of his 19-year-old nephew Maruf Hossain who police shot in the stomach during a July 17 protest in front of BRAC University. He described witnessing his nephew get shot, saying:

I heard a lot of firing. I was just near my nephew, and I saw him fall forward. He saw me and said, "Uncle, please save me. I have been hit by a bullet." At that time, I couldn't see where he was hit so I took off his shirt and trousers and found a big hole in his stomach. He was bleeding a lot. I tried to lift him up and wrap the wound, but I couldn't manage because the wound was so big. We asked an ambulance that was taking away a dead body if they could take him first as he was still alive.

The man's nephew died on his way to Dhaka Medical Hospital. He went on to explain what happened when he attempted to collect the body later that evening. He said:

At 11 p.m., the officer in charge of the morgue, [name withheld], was about to release the body, but he got a phone call and received an order that no bodies of students could be released without a police clearance. We came back [home] without the body because they refused to release it.

The man told Fortify Rights what the police said when he went to the police station located near BRAC University the next morning. They told the man: “No one died from gunshots coming from our police station. There are no dead bodies from here, so we can’t give you police clearance. Go to Rampura police station to ask for clearance.”

The police in Rampura initially directed the man to Shahbagh police station, claiming the case was not in their jurisdiction, but the Shahbagh police claimed that they only deal with bodies from outside Dhaka, leading the man back to Rampura. Through a personal connection, the man eventually managed to secure a clearance certificate from the police officer in charge and returned to the hospital morgue. Describing continued obstacles at the morgue, the man said:

[The morgue officials at the hospital] told us to go identify our relative in the morgue. The dead bodies were piled together. My nephew was lying under eight dead bodies. We identified him from a scar on his leg. His father recognized the scar. But when [the morgue officials] saw “student” on the death certificate, they again said they could not release the body and needed to talk to their supervisor. ...The supervisor cleared the release after we spoke to him. Then, they said they couldn’t release the body because it needed a post-mortem report and the responsible [officer] had already left for the day. So, we went back the next day, and then my nephew’s body was missing, but the other bodies were still there.

The family finally found and obtained the body of Maruf Hossain at a different morgue in Dhaka on July 22, six days after his death.

A 50-year-old Dhaka resident similarly told Fortify Rights how the official in charge at the same morgue at Dhaka Medical Hospital refused to release the body of her brother who was shot in the back of the head on July 19 by police. The police shot her 45-year-old brother, Abdul Hudud Akon, while he crossed a protest site in Dhaka after returning to his tailoring shop following prayers at a nearby mosque. He later died at the Dhaka Medical Hospital. The woman explained how the morgue official delayed the release of her brother’s body for two days after the family first requested the body, citing the need for specific police permissions. She went on to say: “When we went to the police station to get the release authorization, they made us sign a statement saying that our relative did not die from a police shooting but that he was killed by the protesters.”

Fortify Rights found similar use of excessive and deadly force by the security forces and armed pro-government vigilantes in two cities outside Dhaka, Chattogram and Cox’s Bazar.

In response to peaceful protests in Chattogram City, Fortify Rights found that members of the ruling Awami League—including its student wing, the Chhatra League—responsible for the crackdown alongside the Chattogram police forces. On July 16, 2024, according to multiple witnesses, the Awami League, including Chhatra League members, opened fire at a gathering of Anti-Discrimination Student Movement protesters, killing two students—Wasim Akram, 22, and Faisal

Ahmad Shanto, 21—and a carpenter from Noakhali District, Faroque, 32.

Fortify Rights documented the killing of 22-year-old Wasim Akram. Describing the incident, a 26-year-old witness said:

[Wasim Akram] died on July 16 after being shot by the Chhatra League. This was in front of my eyes. ... I could not hear very well. He went to his knees when he was shot. I saw him sit down in the crowd, and he was surrounded by the Chhatra League students who started beating him. It was with sticks that he was being beaten even after he was shot while on the [street] ground. He could not escape because he was shot.

A 28-year-old member of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement in Chattogram who also witnessed the attack on Wasim Akram similarly described the incident, saying:

[Chhatra League] not only shot him but also physically beat him with kicks and fists. Then, Wasim became unconscious on the spot. ... I saw Wasim being beaten. He was beaten with a wooden stick, and as we chased them away, they left him. ... There were about 15 Chhatra League members who were beating Wasim.

He further identified Nurul Azim Rony, a member of the Awami League and former General Secretary of the Chattogram Chhatra League, and Helal Akbar Chowdhury Babar, a former member of Central Jubo League, among those who fired shots at protesters that day. He said:

I was about 30 to 40 feet away from Wasim's body. ... Nurul Azim Rony and Babar fired most of the gunshots .... This is something I saw with my own eyes. The guns were shotguns, and Babar had a pistol. ... [Wasim Akram] wasn't shot in just one part of his body; he was shot in multiple places, and his legs were covered in blood.

The 28-year-old went on to further describe the involvement of the police. He said: "The police force was with the Chhatra League, Jubo League, and the members of Awami League when Wasim was shot. They shot many tear gas canisters and rubber bullets at us. When the tear gas was thrown at us, we struggled to get oxygen."

After the killing of Wasim Akram, a coordinator for the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement in Chattogram posted on Facebook, "[Nurul Azim] Rony is the main culprit behind the barbaric attack on the students of Chattogram and the most shootings. Try to detain him." In September 2024, a resident of Chattogram reportedly brought a lawsuit against Helal Akbar Chowdhury Babar for his involvement in the violence, and earlier, in August, authorities arrested Nurul Azim Rony at the airport in Dhaka.

Fortify Rights also documented how police and Awami League members shot peaceful student protesters with birdshot—a type of small-caliber shotgun pellets—in Cox's Bazar between July 16

and July 18 and on August 5, 2024, injuring protesters. For example, a 23-year-old Cox's Bazar Government College student involved with the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement in Cox's Bazar described being shot in the eye with birdshot during a protest on Laldigir Par Road on July 18. He said:

I saw the police shoot from the front into the crowd. ... I was at the front line, so I could see them easily. They wore police uniforms and helmets, and some police had batons, and others had guns, including rubber bullet guns and [birdshot] guns. Yes, they used their guns. The police were behind us and in front of us. The police at first told us that nothing would happen, but later, they joined with the Awami League to attack us. ... I fell down face-first after being hit with the [birdshot] pellets. ... Some of my friends held me from both sides, and I stayed conscious the whole time. I was taken to Sadar Hospital.

Another student in Cox's Bazar similarly told Fortify Rights about being shot at during a protest on July 18, saying:

I was hit with [birdshot] bullets. It was on the back of my right side. I had to go to Chittagong Hospital. The [birdshot] pellet hit my bone. It was fired from a distance. ... [The police and Awami League] used tear gas and rubber bullets. It was a joint force attacking us. The [birdshot] pellets hit me and came from the side of the Awami League and the police. Their side had about 100 forces of both police and Awami League people.

Describing the atmosphere of the protest, he went on to say: "We didn't have any weapons. We were protesting peacefully. ... [The police] didn't give us a warning to stop the protest. They just suddenly started firing rubber bullets and [birdshot] pellets into the crowd."

Fortify Rights documented further attacks on peaceful protesters in Cox's Bazar after the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on August 5, 2024. A 22-year-old student from Cox's Bazar International University said:

I was shot [with live ammunition] on August 5, the day the Prime Minister resigned. ... We were approaching Shahid Minar [Road] via Kalur Dukan [Road]. The opposition was firing randomly at us from the Ghum Gach Tola area [of Cox's Bazar]. I was at the front of the rally. At the time of the firing, we moved to a safe area. My leg was in pain. When I noticed that my pants were soaked in blood, I lost consciousness, and my friends took me to the Sadar Hospital. By then, it was late in the afternoon, around 5:15 p.m. When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a hospital bed with my family members by my side.

He could not identify the perpetrators but noted, "I did not see any police at the demonstration," indicating that Awami League members may have been responsible for the shooting.

Under international human rights law, Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Bangladesh is a signatory, and Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a state party, guarantee the right to peaceful assembly. Article 37 of Bangladesh's Constitution similarly guarantees to every citizen "the right to assemble and to participate in public meetings and processions peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of public order or public health." An assembly is considered peaceful under international law if its overall nature is peaceful—criteria met by the protests in Dhaka, Chattogram, and Cox's Bazar.

International law further provides that police should use force only when strictly necessary and in ways that are lawful and proportionate to the threat at hand. Outlining appropriate police conduct under international law, the U.N. Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials requires that law enforcement officials "use force only when strictly necessary and to the extent required for the performance of their duty."

The Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials further require that law enforcement officials apply non-violent enforcement measures first and, when the use of force is unavoidable, "exercise restraint in such use and act in proportion to the seriousness of the offence and the legitimate objective to be achieved." Moreover, Principle 9 of the Basic Principles states:

Law enforcement officials shall not use firearms against persons except in self-defence or defence of others against the imminent threat of death or serious injury, to prevent the perpetration of a particularly serious crime involving grave threat to life, to arrest a person presenting such a danger and resisting their authority, or to prevent his or her escape, and only when less extreme means are insufficient to achieve these objectives. In any event, intentional lethal use of firearms may only be made when strictly unavoidable in order to protect life.

Notably "internal political instability or any other public emergency may not be invoked to justify any departure from these basic principles."

The Basic Principles further recommend that law enforcement officials are equipped "with various types of weapons and ammunition that would allow for a differentiated use of force and firearms," which includes "non-lethal incapacitating weapons." Such weapons may include birdshot, rubber bullets, and teargas. However, according to the Basic Principles, these weapons should be used only "in appropriate situations" and should be "carefully evaluated in order to minimize the risk of endangering uninvolved persons" and "carefully controlled." Specific to policing non-violent assemblies, the Basic Principles require law enforcement officials to "avoid the use of force or, where that is not practical, ... restrict such force to the minimum extent necessary."

Contrary to the Basic Principles, eyewitness testimonies and the injuries documented by Fortify Rights demonstrate that the police forces and pro-government vigilantes not only used force but fired at the heads and faces of protesters, causing lethal and serious injuries from otherwise non-lethal weapons.

In August 2024, at the request of the interim government, the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights established a fact-finding mission to "establish facts, identify responsibilities, analyse root causes and provide concrete recommendations on the next steps Bangladesh should



take to address the past violations and to ensure non-recurrence.”

In October 2024, the International Crimes Tribunal—a tribunal established under Bangladesh law “to try and punish any individual or group of individuals” responsible for committing crimes against humanity, crimes against peace, or genocide in Bangladesh—issued arrest warrants for former Prime Minister Hasina and more than 40 other individuals, including senior politicians, for their alleged roles in “massacres, killings, and crimes against humanity” during the mass protests in July and August 2024.

On October 17, Mahfuj Alam, the Special Assistant to the interim government’s Chief Advisor, announced that family members of the “martyred” Anti-Discrimination Student Movement would receive 30 lakh [approximately US\$88,000].

Donor governments should support Bangladesh in ensuring resources are available to hold perpetrators accountable and provide remedies to survivors and the family members of victims, said Fortify Rights.

*“Survivors and family members of the victims of the July and August violence are entitled to truth, justice, and support,” said John Quinley. “Major human rights reforms are necessary and possible in Bangladesh but will only be achieved through ensuring accountability and remedies for past violations under all previous governments.”*

## Background

In early July 2024, tens of thousands of university students in Bangladesh initiated peaceful protests following a ruling by the Supreme Court to restore quotas for government jobs. Specifically, the ruling provided for a 30 percent reservation of government jobs for descendants of those who joined Bangladesh’s war for independence in 1971. In late July and August, the protests spread into a country-wide mass protest that eventually led to calls for the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

On August 4, 2024, Sheikh Hasina reportedly called on her supporters “to curb anarchists with iron hands.” The next day, August 5, Hasina fled the country after the army refused to intervene to end the protests.

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