

Quota protests on; govt looks to SC for a way out



Students demonstrate blocking the Shahbagh intersection in the capital around 4:30pm yesterday as part of their “Bangla Blockade” programme demanding scrapping of the quota system in government jobs. Photo: Amran Hossain

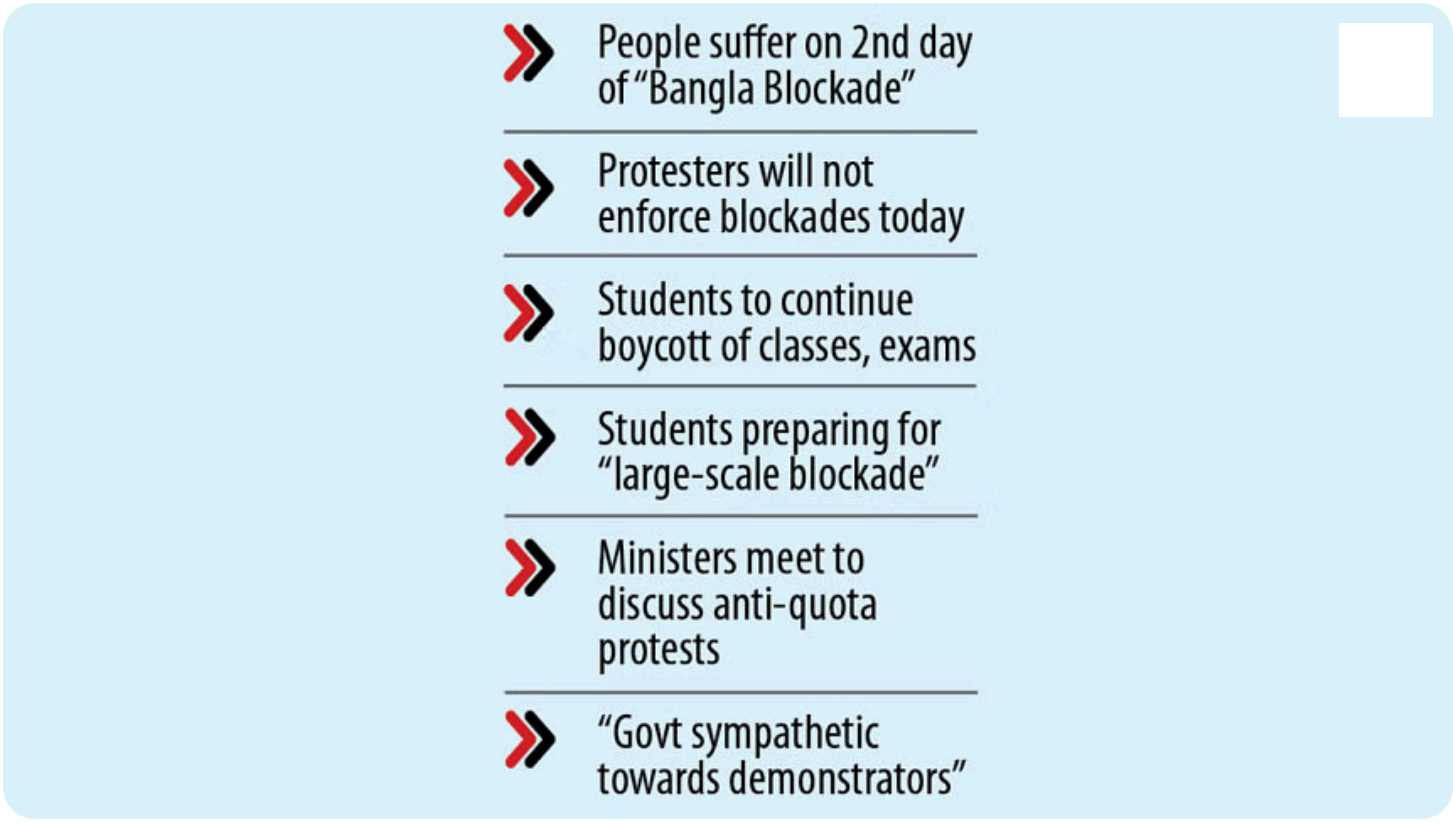
For the second consecutive day, students demonstrating against the quota system for government jobs occupied key city intersections, bringing traffic to a halt for hours.

They also blocked rail lines and major highways at places across the country.



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The students' "Bangla Blockade" had a cascading effect on traffic on other streets. Thousands were stuck in gridlocks on city streets and thoroughfares for hours on end since 4:00pm.

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- >> People suffer on 2nd day of "Bangla Blockade"
 - >> Protesters will not enforce blockades today
 - >> Students to continue boycott of classes, exams
 - >> Students preparing for "large-scale blockade"
 - >> Ministers meet to discuss anti-quota protests
 - >> "Govt sympathetic towards demonstrators"

The protesters, however, decided not to enforce any blockades today. Instead, they would continue their boycott of classes and exams.

"We will coordinate with students across the country tomorrow [today] to launch a tougher demonstration on Wednesday," said Nahid Islam, a Dhaka University student and an organiser of the movement.

"We have not called off the blockade. Instead, we are preparing for a large-scale blockade," he said.

Students of different public universities and colleges and jobseekers have been demonstrating for the last seven days demanding reinstatement of a 2018 circular that abolished the quota system in government jobs.

The Supreme Court on June 4 upheld a High Court verdict that declared the government circular illegal.

Attorney General AM Amin Uddin said his office would take the next steps after receiving the full text of the HC verdict.

He said the government's petition against the HC verdict was scheduled to come up before the Appellate Division on Thursday.

He said the students should have patience and avoid public demonstrations since the matter was pending with the Supreme Court. "I don't know why they are carrying out the movement," he said.

Meanwhile, three ministers and two state ministers discussed the students' movement in a closed-door meeting yesterday at the Awami League president's political office in Dhanmondi.

AL General Secretary and Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader; Law Minister Anisul Huq; Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury; and State Minister for Information Mohammad Ali Arafat; State Minister for Education Shamsun Naher along with AL office Secretary Biplab Barua were at the meeting.

Sources said the participants expected a solution to the issue soon. They said the government was sympathetic towards the demonstrators and that it would act sensibly. They were of the opinion that the protesters should not carry out any programme that causes public suffering.

DEMO IN DHAKA

Like the previous day, the protesters blocked Shahbagh, Science Lab, Nilkhet, Technical, Karwan Bazar, Farmgate, and Zero Point intersections for at least four hours.

Hundreds of students of Dhaka University gathered in front of the Central Library around 3:30pm and headed for Shahbagh in processions.

Holding placards and chanting slogans, they blocked Shahbagh intersection around 4:00pm.

Other groups of mostly Dhaka University students blocked the Chankharpul intersection near Mayor Mohammad Hanif Flyover, and Banglamotor and Sonargaon intersections.

Around the same time, students of Dhaka College and Eden Mahila College blocked the Nilkhet and Science Lab intersections.

"We have been left with no other options other than taking to the streets. We will not stop our movement until our demands are met," Rashed Al Hasan, a student of Dhaka College, told The Daily Star.

Defying police obstruction, students of Jagannath University blocked the Zero Point intersection in Gulistan for three hours from 4:00pm.

Around 4:15pm, students from Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University blocked the street near their university in Agargaon.

Some students blocked the Paltan intersection around 5:00pm.

Several hundred students marched towards Farmgate around 5:00pm, halting traffic on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue.

A huge number of people were seen walking to their destinations.

There, the students ended their blockade for the day around 7:30pm and marched towards Shahbagh.

HIGHWAYS, RAIL LINES

Students blocked rail lines in Dhaka's Karwan Bazar level crossing for nearly an hour from 6:40pm. Besides, rail lines in Mymensingh, Rajshahi, and Chattogram were also blocked for several hours.

They also blocked the Dhaka-Chattogram, Dhaka-Aricha, Chattogram-Khagrachhari, Barishal-Kuakata, and Dinajpur-Dhaka highways.

Cumilla University students blocked the Dhaka-Chattogram highway for four hours from 4:00pm. They staged a sit-in on the highway at Kotbari in Cumilla Sadar.

Students of Chittagong University along with students from various CU-affiliated educational institutions first blocked the road in front of Gate-2 of Sholoshahar and then staged a sit-in in Tigerpass area of Chattogram city.

Hridoy Ahmed Rizvi, a Chhatra League activist at the university, allegedly threatened an organiser of the movement at CU.

Khan Talat Mahmud Rafi, a first-year honours student of Dramatics, alleged that Hridoy called his father in Netrakona on Sunday night and said that there would be dire consequences for Rafi if he did not quit the movement.

Contacted, Hridoy claimed that his phone had been "hacked".

Rail communication between Dhaka and Mymensingh was suspended for two hours from 1:30pm as students of Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh rail line for the third consecutive day.

The students set up barricades at Jabbarer Mor, halting the Jamalpur Express on its tracks. Rail communication resumed at 3:10pm, reports UNB.

Hundreds of students from Rajshahi University blocked the Dhaka-Rajshahi rail line near the campus for nearly five hours from 11:30am.

WHAT MINISTERS SAID

Talking to The Daily Star last night, Law Minister Anisul Huq said the government has no decision about the quota system, as the matter is now pending with the Supreme Court.

He said the protesters can place their arguments before the court through lawyers.

"When the High Court was holding hearings on the case filed for keeping the quota system, those who were demonstrating had no lawyers. They did not present their arguments before the High Court.

"Now the case is before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. They can now place arguments before the Appellate Division through lawyers. The Appellate Division will give a fair verdict after hearing their arguments," he said.

Road Transport Minister Obaidul Quader said programmes that cause public sufferings should be avoided.

"The court scrapped the circular that abolished the quota system. The government has appealed against that decision. Creating public suffering by blocking roads should be avoided until the court delivers its verdict," Quader said.

Education Minister Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury said he would not comment on a matter pending with the court.