

Bangladesh demands US embassy withdraw criticism over student protests

DHAKA: Bangladesh's government demanded on Wednesday that the US embassy withdraw criticism over its handling of days-long student protests in the capital over a fatal traffic accident.

Tens of thousands of students have blocked streets of Dhaka for more than a week, demanding safer roads, after two teenagers were killed by a speeding bus.

Police fired tear gas and beat up students to force them to disperse but they have stayed on. Scores of people have been hurt in demonstrations.

On Sunday, the US embassy posted a statement on Facebook saying youngsters engaging in peaceful protests were exercising their democratic rights and that nothing could justify "brutal attacks and violence" against young people.

The United Nations said it too was concerned about violence in the streets and called for calm.

Information Minister Hasanul Hoque Inu said police had acted with restraint and that both the United States and the United Nations had overstepped the line with their criticism.

"We urge to withdraw this statement. This is discourteous," Hoque said of the US statement, adding the government would write to the embassy and the United Nations to register its protest.

On Sunday a group of armed men attacked a vehicle carrying the US ambassador. There were no injuries but two vehicles were damaged. Police said on Wednesday they were still investigating the case.

Students are demanding changes to transport laws following the July 29 deaths, after the driver of a privately operated bus lost control and ran over a group of students.

Detained photographer back in police custody

An award-winning photographer who accused Bangladesh officers of assaulting him after his arrest during major protests in Dhaka was back in police custody after a medical checkup, an official said on Wednesday.

Shahidul Alam, 63, was detained by plainclothes police at his home on Sunday after giving an interview to Al Jazeera about the student demonstrations, an arrest which drew condemnation from international rights groups.

The high court on Tuesday ordered authorities to transfer Alam to hospital.

“We have completed the checkup and he didn’t need hospital admission. He was taken back after the procedure,” said Bangabandhu hospital director Brigadier General Abdullah al Harun. Doctors would report on Alam’s condition to a higher court, he added.

Alam had been remanded in custody by a lower court for violating controversial laws on internet speech, but the remand order was suspended by a higher court.

He was accused of making “false” and “provocative” statements as tens of thousands of students protested in Dhaka to demand improvements to road safety and an end to corruption.

The renowned photographer told reporters outside a magistrate’s court on Monday that he had been beaten so badly in police custody that his tunic needed washing to get the blood out.

On Tuesday morning he was shifted to hospital, his wife Rahnuma Ahmed told AFP, adding he looked better than during

his appearance in court when he seemed shaken and was limping.

Alam founded the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, a photography school in Dhaka that spawned hundreds of photographers. He shot images of the demonstrations and discussed the protests on Facebook Live.

New York-based Human Rights Watch demanded his release, denouncing authorities for targeting activists and journalists instead of prosecuting those responsible for unlawfully attacking student protesters.

The protests seemed to have fizzled out on Tuesday, with students telling AFP they feared further government repression if the demonstrations continued.