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Dhaka war crimes protest gains ground

By Syed Tashfin Chowdhury
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DHAKA - Demands from a mass protest for all war criminals convicted of committing atrocities in Bangladesh's 1971 independence struggle to be given the death penalty have won the support of millions of Bangladeshis as the demonstration enters its tenth day.

The protest which began on February 5 at the Shahbagh intersection in Dhaka, has spread beyond the capital amid reform demands that include a ban on Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, a member of the 18-party alliance that forms the opposition. It was sparked on the same day by a 31-year jail term handed to the party's general secretary, Abdul Quader Mollah, who was convicted of war crimes that included mass murder and rape.

The demonstration enjoyed the first fruits of success on February 11 when the country's cabinet gave the nod to a bill that would allow the government to challenge courts over sentences given under the International Crimes (Tribunal) Act.

Protesters at Shahbagh had initially demanded that Mollah be hanged along with other people who committed war crimes in 1971. During the bloody independence most of the top leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami collaborated with the Pakistani armed forces to wreak havoc on the Bangladeshi populace. Jamaat, a faction of the original political party in Pakistan, in 1971 officially rejected Bangladesh's desire to split from Pakistan (at that time was known as West Pakistan).

Jamaat-e-Islami acting secretary general Rafiqul Islam Khan in a press statement released

before the February 5 judgement on Mollah, said, "Do not push the country into a civil war by delivering one-sided verdicts against our leaders. If anything happens against Quader Mollah, every house will be on fire."

Hours after Mollah was sentenced under the country's International Crimes (Tribunal) Act, a group of bloggers under the platform "Bloggers and Online Activists Network" decided to form a human chain near Shahbagh intersection of Dhaka, one of the busiest junctions in the city. The verdict infuriated millions of Bangladeshis, who were waiting for news of another capital punishment similar to the first historic war crimes verdict on January 21, against Abul Kalam Azad, another war criminal and former Jamaat-e-Islami leader. Azad, who allegedly has fled the country, was tried in absentia for crimes against humanity.

Protesters were joined by thousands of people on February 5, and over the next few days demonstrators from other parts of the country travelled to Dhaka to take part. Most are still at the demonstration site.

The February 5 judgement said that a small number of Bangalees, Biharis, other pro-Pakistanis, as well as members of a number of different religion-based political parties, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing, joined or collaborated with the Pakistan occupation army to resist the formation of an independent Bangladesh, and that most of them committed and facilitated the commission of atrocities in violation of customary international law. Alongside Mollah, other senior Jamaat leaders being tried under the international crimes act, include Delwar Hossain Sayedee and Ghulam Azam.

The Shahbagh protesters are demanding capital punishment for all crimes against humanity in Bangladesh in 1971 when, according to the prosecution during Mollah's trial, "some three million people were killed, nearly a quarter-million women were raped and over 10 million people were forced to take refuge in India to escape brutal persecution at home, during the nine-month battle and struggle of the Bangalee nation". Bangladesh, which was then East Pakistan, was being ravaged by military forces from West Pakistan.

The Bangladesh cabinet on February 11 noted protest demands by giving the nod to a bill for the amendment of Section 21 (2) of the ICT Act, which if approved by parliament in its present session would give the government a right to appeal to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court against any inadequate sentence or order of acquittal pronounced by the International Crimes Tribunal for any of the accused. The court would then have 90 days to dispose of the appeal or order an acquittal.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said in parliament on February 10 that she would do everything to amend the relevant law if there were any weakness in it. The government has not officially said anything about changing Mollah's verdict once the bill is passed.

Jute and Textiles Minister Abdul Latif Siddiqui has said that a bill seeking to ban the Jamaat-e-Islami and its student wing would be placed in the current parliament in line with the demand of the ongoing nationwide mass movement. The minister took part in a three-minute silence on February 12 to demand the death penalty of war criminals.

Back at the Shahbagh intersection, protesters are keeping the demonstration alive by chanting slogans, burning effigies of war criminals and collecting signatures for petitions, among other means of projecting their grievances.

"Dhaka university film associations are screening films, there are people singing songs, reciting poetry; it's an exhilarating experience," Mahbubul Haque Bhuiyan, a recent post-graduate student in journalism from Dhaka University who joined the protest on day one, told Asia Times Online. "Till now, the bloggers have been able to keep the protests free from politics."

Other protesters said that attempts by politicians from the ruling Awami League (AL) to steer the protests to their advantage were ongoing.

Top AL leaders, including the deputy leader of the parliament Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Forest and Environment Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud, and Post and Telecommunications Minister Sahara Khatun, tried to speak, only to be heckled by the crowd. On February 7, protesters hurled stones and empty water bottles at special assistant to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and joint AL general secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif, forcing him to leave the protest site.

Protesters have also told Asia Times Online that activists from the ruling party's student wing, Bangladesh Chhatra League's (BCL), have been trying to take control by paying the tabs, providing food, and steering protests inside the Dhaka University campus and other ways. "But we hope to keep the protests entirely neutral till the end," said a blogger from the BOAN, who did not want to be identified.

People outside of the capital city as well as non-resident Bangladeshis living in other parts of the world have also demonstrated solidarity with the Shahbagh movement, with protest pictures posted online.

While sharing similarities to Arab Spring protests and the recent sit-in in Islamabad, the Shahbagh protests have some distinctive features. Dr Fahmidul Haq, associate professor of mass communication and journalism department of the University of Dhaka, said, "In regard to Arab Spring and others, we have seen the protesters used Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to continue their protests but here the protest has been called by a group of bloggers."

The main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) remarked on Tuesday that the "rally is losing neutrality" due to a liberation war-era slogan being chanted again and again. The slogan "Joy Bangla" has been associated with the ruling AL since 1971. However, BNP welcomed the youth movement.

While these events are breathing down Jamaat-e-Islami's neck, the party has already termed the protests "a government plot to create anarchy" and force the tribunals to "deliver verdicts as per its dictate."

Skirmishes occurred between Jamaat activists and police in Dhaka's Tejgaon, Karwan Bazar and Motijheel areas and other parts of Bangladesh, on Tuesday and Wednesday and also in different parts of the country on Thursday.