More than 400 injured in Bangladesh job quota rally clashes

AFP- More than 400 Bangladeshis were injured in ongoing protests over quotas for coveted government jobs, police and protesters said Tuesday, after clashes between rival student groups the previous day.
Demonstrators said they were holding peaceful marches on Monday at two universities in the capital Dhaka when they were attacked by student activists from the ruling party armed with sticks, rocks, machetes and molotov cocktails.

The violence was a sudden escalation in efforts to hinder a determined campaign that has ignored calls by Bangladesh's prime minister and top court to return to class.

Police inspector Bacchu Mia told AFP that "297 people were treated at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital" in the aftermath, with 12 of that number admitted.

Another 111 protesters at Jahangirnagar University were treated at a medical clinic on campus and a nearby hospital.

"More than 100 students were treated at our centre," Shamsur Rahman, head of the Jahangirnagar University medical centre, told AFP.

Yousuf Ali, a doctor at the Enam Medical College Hospital, said 11 patients had been treated at his facility.

"Four people, including a professor who was hit with rubber bullets, are still admitted," he added.

Students have for weeks staged near-daily protests demanding the government scrap a quota system for government jobs and introduce a merit-based scheme instead.

The scheme reserves more than half of well-paid civil service posts for specific groups, including children of heroes from the country's 1971 liberation war from Pakistan.

Critics say the system benefits children of pro-government groups who back Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who won her fourth consecutive election in January after a vote without genuine opposition.

Riot police last week attempted to disperse rallies with tear gas and rubber bullets, injuring at least 11 students in the eastern city of Comilla.

— 'Violence against peaceful protesters' —

Monday's clashes were the worst violence since the campaign began, with activists at Jahangirnagar University saying they were mercilessly attacked by members of the ruling Awami League's student wing.

The violence was condemned by Amnesty International, with the rights watchdog urging Bangladesh to "immediately guarantee the safety of all peaceful protesters".

US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller also denounced "violence against peaceful protesters".

Bangladesh's foreign ministry said Dhaka was disappointed at the State Department statement, adding that US claims of two deaths during the protests were unsubstantiated.

Protests resumed on Tuesday afternoon in several locations around Dhaka, with fresh clashes that saw rival student groups throwing bricks at each other.

"Students were protesting at least a dozen places in the capital," Dhaka Metropolitan Police spokesman Faruk Hossain told AFP.

Elsewhere in the country, rallies joined by hundreds of

students blocked rail lines and highways leading to the capital.

AFP