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Hon. Prime Minister
Prime Minister's Office
Old Sangsad Bhaban
Tejgaon, Dhaka-1215
Bangladesh

Hon. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina,

I write to you with grave concern over the recent violent crackdowns on the ongoing 'Bangla-Blockade' quota-reform protests in Bangladesh and urge you to take urgent and concrete action to end the violence and ensure justice and accountability for the death of over 200 people during the protests.

On 28 July 2024, the Home Minister of Bangladesh stated in a press briefing that the death toll from the violence is 147, while unofficial estimates, such as by Prothom Alo, suggest that at least 211 people have died because of the violence, making it one of the deadliest crackdowns on protests in Bangladesh's history.¹ Bangladesh Police alongside paramilitary forces such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) and Bangladesh Military were extensively deployed across the country to quell protests. The high death toll is a shocking indictment of the absolute intolerance shown by the Bangladeshi authorities to protest and dissent. The unlawful use of force, including lethal force, against protesters shows the authorities' callous disregard for the right to life and an abject failure by law enforcement officials to uphold their obligations under domestic and international human rights law.

In the last 10 days, Amnesty International has monitored and documented the grave human rights violations being committed by the authorities during the policing of protests. On two separate occasions, Amnesty international verified the evidence that confirms the use of unlawful force, unlawful use of lethal and less-lethal weapons against student protesters, amid six days of communication restrictions.² Our findings point to unlawful use of birdshot against student protesters, dangerous use of tear gas in enclosed student spaces and unrestrained use of lethal firearms, such as AK-pattern assault rifles, by security forces. They also point to violence unleashed by Bangladesh Chatra League (BCL), the student wing of your ruling party, first against unarmed and peaceful student protestors in the University of Dhaka and then against students receiving medical treatment at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Amid these protests, people in Bangladesh have also been subjected to a nationwide internet shutdown since the evening of 18 July 2024. Prior to this shutdown, access to mobile internet was temporarily restricted across the country, and access to social media platforms was blocked in certain areas. On 19 July 2024, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) imposed a ban on all rallies and processions within the capital city using powers under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure.³ At

¹ Prothom Alo, "Quota protests death toll 147: Home minister", 28 July 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/djd4m791ej>; Prothom Alo, "Violence centering quota reform movement: Death toll rises to 211", 29 July 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/plk8xa9b1e>

² Amnesty International, Bangladesh: Witness testimony, video and photographic analysis confirm police used unlawful force against protesters, 17 July 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/bangladesh-witness-testimony-video-and-photographic-analysis-confirm-police-used-unlawful-force-against-protesters/>; Amnesty International, Bangladesh: Further video and photographic analysis confirm police unlawfully used lethal and less-lethal weapons against protesters, 25 July 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/bangladesh-further-video-and-photographic-analysis-confirm-police-unlawfully-used-lethal-and-less-lethal-weapons-against-protesters/>.

³ The Guardian, "Bangladesh police given 'shoot-on-sight' orders amid national curfew", 20 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jul/20/bangladesh-police-given-shoot-on-sight-orders-amid-national-curfew>

midnight on Friday, 19 July 2024, police in Bangladesh were granted “shoot-on-sight” orders and a nationwide curfew was imposed. The arbitrary imposition of a total shutdown of the internet across the country, a blanket ban on protests in Dhaka followed by a shoot on sight curfew across the country marked an unprecedented clampdown on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly. Such blanket restrictions violated Bangladesh’s international obligations as a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

The blanket shutdowns impacted people’s safety, security, mobility, and livelihoods while creating instability and panic, further undermining their trust in authorities. Such bans also restrict organisations from conducting human rights monitoring at precisely the time when people are most at risk. We acknowledge that nationwide internet access was partially restored since 23 July 2024 after six days of complete shutdown while the curfew was also relaxed on 24 July 2024. Although mobile internet was finally restored on 28 July 2024, after an 11 day blackout, social media platforms remain restricted while the curfew is yet to be fully lifted.⁴ At the same time, according to media reports 10,000 arrests have taken place, mostly targeting opposition leaders and activists and student leaders and protest participants.⁵ Additionally, over 213,000 people have been accused over the recent protest related violence in around 200 cases filed in police stations in the capital alone.⁶ Most of these accused individuals are unnamed. The tactic of not naming the accused in First Information Reports (FIRs) leaves room for law enforcers to arrest anyone they want, as has been previously documented by Amnesty International.⁷ The mass arrest and arbitrary detention of student protesters has further perpetuated a climate of fear.

It is important to note that the recent deadly crackdown on the student protests has taken place against a wider backdrop of increasing intolerance and suppression of dissent in Bangladesh, through the deployment of repressive legislation, such as the Digital Security Act 2018 and the nearly identical Cyber Security Act 2023 which has replaced it, to target any form of dissent or criticism of the government, including by journalists, human rights defenders and activists.⁸ Several INGOs, including Amnesty International, and UN bodies, such as the OHCHR and UN Special procedures, have called for the Government of Bangladesh to uphold its obligations under international law to respect, protect and fulfil the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and also to adopt a rights-respecting approach in the policing of protests. Despite these calls, the Government of Bangladesh has repeatedly shown an unwillingness to uphold its international human rights obligations and has failed to take any meaningful action to end the violence.

In this context and the Bangladeshi government’s obligations under international law to respect and protect (amongst other rights) the rights to life, freedom from torture and other ill-treatment, freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, I urge the Government of Bangladesh to:

- Immediately and fully lift the curfew, restore full access to social media platforms and guarantee that shoot on sight curfew orders and internet shutdowns will not be used in the future to crack down on protesters or to repress any other fundamental rights.
- Immediately and unconditionally release all the people detained or arrested solely for exercising their right to protest peacefully.
- Instruct law enforcement agencies to exercise restraint, not to use unnecessary or excessive force against demonstrators and to implement measures to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. This includes revising policing

⁴ Al Jazeera, "Bangladesh restores mobile internet after 11-day blackout to quell protests", 28 July 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/28/bangladesh-restores-mobile-internet-after-11-day-blackout-to-quell-protests>

⁵ Prothom Alo, "403 more arrested across the country", 30 July 2024, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/ifoizqcw38>; Amnesty International, "Bangladesh: End punitive mass arrests and arbitrary detention of student leaders and protesters", 29 July 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/bangladesh-end-punitive-mass-arrests-and-arbitrary-detention-of-student-leaders-and-protesters/>

⁶ The Daily Star, "Cases after violence: Over 2 lakh accused in Dhaka city", 29 July 2024, <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/cases-after-violence-over-2-lakh-accused-dhaka-city-3664161>

⁷ Amnesty International, "Bangladesh: Garment workers must receive rights-based compensation and justice immediately", 1 May 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/bangladesh-garment-workers-must-receive-rights-based-compensation-and-justice-immediately/>; Amnesty International, Bangladesh: Over 100 Indigenous People Arbitrarily Arrested: Bawm Villagers, 22 May 2024 (Index Number: ASA 13/8076/2024), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/8076/2024/en/>

⁸ Amnesty International, *Repackaging Repression: Cyber Security Act and the Continuing Lawfare against Dissent in Bangladesh* (forthcoming, 2024) (Index: ASA 13/8332/2024) (The key findings of this research briefing were shared with relevant officials of the government of Bangladesh through right of response letters dated 4 July 2024, reference: TG ASA 13/2024.5757, TG ASA 13/2024.5758 and TG ASA 13/2024.5759); Amnesty International, *No Space for Dissent – Bangladesh’s Crackdown on Freedom of Expression Online* (2021) (Index: ASA 13/4294/2021), <http://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/4294/2021/en/>; Amnesty International, *Caught between fear and repression: Attacks on freedom of expression in Bangladesh* (2017) (Index: ASA 13/6114/2017), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/6114/2017/en/>

practices and ensuring that security forces are adequately trained in human rights standards, and the protection and facilitation of peaceful protest. The authorities are obligated under international law to always exercise restraint and not to use force beyond that which is strictly necessary, proportionate, and lawful in response to any escalation they may face.

- Cooperate with the UN to conduct a thorough, effective, independent, and impartial investigation into the deaths and injuries during the crackdown. Those found responsible for the unlawful use of force must be held accountable.
- Provide full reparations, including adequate compensation and guarantees of non-repetition, to victims and survivors of unlawful police violence, including those who have been injured and family members of those who have been killed.
- Guarantee the protection of the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression in accordance with the Constitution of Bangladesh and international human rights standards and repeal legislation which contravene these standards, including but not limited to the Cyber Security Act 2023 and Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1898.

Upholding these obligations can help restore public confidence in the rule of law and demonstrate Bangladesh's commitment to human rights on the international stage. The world is watching, and it is imperative that the human rights of people in Bangladesh are protected.

I would like to thank you for your attention on this urgent matter.

Yours sincerely,

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Secretary General
Amnesty International