

The Dhaka Massacre of 6 May 2013: A Briefing



July 2013



Key Points

- On 5th and 6th May, protestors in Dhaka experienced the worst incidence of government brutality since Bangladesh's independence.
- Events climaxed in the early hours of Monday 6th, when a reported 10,000 police and paramilitary units surrounded tens of thousands sit-in protesters, and fired into unarmed crowds with live ammunition.
- The two dissenting stations broadcasting these events, were taken off air and remain banned to this day.
- Verified footage and corroborated witness accounts point to horrific levels of violence used by government forces and ruling party supporters.
- Substantiated evidence of the death toll is increasing. The names and details of 61 who lost their lives have been compiled by rights organisations to date. Claims range from 11 (official) to hundreds and even thousands.
- The Bangladeshi government and supporters have acted to downplay the significance of the incident. The Bangladesh intelligence service has threatened to treat 'exaggerated' reporting as subversive activity.
- The alleged extremism of the demonstrators is used by the government and supporters, to contend that victim accounts of the night are unreliable
- Many witnesses to the events cannot speak openly for fear of punishment, even the hospitalised are closely monitored. Families arranging funeral prayers for loved ones have been harassed by police.
- An international, independent inquiry is required to find the truth behind this tragedy. The Government of Bangladesh must be made conscious that its actions are being thoroughly monitored; such scrutiny will reduce future abuse of state powers.

What happened on 5th and 6th May?

On 5th May, a usually apolitical group of religious teachers, students and ordinary citizens staged one of the largest protests in Bangladesh's history, with an estimated one million people converging on the capital Dhaka from all over the country. It was their third recent gathering following earlier nationwide protests on 22nd February (met by police violence) and a large generally peaceful Long March to Dhaka programme on 6th March.

During 5th May, there were sporadic clashes as police and ruling party activists provoked and attacked unarmed protesters. Tens of thousands of protesters opted to stage a sit-in in the densely built-up Motijheel district of Dhaka until their leader Allama Shafi was allowed there by the government to address them. The electricity in the area was cut off around midnight, and in the darkness of the early hours around 2:30am, a combined force of police, border guards and Rapid Action Battalion units surrounded the area and moved in, firing at will. What follows is not in dispute: thousands of rounds were fired, and many people were killed, and injured. Two broadcasters who defied government restriction to report from the area were forcibly taken off air.

With the closure of the Amar Desh newspaper, and imprisonment and reported torture of its editor Mahmudur Rahman -- who has been the protest group's most significant supporter in the media -- the infrastructure for the survivor's own humanising perspective is sadly absent.

By Most Accounts, A Massacre

Human rights groups have confirmed this incident to be a massacre, and with time qualitative and quantitative information surrounding the incident is emerging despite a concerted official disinformation campaign. An early report by The Economist puts numbers killed at 50 citing EU diplomats. However, video footage and pictures have emerged, which, in addition to eyewitness reports indicate that at least 500 may have been killed. Video footage show scenes of chaos in which bodies are strewn around and protesters falling dead when police shoot live rounds. Verified films published on the Desh Rights website attests to this. We also published a survivor testimony of bodies being placed in dumptrucks by the authorities and removed from the scene.

The most thorough investigation thus far comes from

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the human rights organisation, Odhikar. Their fact finding report 'Assembly of Hefazate Islam Bangladesh and Human Rights Violations', published on 10 June, details the emerging picture of events that took place on 5/6 May. Drawing on interviews with young survivors, families of dead and missing, officials and municipal workers, the fact-finding report gives a vivid account of the night.

The government and their supporters accuse the demonstrators for initiating the violence, and point to the fact that many Hefazat activists were carrying bamboo sticks. To contextualise, bamboo sticks are a traditional feature of processions and marches in Bangladesh, and have a historical, symbolic resonance spanning hundreds of years.

On the other hand, verified video accounts bear witness to merciless beatings of protesters presenting no immediate threat, and who are indeed trying to escape. They also depict the aftermath of the storming of the national mosque by security forces. These eyewitness videos and testimonies are available on the Desh Rights website, as well as the Odhikar report.

Opponents of Hefazat criticise the movement, pointing to the presence of young people in the demonstration as exploitative, and even going so far as describing their use as human shields. The Foreign Minister Dr Dipu Moni has accused protesters of 'playing dead' for the cameras, pointing to one occasion captured on video showing three people getting up from these positions once prodded by the police. However, survivor accounts in many other contexts mention 'playing dead' as a survival tactic of frightened victims.

The government's account of a death toll of 11, and a short non-lethal clearing operation in the early hours of 6th does not tally with the evidence, and has begun to be challenged by international media and some domestic commentators (Bergman and Foyez, 2013 and Al Jazeera, 2013). However, since all the significant dissenting domestic news agencies have been closed by the government, and information to the international audience is usually provided by pro-establishment gatekeepers, news agencies and NGOs, the reporting on May 6th has been very muted.

Human rights organisations in Bangladesh have voiced concerns in different ways. While pro-establishment bodies like Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK, 2013) have been hesitant, other smaller outfits like Odhikar have been vocal (Odhikar, 2013a), calling for an independent judicial investigation and the restoration of freedom of expression and media (Odhikar, 2013b).

"This is the first incident of large-scale indiscriminate killing in Dhaka city, after 42 years of independence of Bangladesh in 1971, by the State agents."

Odhikar Human Rights Group

"This is an extremely volatile situation and there is still a risk of further violence. All law enforcement personnel must abide by international law enforcement standards and ensure that they do not use excessive force in dealing with the protesters"

Amnesty International

"...[forces] shot live ammunition and rubber bullets into unarmed crowds, conducted sweeping arrests, and used other forms of excessive force during and after protests that began in February and continue... opened fire on crowds, often without warning..."

Human Rights Watch, warning of violence before massacre

The individual, human stories of what transpired during and around the sad events in Motijheel require a humane and non-partisan investigation. The conditions for such an investigation, namely political will, trust and freedom from recrimination are absent.



An armed Dhaka Metropolitan Police Officer stand over a body in Motijheel, early hours of 6/5/13. Picture courtesy Feb28.info

Timeline of Turmoil

- 5 Feb Shahbag protests begin in Dhaka demanding executions of the accused in controversial War Crimes Tribunals and the banning of religion-based political parties
- 22 February First Hefazat counter protest at religious defamation from Shahbag protest, is fired upon
- 3/4 April Government arrests four bloggers from the Shahbag movement accused of defaming religions
- 6 April Hefazat stage Long March on Dhaka
- 24 April Country suffers worst industrial accident as a building housing garments factories collapses, killing over 1100
- 5 May Hefazat Dhaka Blockade programme
- 6 May Brutal Operation Flushout undertaken on Hefazat demonstrators at Motijheel, with simultaneous operations on Lalbagh, Kachpur and Hathazari
- 8 May Joint forces call press conference exonerating themselves of any wrongdoing
- 10 May Media euphoria over rescue of Reshma, the last survivor of the garments factory collapse
- 12 May Government releases two of the four bloggers suspected of defamation
- 16 May Government announces plan to reduce internet upload bandwidth by 75%, but plan is shelved
- 16 May Missing war crimes tribunals' defence witness Shokronjan Bali issues a statement from an Indian jail confirming his kidnap by Bangladesh authorities
- 19 May 15 Newspaper editors write to urge Government to honour press freedom
- 20 May Home Minister MK Alamgir bans political rallies and processions nationwide
- 21 May Detained Hefazat secretary general Junaid Babunagri issues a confessional statement whilst under interrogation
- 23 May Hefazot Head Allama Shah Ahmed Shafi rejects Babunagri confession, alleging it was obtained under torture and demands his release
- 28 May Minister for Home Affairs Tuku threatens main opposition leaders, with another 6th May scenario.

How Did Bangladesh Arrive At This Impasse?

The Hefazat-e-Islam', is a three year old association of teachers and scholars from independent qaumi (community) madrassas, which was established to challenge accusations made against the sector for training terrorists and causing unemployment problems. Hefazat draws from a centuries old tradition of religious education, rejects partisan politics and could never have envisaged such a government response. Protesters were rallying around Hefazot's 13 points, but also a leadership which they believe could protect and dignify religious rights in Bangladesh, including those of minority faiths. They petitioned to protest the denigration of God, religious personalities and appearances, with stringent maximum penalties for defaming Islam.

Hefazot's 13 points have been seized upon as fundamentalist, reactionary and illiberal, and in many respects they pose challenges. But like in other arenas, this charge has been used to dehumanise a



Bodies lie before the Water Lily monument, covered in cotton shrouds and tarpaulin guarded by the Rapid Action Battalion. Picture courtesy Feb28.info

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section of the national citizenry, and as an excuse to look away from, or even deny, the atrocities that took place in the 5th and 6th of May.

The movement came to public prominence in February of this year in response to religious defamation emanating from some of the protestors of the Shahbag rally. The latter became an international media sensation in February of this year as protestors demanded death penalties to be applied to those leaders accused of war crimes. Most of the leaders belong to the established Jamaat-e-Islami, a political party with little traction amongst the Hefazat.

Some prominent bloggers amongst the Shahbag protestors were identified hurling religious insults, which was the last straw for a movement with several existing demands of government.

To voice their opposition, on Friday 22nd February, Hefazat held their first protest nationwide after weekly prayers. They fell victim to state violence after the police fired upon the crowds and conducted mass arrests.

On 6th April, Hefazat-e-Islam organised a Long March programme to Dhaka, to respond to the deaths and grievances. This was relatively non-violent by Bangladeshi standards, despite provocation from political antagonists. They vowed to return to the capital a 5th May to make the seriousness their convictions known.

Instability in Bangladesh

A false dichotomy

The narrative around the Motijheel Massacre is being presented as a simplistic struggle between secularism and fundamentalism in Bangladesh: a fight of the government, Shahbag and the progressives, in support of Western civilisational values, against the fundamentalist Islamists and opportunists of Hefazat-e-Islam, Jamaat-e-Islam and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

This is a misleading dichotomy. The 'secular' Shahbag movement and the 'Islamist' Hefazat have both presented problematic demands, the former in the form of death penalties from controversial and internationally discredited tribunals and the absolute closure of political space to religion. The latter have mobilised against religious defamation, also with calls for the death penalty (despite a corrupt legal system), and are reasserting traditional conservative social norms that threaten their opponent's perceptions of freedom.

"They (law enforcers) carried out the drive successfully. I don't think it'll cause any image crisis (abroad), but the lies and drama may...."

Foreign Minister Dr Dipu Moni. 8th May 2013 (Source: UNBConnect, 2013)

"We found seven dead bodies from rally venue while one cop was killed and his gun was snatched by Hefajat-e-Islam activists...The joint forces of police, Rapid Action Battalion and Border Guard Bangladesh conducted the 10-minute-long flash out operation to disperse Hefajat activists from the venue as they were told earlier to leave the place... We live in the era of advanced technology and it is quite impossible to hide anything. Some people are spreading rumor through sharing edited photos in social communication sites."

Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Benazir Ahmed. 8th May 2013 (Source: BDNews24, 2013)

"I'm not sure whether what [DMP, BGB and Rab officials] said about that day's [clearance] drive was their own words... or imposed by government high-ups. But I can say the country's people don't believe it and couldn't take it into confidence... We want to know: how many people were killed on that day; the number of police, Rab and BGB members that took part in the operation; the number of bullets, types of arms and armoured vehicles used; and the reason for conducting the operation in the darkness of night,"

Main opposition BNP chairperson's adviser Shamsuzzaman Dudu 8th May 2013. (Source: Dhaka Tribune, 2013)



A scene from behind an armoured personnel carrier. Picture courtesy Feb28.info



This image captures terrified protesters chased into a nearby branch of Trust Bank. Picture courtesy Feb28.info

A pernicious political culture

The Motijheel Massacre took place days after the collapse of a factory in Savar. In the aftermath of Bangladesh's worst industrial disaster, the global spotlight focused on the suffering and exploitation of the garment workers by global supply chains and consumerism. Yet insufficient attention has been given to the submissive political culture that allowed the factory and building owners of Savar to bypass regulation and operate with impunity.

Bangladesh's political culture can be seen as a triad of power elites, hired muscle and corporate media interests. That is how the tragedy of Savar in April 2013 could occur just months after the deadly Tazreen factory fire of 2012.

The pattern of temporary outrage with little investigative follow-through, and poor representation of striking workers certainly deserves disruption. As governments are prone to using developing events to 'bury bad news', Bangladesh's authorities have been glossing over the massacre that took place on 6th May with a campaign of disinformation and by vilifying the victims.

This government stands accused of siding with exploitative factory owners; the owner of the collapsed building, Sohel Rana, belongs to the ruling Awami League and used his political influence to bypass building regulation. He and his tenant factory owners benefitted from the government actions against rights advocates, in particular trade unionist Aminul Islam, whose tortured body was found after his long campaign for garment worker rights. In a recent development, there have been reports in the Bangladeshi and UK press that the rescue of a young female survivor on 10th May, 17 days after the building collapsed, was a stage managed publicity stunt, to distract media attention.

The Dhaka Massacre of 6 May may be seen as the action of a government that knows it can act with impunity, nationally, even internationally. It is an insult to human conscience, and a chilling indictment of the national establishment that protesters from a movement with no partisan political connection, have been systematically misrepresented, dehumanised, murdered and terrorised under the banner of protecting Bangladesh's secularism.

The Government of Bangladesh has made international headlines several times this year. They can be seen as results of direct attempts by the ruling Awami League to

achieve total power. From the government's removal of Nobel Prize winning Muhammad Yunus from Grameen Bank and takeover of the organisation, to the crack down on labour activism in the ready made garments sector, to the highly unjust manner by which it has conducted the International Crimes Tribunal.

Bangladesh's political culture is entangled in violence and terrorism of an unfashionable everyday nature. The main political parties have armed wings, and the ruling party at any given time deploys the instruments of state to struggle for total power at all costs. This has been used, as we have seen, most murderously by the current government. It is dismantling the remaining checks and balances to achieve total power, most recent with the removal of the caretaker government system. This forecloses the possibility of a free and fair election.

Implications of this violence

The latest crackdown has brutalised the independent madrassahs, who have historically provided a religious, community-based leadership steering away from the country's troubled and often corrupt political practices. The ensuing media cover-up and disinterest has spread fear and deep resentment amongst many ordinary people, and pushed them to the margins.

While we reject the Talibanisation thesis pushed upon Bangladesh, as empirically and theoretically weak as well as self-serving, the terrifying and desperate logic of the situation suggests that as the violence bar has been raised so high, and avenues for public expression, organisation and dialogue are closed, the country will slip further into the red.

By doing business as usual, we fail to recognise that Bangladesh changed forever that night. We continue to encourage the Government of Bangladesh to act against its citizens with impunity. We continue to demonstrate to its largely donor financed civil society, that the values of human rights and social justice are purely for marketing. As time elapses our knowledge of particulars develops in character and content. More survivors and participants come forward with their experiences of government brutality. On the physical level, evidence is removed and degraded by government and the terrible events of 5th and 6th May run the risk of being buried, forgotten and their lessons unheeded.



The scale of human presence at Motijheel during the daytime rally (top) and later that night resting and sitting in before the assault (bottom) Picture courtesy Feb28.info

What can the UK do?

The United Kingdom is uniquely placed and has a duty to act for the following reasons -

- More than half a million Bangladeshis reside permanently in the UK as citizens, many of whom will be concerned about the well-being of their family members and concerned for the future of the country.
- Political autocracy and impunity restricts access to economic opportunities in Bangladesh, causing migration to countries like the UK whilst leaving the young nation's underlying problems unresolved.
- The UK government is the largest contributor of foreign direct aid to Bangladesh, effectively subsidising a corrupt state and a self-serving donor-recipient NGO community
- The UK has trained the Bangladeshi Police and Rapid Action Battalion in the past, and there are pointers creating the insinuation that the British government may have provided support to the government crackdown.
- The BBC, in particular its Bengali Service has continued to disappoint regarding its coverage of the situation, raising questions about editorial objectivity and its agenda.

As a result of the above, the UK is not only duty bound, but is likely to be given an audience to persuading or even compelling the Government of Bangladesh to

act to hold itself accountable, uphold justice and demonstrate democratic values.

What Parliamentarians do?

1. Secure a debate in the House of Commons on this matter as critical for harmony and accountability within Bangladeshi society both in Bangladesh and in the British diaspora
2. Support the establishment of an independent, international body with the capability and resources to investigate the massacre of 6th May and surrounding events with the expressed purpose of preventing them from happening again.
3. Critically review the balance and bias with which Bangladesh-related affairs are reported, analysed and engaged by UK state-funded institutions (e.g. BBC Bengali Service).
4. Freeze the UK assets of key regime officials and backers.
5. Review security and development cooperation with the Bangladeshi government pending the outcome of an independent inquiry into the massacre.
6. Demand the Government of Bangladesh create conditions for the opposition to have confidence in it, by reversing all restrictions on the opposition parties, civic groups and media and releasing political prisoners.
7. Consider suspending the Government of Bangladesh from the Commonwealth until it takes its responsibilities to its citizens seriously.

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