

Operation Devil Hunt: Bangladesh's Growing Crime Rate & Public Safety Crisis

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Bangladesh Campaign – April 2025



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Introduction

Bangladesh is at a turning point in its history as it deals with an increase in crime and political unrest after former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was overthrown by a student-led movement. Former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was overthrown in July 2024 as a result of widespread protests sparked by decades of systemic corruption, socioeconomic inequality, and an intense distrust of current law enforcement. Public outrage over a contentious public sector employment quota served as the starting point for the movement, which quickly expanded to include demands for extensive democratic reforms and accountability for widespread violations of human rights. Public dissatisfaction was heightened by the ruthless crackdown that followed under Hasina's rule, which resulted in the detention of thousands of activists, journalists, and political dissidents.

Following these events, Hasina left the country, opening the way for Nobel Prize winner Professor Muhammad Yunus to lead an interim government starting August 8th, 2025. Determined to restore order and rebuild public trust, the new administration launched Operation Devil Hunt on February 8th, 2025, a sweeping, statewide crackdown targeting those perceived as threats to national stability. Independent reports indicate that thefts, kidnappings, and public disputes occur unchecked, placing inhabitants in constant terror, despite official figures claiming a decline in violent crimes.

In considering Bangladesh's present public safety dilemma, this report explores the beginnings and development of Operation Devil Hunt. It analyses the crackdown's immediate effects, such as its harsh law enforcement strategies and widespread arrests, and evaluates whether these actions provide a permanent solution or are only a band-aid solution covering up more serious systemic problems. As Bangladesh embarks on a path toward democratic renewal under Yunus's leadership, the challenge remains to balance effective security measures with the preservation of civil liberties, ensuring that the nation can overcome its troubled past and build a stable and better future.

Background

The July 2024 Revolution was a series of mass pro-democracy uprisings led by student activists from Students Against Discrimination that culminated in Sheikh Hasina's expulsion from government.¹ The uprisings were initially ignited by public outrage over a controversial public-service hiring quota but swiftly escalated into broader demonstrations against systemic inequality and impunity for human rights abuses. According to the United Nations, in response to these demonstrations, the state initiated a calculated brutal crackdown on human rights defenders, activists, and political dissidents.² Security forces, authorised by

¹ The Print, 'Yunus govt launches 'Operation Devil Hunt' to weed out 'destabilising' forces after fresh violence' (South Asia Journal, 11 February 2025)

<<https://southasiajournal.net/yunus-govt-launches-operation-devil-hunt-to-weed-out-destabilising-forces-after-fresh-violence> /> accessed 4 April 2025.

² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Preliminary Analysis of Recent Protests and Unrest in Bangladesh' (6 August 2024)

Hasina's government, employed tactics such as intimidation, violence, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and torture to suppress dissent and quash protests.³ Over 11,700 individuals were detained without proper legal procedures.⁴ Journalists exposing state abuses were also targeted, and critical media outlets were shut down.⁵

By early August, Sheikh Hasina fled the country, and on August 8th, 2025, Nobel laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus assumed leadership of the interim government, pledging to restore national order, uphold human rights, address long-standing grievances, and safeguard democratic freedoms.⁶ Since assuming power, Bangladesh's interim government has undertaken significant reforms aimed at addressing past political biases and human rights violations.⁷ In August 2024, the interim government replaced officials accused of political partisanship and arrested senior police officers implicated in previous abuses. This move sought to restore impartiality within the administration.⁸

On August 29th, 2024, Bangladesh acceded to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, a move aimed at signalling a commitment to upholding human rights standards.⁹ Concurrently, the government established a five-member Commission of Inquiry to investigate enforced disappearances that occurred during Sheikh Hasina's 15-year tenure.¹⁰ By October 2024, the Commission had received over 400 complaints related to enforced disappearances.¹¹ On September 11th, 2024, Yunus announced the formation of six commissions to address systemic issues and usher in reform in the following sectors: the electoral system, police administration, judiciary, anti-corruption measures, public administration, and constitutional reform.¹²

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/preliminary-analysis-recent-protests-and-unrest-bangladesh> accessed 4 April 2025.

³ Amnesty International, 'Bangladesh: Critical UN report must spur accountability and justice' (13 February 2025) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/02/bangladesh-critical-un-report-must-spur-accountability-and-justice/> accessed 20 March 2025.

⁴ Jaime Keaten, 'UN rights office estimates up to 1,400 killed in crackdown on protests in Bangladesh' (AP News, 12 February 2025) <https://apnews.com/article/bangladesh-human-rights-hasina-yunus-volker-turk-united-nations-951dc40f60d6a798eb5af5ed1d11bbad> accessed 4 April 2025.

⁵ CIVICUS, 'Bangladesh: Interim government commits to human rights reforms as they release activists, protesters and investigate past crimes' (CIVICUS Monitor, 30 October 2024) <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/bangladesh-interim-government-commits-to-human-rights-reforms-as-they-release-activists-protesters-and-investigate-past-crimes/> accessed 4 April 2025.

⁶ *ibid*; The Print, 'Yunus govt launches 'Operation Devil Hunt' to weed out 'destabilising' forces after fresh violence' (South Asia Journal, 11 February 2025) <https://southasiajournal.net/yunus-govt-launches-operation-devil-hunt-to-weed-out-destabilising-forces-after-fresh-violence/> accessed 4 April 2025.

⁷ CIVICUS, 'Bangladesh: Interim government commits to human rights reforms as they release activists, protesters and investigate past crimes' (CIVICUS Monitor, 30 October 2024) <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/bangladesh-interim-government-commits-to-human-rights-reforms-as-they-release-activists-protesters-and-investigate-past-crimes/> accessed 4 April 2025.

⁸ *ibid*.

⁹ CIVICUS, 'Bangladesh: Interim government commits to human rights reforms as they release activists, protesters and investigate past crimes' (CIVICUS Monitor, 30 October 2024) <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/bangladesh-interim-government-commits-to-human-rights-reforms-as-they-release-activists-protesters-and-investigate-past-crimes/> accessed 4 April 2025.

¹⁰ *ibid*.

¹¹ *ibid*.

¹² *ibid*.

The Bulldozer Procession

However, despite the interim government's efforts to address past injustices and restore stability, the transition period has been marked by sporadic violence and persistent political unrest. The country remains destabilised, grappling with an escalating public safety crisis.¹³ On February 6th, 2025, unrest erupted across the country following reports that former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was planning to address her supporters through a Facebook Live broadcast from exile in India.¹⁴ The news ignited fury among anti-Hasina groups, notably members of the Students Against Discrimination movement, who perceived the speech as a direct challenge to the interim government's authority.¹⁵

In her speech on February 5th 2025, Hasina remained defiant and called upon the people of Bangladesh to oppose the interim government, accusing it of seizing power unconstitutionally.¹⁶ Outraged, thousands of protesters, some wielding sticks and hammers, gathered around Hasina's former residence, the home of Bangladesh's founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and set fire to the building to detract from Hasina's broadcast.¹⁷ Taking to social media that evening, Hasnat Abdullah, a student leader of Students Against Discrimination, wrote that "tonight Bangladesh will be freed from the pilgrimage site of fascism".¹⁸ Some demonstrators brought heavy machinery, including a crane and an excavator, to aid in demolishing Hasina's residence. The rally led to broader calls for demolition protests across the country, a campaign dubbed the "Bulldozer Procession".¹⁹ Using excavators and makeshift tools, demonstrators vandalised and torched multiple properties linked to Hasina's family and political allies,²⁰ including prominent Awami League figures like President Abdul Hamid and former chief of the Bangladesh Army, Moeen U Ahmed.²¹

The interim government strongly condemned the attacks and accused Hasina of inciting chaos from abroad. On February 7th 2025, the interim government issued a public appeal for calm, urging citizens to uphold the rule of law and resist resorting to the same kind

¹³ The Print, 'Yunus govt launches 'Operation Devil Hunt' to weed out 'destabilising' forces after fresh violence' (South Asia Journal, 11 February 2025)

<<https://southasiajournal.net/yunus-govt-launches-operation-devil-hunt-to-weed-out-destabilising-forces-after-fresh-violence/>> accessed 4 April 2025.

¹⁴ Sanstuti Nath, 'Operation Devil Hunt: How Bangladesh Is Hunting Sheikh Hasina Loyalists' (NDTV, 10 February 2025) <<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/operation-devil-hunt-how-bangladesh-is-hunting-sheikh-hasina-loyalists-7676663>> accessed 23 March 2025.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Al Jazeera, 'Bangladesh protesters torch family home of ousted PM Sheikh Hasina' (6 February 2025)

<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/6/bangladesh-protesters-torch-family-home-of-ousted-pm-sheikh-hasina>> accessed 1 April 2025.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Al Jazeera, 'Bangladesh protesters torch family home of ousted PM Sheikh Hasina' (6 February 2025)

<<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/6/bangladesh-protesters-torch-family-home-of-ousted-pm-sheikh-hasina>> accessed 1 April 2025.

²¹ New Age, '15 Injured in "Attempts to Vandalise Mozammel Haque's Gazipur House"' (8 February 2025)

<<https://www.newagebd.net/post/country/257441/15-injured-in-attempts-to-vandalise-mozammel-haques-gazipur-house>> accessed 31 March 2025.

of violence that, in his words, had defined the “fascist regime” that had been overthrown.²² The interim government stressed that its security forces would act swiftly to preserve law and order, arresting anyone attempting to stir unrest or destroy property.²³ The interim government called on “all citizens to materialise [a] dream of building a country where all Bangladeshis can live in security and dignity to act with self-discipline and to channel their energy into productive, peaceful efforts to support positive changes”.²⁴

On the evening of February 7th, violence erupted further in the Gazipur district when announcements from mosques falsely claimed that robbers were gathering to attack the home of former Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque.²⁵ Members from Students Against Discrimination responded to the calls only to be met with violence from law enforcement, realising too late that the alarms were part of a calculated trap.²⁶ Between fifteen to twenty students were locked inside the building and attacked with sharp weapons, sticks, and clubs, forcing several to climb to the roof and jump to save their lives.²⁷ One student eventually died from their injuries.²⁸ In response, Students Against Discrimination issued a 24-hour ultimatum, demanding the immediate arrest of those responsible for the attack,²⁹ spurring the interim government to call an emergency meeting across law enforcement agencies to address growing violence, unrest, and crime.

Operation Devil Hunt

The result of the inter-law enforcement meeting was the development of a nationwide campaign known as Operation Devil Hunt. On February 8th, 2025, the interim government launched the operation to curb violent offences by intensifying law enforcement response.³⁰ According to the interim government’s head of the Interior Ministry, Md. Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, the operation aims at bringing to justice those who “threaten the nation’s stability” by synchronising efforts across police agencies, the Bangladesh Army and Navy, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Ansar, and the Coast Guard, and centralising administration to a main control room.³¹

The Operation “will carry on until every devil is held accountable”, Chowdhury claimed.³² In the first day or two of the Operation, 1,308 individuals were arrested

²² bdnews24.com, 'Yunus Calls for End to Attacks on AL-linked Property' (7 February 2025) <<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/ed40430de0a2>> accessed 4 April 2025.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ The Print, 'Yunus govt launches 'Operation Devil Hunt' to weed out 'destabilising' forces after fresh violence' (South Asia Journal, 11 February 2025).

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Agence France-Presse, 'Bangladesh Authorities Arrest over 8,600 amid Surge in Crime' (Daily Sabah, 24 February 2025) <<https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-authorities-arrest-over-8600-amid-surge-in-crime>> accessed 1 April 2025.

³¹ Ali Asif Shawon, 'What is Operation Devil Hunt?' (Dhaka Tribune, 9 February 2025) <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/government-affairs/373261/what-is-operation-devil-hunt>> accessed 4 April 2025.

³² *ibid.*

nationwide.³³ Media outlets reported that many of those arrested are members or affiliates of the Awami League–Bangladesh’s oldest existing political party, which played a leading role in its struggle for independence, but has long since been justly criticised for power-grabbing and using violence to remove any perceived threats to their power.³⁴ In Gazipur alone, 81 members of the Awami League were arrested in a single evening.³⁵ During raids, law enforcement allegedly recovered homemade firearms, ammunition, and sharp weapons.³⁶

Between February 1st and February 24th, 2025, an increase in prevalence of serious crimes—including murder, rape, mugging, robbery, and extortion—were reported across the country.³⁷ In a statement to the Daily Star, Omar Faruk, a professor in the Department of Criminology and Police Science at Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University, noted that people are living in constant fear of falling victim to violence or theft, while the government continues to characterise the overall state of the country as satisfactory.³⁸ Videos of a sexual assault being committed on a moving bus, and men attacking a couple with sharp weapons have surfaced on social media.³⁹ In Chand Udyan, 20 young men stormed a local shop and held a machete to the shop owner’s throat while the others stole cash and goods.⁴⁰ Residents are so fearful that they have started closing down their shops when they perceive gangs—usually groups of men dressed in all black, carrying machetes, knives, or guns—approaching.⁴¹

In the first two weeks of the Operation, Bangladeshi security forces arrested more than 8,600 individuals following a law enforcement crackdown targeting rebels allegedly linked to the coup that ousted Hasina’s former government.⁴² An analysis of monthly crime data from the past six years shows that January 2025 recorded the highest number of reported muggings and robberies in a single month, with 242 incidents.⁴³ In response, the interim government’s head of the Interior Ministry, Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, ordered law enforcement to intensify their efforts and increase patrols to bring all perpetrators to justice.⁴⁴ Unlike law enforcement crackdowns under Hasina’s government, the interim government has

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Sanstuti Nath, 'Operation Devil Hunt: How Bangladesh Is Hunting Sheikh Hasina Loyalists' (NDTV, 10 February 2025) <<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/operation-devil-hunt-how-bangladesh-is-hunting-sheikh-hasina-loyalists-7676663>> accessed 5 April 2025.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Staff Correspondent, 'Operation Devil Hunt: arrests in nationwide crackdown surpass 18,000' (bdnews24.com, 20 February 2025) <<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/b956cf2879c0>> accessed 5 April 2025.

³⁷ Muntakim Saad and Mohammad Jamil Khan, 'Crime rates spike' (The Daily Star, 25 February 2025) <<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/crime-rates-spike-3833016>> accessed 29 March 2025.

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ Muntakim Saad and Mohammad Jamil Khan, 'Crime rates spike' (The Daily Star, 25 February 2025) <<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/crime-rates-spike-3833016>> accessed 29 March 2025.

⁴⁰ 'Mohammadpur plagued by rising gang violence' (*Bangladesh First*, 21 February 2025) <<https://bfirst.news/bangladesh/16852/mohammadpur-plagued-by-rising-gang-violence>> accessed 3 April 2025.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Agence France-Presse, 'Bangladesh Authorities Arrest over 8,600 amid Surge in Crime' (Daily Sabah, 24 February 2025) <<https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-authorities-arrest-over-8600-amid-surge-in-crime>> accessed 1 April 2025.

⁴³ Muntakim Saad and Mohammad Jamil Khan, 'Crime rates spike' (The Daily Star, 25 February 2025) <<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/crime-rates-spike-3833016>> accessed 30 March 2025.

⁴⁴ Agence France-Presse, 'Bangladesh Authorities Arrest over 8,600 amid Surge in Crime' (Daily Sabah, 24 February 2025) <<https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/bangladesh-authorities-arrest-over-8600-amid-surge-in-crime>> accessed 1 April 2025.

insisted that the grounds for the Operation and the measures taken are lawful, emphasising that no extrajudicial killings have been committed and that those arrested are receiving their due process rights.⁴⁵

However, roughly two weeks into the operation, on February 20th, armed forces clashed with an alleged gang of suspected criminals.⁴⁶ Gunfire broke out in Dhaka's Mohammadpur area and resulted in two armed suspects being killed and five others arrested.⁴⁷ By the evening of February 20th, the scale of Operation arrests soared further into the thousands. By the end of the month, over 30,000 individuals had been arrested.⁴⁸ Of those arrested, police data shows that roughly 12,500 had been detained as a result of the Operation, with the remaining arrested on criminal charges unrelated to the Operation, but during the same period.⁴⁹

As of early April 2025, the Operation remains in full force, with no pending termination date announced.⁵⁰ The dramatic increase in arrests has sparked protests from frustrated students and activists across the country who claim the Operation does not achieve its purpose but exacerbates political tensions and public safety concerns. Specifically, students say that arrests are doing little to reduce the overall crime rate, with some reporting instances of police standing by and allowing a crime to occur. In March 2025, Al Jazeera reported an instance where 21-year-old student activist Maydul Hassan was assaulted and robbed right in front of the police, who, according to Hassan, did nothing to intervene.⁵¹ "I cried, I begged, but the police did nothing", Hassan told Al Jazeera. Hassan's experience is far from unique. As countless others fall victim to the ongoing violence, student activists like Hassan have been left questioning what their efforts were really for.

Impact and Criticism

The interim government's launch of the Operation has been met with mixed reactions, with the Bangladeshi public divided. In its initial phase, the Operation appeared to achieve several immediate objectives, with pro-democracy student protestors praising the interim government's firm stance against fascism and violence, particularly from Awami League activists who oppose the current government. Notably, since the crackdown began, there have been no large-scale mob attacks or political riots comparable to the pre-operation incidents.

⁴⁵ The Print, 'Yunus govt launches 'Operation Devil Hunt' to weed out 'destabilising' forces after fresh violence' (South Asia Journal, 11 February 2025).

⁴⁶ Staff Correspondent, 'Operation Devil Hunt: arrests in nationwide crackdown surpass 18,000' (bdnews24.com, 20 February 2025) <<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/b956cf2879c0>> accessed 5 April 2025.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Arman Bhuiyan, 'One month of Operation Devil Hunt: Has it improved safety, security in Bangladesh?' (Dhaka Tribune, 9 March 2025) <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/375789/one-month-of-operation-devil-hunt-has-it-improved>> accessed 5 April 2025.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ No criminal will be spared: Jahangir' (Somoy News, 2 April 2025) <<https://en.somoynews.tv/news/2025-04-02/wEUPt9IZ>> accessed 5 April 2025.

⁵¹ Mehedi Hasan Marof, 'Gotham but no Batman': Crime grips Bangladesh 6 months after Hasina fled' (Al Jazeera, 4 March 2025) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/3/4/gotham-but-no-batman-crime-wave-grips-dhaka-6-months-after-hasina-fled>> accessed 2 April 2025.

The coordinated show of force quickly stabilised the political situation: the wave of vandalism and arson that flared in early February was effectively halted. Many individuals believed to have orchestrated attacks on students and the public in Gazipur and elsewhere were apprehended, which likely prevented retaliatory violence or a spiral of unrest. Moreover, the joint operation led to the capture of numerous criminals and the seizure of weapons, which could have long-term benefits for public safety. Security forces took advantage of the momentum to round up not only political agitators but also gang members, robbers, and extortionists who had outstanding warrants or were active amid political instability.

However, despite pockets of public approval, the operation has sparked serious concerns among human rights advocates, media commentators, and members of the public with respect to the language and breadth of the crackdown. The use of the terms “Devil Hunt” raises alarm among critics who view such language as deeply dehumanising, in a way that creates a harmful narrative at risk of perpetuating a culture that fans intolerance, which threatens basic rights and abusive treatment under the guise of law enforcement.⁵² The scale of the crackdown also raises concerns for potential abuse of power. Within just a few days, hundreds of grassroots supporters of the Awami League and its student wing were arrested, bringing criticism from Hasina’s political camp that the Operation is less about restoring order and more about dismantling the Awami League altogether.

Unsurprisingly, international observers are monitoring the situation with increasing concern, with foreign diplomats and human rights organisations privately urging the interim government to uphold civil liberties and to ensure that the crackdown does not devolve into a campaign of mass political repression. These appeals followed growing alarm among Hasina’s international allies, though the interim government has strongly denied any allegations of political targeting.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the series of transformative events that have recently gripped Bangladesh underscore a nation at a crossroads, caught between its chaotic past and the promise of a more just future. Deeply established problems stemming from decades of systematic corruption, socioeconomic inequality, and a declining faith in traditional law enforcement were revealed by the student-led movement in July 2024, which ultimately led to the departure of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

On February 8th, 2025, the interim government launched Operation Devil Hunt, an extreme, state-wide operation intended to restore order and stop the rising violence. While the operation has resulted in the arrest of tens of thousands and a temporary stabilisation of

⁵² Shafi Md Mostofa and Md Tariqul Islam Tanvir, 'Breaking the Promise? State Violence and Dehumanization in Post-Revolution Bangladesh' (*The Diplomat*, 6 March 2025) <<https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/breaking-the-promise-state-violence-and-dehumanization-in-post-revolution-bangladesh/>> accessed 5 April 2025.

public disorder, its aggressive tactics have ignited intense discussion over its broader implications for human rights and democratic governance.

Both domestically and internationally, the operation has been under criticism for its harsh tactics, which target not only criminals but also political personalities and supporters of the former regime. Opponents contend that such actions run the risk of escalating political polarisation, undermining the rule of law, and sustaining a cycle of violence. Anger and disillusionment have combined to create a force that both demands radical change and questions the interim government's ability to provide long-term stability, as demonstrated by events like the Bulldozer Procession, in which protesters used large machinery to symbolically destroy the legacy of authoritarianism.

At the same time, the interim government, led by Nobel Prize winner Dr. Muhammad Yunus, has undertaken significant reform initiatives aimed at rooting out corruption, addressing enforced disappearances, and transforming critical institutions such as the police and judiciary. Rebuilding public trust will require actions such as establishing inquiry commissions, replacing politically biased officials, and upholding international human rights standards. However, the gap between official statistics and real-life insecurity among citizens remains a stark reminder that true stability extends beyond temporary reductions in violent crime.

Ultimately, the legacy of these events will be measured by Bangladesh's ability to transition from a period of oppressive crackdowns to one of genuine democratic renewal. Long-term stability will necessitate a well-rounded strategy that protects human rights, addresses the underlying causes of social discontent, and effectively enforces law and order. As the interim administration works to restore national unity, hold those responsible for past atrocities accountable, and prepare for free and fair elections, a process that will define the future course of this resilient country, the upcoming months will be critical.

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