

Eye injuries in Bangladesh's 2024 student-led mass uprising: A public health crisis unfolds

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Key points of interest:

- In most countries there is a need for independent monitoring and verification mechanisms to document and respond to mass injuries in protests.
- The Bangladesh case described underlines the importance of regulating riot control weapons and ensuring accountability for state-inflicted injuries.
- There is an intersection of medical neglect, repression, and mental health impacts in civil rights violations linked to less-lethal weapons.

Abstract

Introduction: Initially peaceful, the 2024 student-led job quota reform protests in Bangladesh escalated into a nationwide uprising. The government responded with excessive force, leading to widespread violence, including severe eye injuries to hundreds of protesters. **Methods:** This study investigates the causes, consequences, and medical responses to these eye injuries, which resulted in lasting physical, psychological, and economic impacts on the victims. It uses secondary data, including reports from human rights organisations, hospital records, and media sources. Victim testimonies were collected from published sources to assess the immediate and long-term effects. **Results:** At least 647 individuals sustained severe eye injuries during the protests, according to the government report. The unlawful use of both lethal and less lethal weapons by law enforcement was the primary cause. Hospitals reported over 1,300 eye injury cases, with 630 of them requiring surgery. In the National Institute of Ophthalmology and Hospital alone, 382 patients lost vision in one eye and 19 lost vision in both. Most patients were young men. **Discussion:** This movement resulted in devastating eye injuries for hundreds of patients, with long-lasting physical and economic impacts. Victims, many of whom were breadwinners, faced significant challenges in receiving adequate medical treatment and long-term rehabilitation. Immediate governmental intervention is needed to ensure their inclusion in rebuilding post-uprising Bangladesh.

Keywords: eye injuries, Bangladesh, protest violence, human rights violations, job quota reform.

Introduction

The job quota reform movement in Bangladesh began as a peaceful protest led by university students in July 2024, calling for restructuring the existing quota-based system for government jobs (Alamgir & Khan, 2024; Prothom Alo, 2024a). On July 14, after

controversial remarks by the Prime Minister, students organised a demonstration at Dhaka University, followed by nationwide protests (Daily Sun, 2024). The government responded with excessive force, resulting in widespread violence that extended beyond the initial job quota demands into a more significant an-

ti-government, pro-democracy movement (Chowdhury, 2024; Corea & Erum, 2024; Dhaka Tribune, 2024; New Age, 2024; Shuvra et al., 2024; The Business Standard, 2024a, 2024b). Finally, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government, which many perceive as an authoritarian one, has ruled for the past 15 years at a stretch with the help of controversial elections (Mahmud, 2024), has fallen.

Among the most devastating outcomes of the violence were eye injuries sustained by hundreds of protesters. Law enforcement, in many cases, used pellet bullets and other forms of crowd control that disproportionately caused severe eye damage, leading to blindness in some cases. Several studies in the troubled region of Kashmir, full of military conflicts and social unrest, reported the incidence, clinical findings, and management of pellet gun-related ocular injuries during the widespread protests and riots, as well as clashes between the military and civilian population (Khan et al., 2012; Mushtaque et al., 2012; Wani et al., 2014; Wei et al., 2022). The young, working-age eye injury patients had poor visual outcomes, high medical costs, and a lengthy visual rehabilitation process that placed a heavy financial, psychological, and physical strain on both the patients and society as a whole (Wei et al., 2022). Pellets/projectiles-related eye injuries in crowd control or civic unrest are not so uncommon around the world (Essa, 2016; Rodríguez et al., 2021). During a brutal assault on primarily peaceful protests, hundreds of Iranians suffered severe eye injuries after being struck with paintball bullets, tear gas canisters, pellets, or other projectiles fired by security personnel (Ghajar & Shams, 2023). About 96% of eye injuries by kinetic impact projectiles in the global medical literature are from multiple kinetic impact projectiles (*Lethal in Disguise - How Crowd-Control Weapons Impact Health and Human Rights*, n.d.), which is why the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Special Rapporteur on Torture has called for them to be outlawed (OHCHR, 2023; United Nations, 2020). This article aims to explore the causes and consequences of these injuries, the treatment provided, and the prospects of the victims.

Methods

This study used secondary data from various sources, including reports by human rights organisations, government websites, hospital reports, and victim testimonies published in national dailies. The data was analysed to assess the scale of eye injuries, their immediate and long-term effects, and the adequacy of medical response. Additionally, victim accounts were collected from public sources to provide insights into the personal impact of these injuries. The authors transcribed data from video record-

ings. Information from all the sources was translated into English where necessary.

This study relied on secondary data as collecting primary data was challenging after such a movement in the country when the law-and-order system was unstable. The secondary data on eye injuries were collected from the hospitals, so many cases were unreported, leaving the numbers underestimated. The government and human rights organisations' data were based on information from victims' families, eyewitnesses, hospitals, and national dailies. Nationally representative data on eye injuries in the protest is still unavailable because eye hospitals' data will underestimate the numbers.

Results

Scale of injuries and deaths

According to the Bangladesh Directorate General of Health's Management Information System (MIS), 19,200 people were injured (Hossain, 2024) and 708 died (The Daily Star, 2024a) across the country as a result of the protests. Of these, 647 individuals suffered severe eye injuries, with the Dhaka division reporting the highest number at 603 cases (Moral, 2024). However, these numbers are provisional and will have to be verified, corrected and updated because MIS has compiled the information provided by government authorities and hospitals where the numbers are underreported, as many people were not brought to the hospital at all, and many private clinics do not keep records (Hossain, 2024; Moral, 2024). Assuming that most patients with severe eye injuries showed up at one of the eye hospitals, hospital sources can be given more weight than other media reports. From 17 July to 27 August, the National Institute of Ophthalmology and Hospital (NIOH) alone treated 856 eye injury victims of the protest, where 382 lost vision in one eye and 19 in both (Chambugong, 2024). Besides NIOH, other prominent eye hospitals in Dhaka are the Eye Department of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, Lions Eye Institute, and Bangladesh Eye Hospital. Approximately 1,300 patients with eye injuries were admitted to these hospitals, 630 of them underwent surgeries, and over 90% of them have lost eyesight in one or both eyes (Samaddar et al., 2024). Among the people who were treated for eye injuries at the NIOH during and after the anti-discrimination student movement, 3.6% were women (Chambugong, 2024). However, this data is from a single centre (NIOH), and 856 people were treated in NIOH, but only 579 could be identified.

The Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) later reported, based on the information from victims' families, eyewitnesses, hospitals, and national dailies, that 819 people died during the protests, 70% of which were due to bullet wounds, primarily

inflicted by law enforcement (Human Rights Support Society, 2024). Nevertheless, the report also emphasised that the actual death toll could be at least 1,000 based on credible information from the media, hospitals, and other sources. Among the deceased, most (51%) were young adults and almost all of them (99.9%) were male (The Business Standard, 2024d), which means that young adult males are the major victims of this protest. The Anti-Discrimination Student Movement's subcommittee on health affairs suggested a much higher number of deaths of 1,581 people, which requires further verification by the government (The Daily Star, 2024b). According to the UN preliminary report, more than 600 people were killed between 16 July and 11 August (OCHR, 2024). The final fact-finding report by the UN's OHCHR reported as many as 1,400 protest-related deaths (OCHR, 2025). Table 1 provides a compilation of these statistics from various sources.

Causes of eye injuries

The most common cause of eye injuries was the use of pellet bullets from shotguns (Ahamad, 2024). These bullets, primarily used for crowd control, can be non-lethal under controlled conditions. However, their indiscriminate close-range use resulted in severe damage (Prothom Alo, 2024b). Rubber bullets, tear gas shells, and blunt force trauma from objects like bricks and sticks caused other injuries. In most cases, pellet wounds caused retinal haemorrhage that resulted in loss of vision (Samaddar et al., 2024). Causes for visual loss included retinal, anterior segment (including cornea) and optic nerve pathologies necessitating over 200 vitreo-retinal surgeries and approximately 40 corneal transplants at NIOH, for which there appears to be a shortage of donors (*Addressing the Crisis of Eye Injuries During July Movement*, 2024).

Human Rights Violations

The use of excessive force during the protests violated national laws, including sections 153(C) and 154 of the Police Regulations, Bengal 1943 (PRB),¹ which allows the use of firearms only as a last resort. Various fact-checking individuals and organisations have analysed video footage of various incidents, and it is seen that in many cases, shootings have occurred even though there were no circumstances in which members of the law enforcement forces could exercise their right to self-defence (Prothom Alo, 2024b). Additionally, the PRB stipulates that law enforcement must fire in a controlled manner, directed at the intended target and minimising casualties, and the fire must cease as soon as the objective is achieved (sec-

tion 154). Firearms must never be used simply to disperse an assembly, as it is unlawful to fire indiscriminately when policing an assembly (OCHR, 2025). However, many protesters and bystanders were shot indiscriminately, often at close range, in direct violation of these regulations (Prothom Alo, 2024b). Many of those who had fatal bullet wounds or gunshot wounds on their bodies were victims of aimed fire or targeted shooting (Prothom Alo, 2024b). According to media reports that have surfaced since 5 August, it was made clear that the police deliberately targeted and shot at the protesters' heads, chests, legs and even the eyes (Lohani & Supriya, 2024). OHCHR also confirmed that police fired rapid and multiple shotgun rounds targeting crowds' torsos and heads, increasing their lethality and risk of injuring vital organs and blinding, as seen in videos (OCHR, 2025). The use of force and firearms by police and paramilitary forces between 15 July and 5 August violated human rights, including the right to life and security (OCHR, 2025). RAB (Rapid Action Battalion: an anti-crime and anti-terrorism unit of the Bangladesh Police) personnel on helicopters were seen shooting rifles or shotguns loaded with lethal ammunition at protesters, whereas shooting firearms from a helicopter at crowds of protesters is inherently indiscriminate and, therefore, in violation of human rights standards since the weapons cannot be reliably aimed at particular individuals specifically posing an imminent threat (OCHR, 2025). According to section 155(B) of PRB, shooting over the heads of a crowd or at any other target outside the gathering is strictly prohibited as it can cause casualties from a distance. During the protests, these instructions of the police regulations were not followed, resulting in many people being shot while inside their homes, on balconies and rooftops. The OHCHR found recurring patterns of security forces violating international human rights law, including suppressing peaceful assembly rights, dispersing peaceful assemblies with disproportionate force, and even deliberately killing or maiming defenceless protesters by shooting them at point-blank range (OCHR, 2025). The OHCHR report also pointed out the fact that PRB allows police to use firearms with lethal ammunition to disperse unlawful assemblies where necessary to protect property, and it even states circumstances requiring the police to shoot directly into crowds, which is contrary to international law.

Shotguns with metal pellets are not considered lethal weapons by law enforcement in Bangladesh, and ordinary police officers in the field had broad discretion to decide when to deploy metal shot and when to use rubber bullets (OCHR, 2025). The use of shotguns loaded with metal pellets in public order management is not in line with international human rights law

1 https://www.police.gov.bd/en/legal_instruments

(OCHR, 2020). The wide radius of the spreading metal shot makes this combination of firearm and ammunition inherently indiscriminate when deployed in the crowd. They can also not be considered 'less-lethal' given that the pellets penetrate the human body and can be deadly. They may also cause blindness and other serious injuries with long-term consequences (OCHR,

Table 1. Deaths and injuries due to Quota Movement 2024 in Bangladesh and a focus on eye injuries

Indicator	Statistics	Source	Type of source	Reference
Death	717	Directorate General of Health Services	Government body	(Government of Bangladesh, n.d.)
	819	Human Rights Support Society	Human Rights organisation	(Human Rights Support Society, 2024)
	1581	Anti-Discrimination Student Movement's sub-committee on health affairs	Students' body	(The Daily Star, 2024b)
	>600	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Preliminary Analysis Report	International organisation	(OCHR, 2024)
	1,400	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Fact-Finding Report	International organisation	(OCHR, 2025)
Injury	>19,200	The Daily Star	Newspaper report from government data	(Hossain, 2024)
	>18,000	Prothom Alo	Newspaper report from government data	(Moral, 2024)
	>30,000	Quota Movement Bangladesh	Website by protesters	(Quota Movement Bangladesh, n.d.)
	>33,000	Shohid dot info	Website by protesters	(Shohid Info, n.d.)
Eye injury	647	Directorate General of Health Services	Government body	(Moral, 2024)
	1300	Various hospitals across Dhaka*	Newspaper report from hospital data	(Samaddar et al., 2024)
	856	National Institute of Ophthalmology and Hospital	Newspaper report from single-center	(Chambugong, 2024)
Lost sight of one or both eye	550 (Specified numbers for unilateral and bilateral loss of vision are unknown)	Various hospitals across Dhaka*	Newspaper report from hospital data	(Samaddar et al., 2024)
	401 (Unilateral: 382, Bilateral: 19)	National Institute of Ophthalmology and Hospital	Newspaper report from single-center	(Chambugong, 2024)

* National Institute of Ophthalmology and Hospital, Lion's Eye Institute, Bangladesh Eye Hospital, Dhaka Medical College Hospital's Ophthalmology Department and other hospitals in Dhaka

2025). Although the use of multiple kinetic impact projectiles (rubber or plastic bullets) is called to be outlawed by the UN, they caused serious eye injuries to the victims of the July uprising. The OHCHR report confirms that shotguns contain metal shot cartridges with up to 200 2-3mm metal pellets, while other cartridges have less-lethal 6 to 8 rubber bullets. In 2022 and 2023, Bangladesh Police ordered over three million metal shot cartridges, more than double the number of rubber bullets (OCHR, 2025), which indicates the high level of reliance on and widespread use of lethal metal shot by the Police. In several cases, less-lethal weapons (such as tear gas being deployed in confined spaces or sound grenades detonated directly within crowds) were also used in ways that would increase their propensity to injure severely (OCHR, 2025).

According to information from various sources in the law enforcement agencies, ammunition experts, various hospitals and multiple fact-checking individuals and organisations, and analysis of videos and images of weapons used during the clashes, three categories of weapons were used more frequently in shooting at protesters: shotguns, pistols and Chinese rifles, while weapons like sub machinegun (SMG) and light machinegun (LMG) were used in some places (Prothom Alo, 2024b). These shotguns use two types of bullets- rubber and lead, and their cartridges contain small balls or splinters (Prothom Alo, 2024b). These guns are mainly used to suppress riots. They are usually not lethal, but also lethal depending on the number of projectiles, size, and distance. More specifically, Amnesty International has verified the unlawful use of both lethal and less lethal weapons, including 12-gauge shotguns loaded with birdshot, 37/38mm grenade launchers, AK-pattern assault rifles and Chinese type 56-1 assault rifles against the protesters (Corea & Erum, 2024). Police in Bangladesh use 9 mm pistols along with 7.62 mm Chinese rifles, SMGs, and LMGs (Prothom Alo, 2024b). A 9 mm pistol is effective up to 50 meters, but it can still be lethal at greater distances; a 7.62 mm rifle bullet is fatal within 300 meters; and shotgun rounds can cause death within 40-50 meters, depending on the cartridge type (Prothom Alo, 2024b). OHCHR documented three instances of the Bangladesh Army using lethal military rifles, including the BD-08 (a Bangladeshi licensed copy of the Chinese Type 81 assault rifle with high-energy projectiles of 7.62x39mm), aiming at protesters. The projectiles have enough energy to kill or seriously injure someone even beyond a 600-meter range (OCHR, 2025).

The independent fact-finding inquiry conducted by OHCHR confirms that the former Government, security apparatus, and violent elements of the then ruling party Awami League systematically engaged in serious human rights violations between 1 July and 15 August, which raises concerns

from the perspective of international criminal law. The security forces, including police, RAB, and BGB (Border Guard of Bangladesh), used a combination of military rifles and shotguns loaded with lethal metal pellets, as well as less-lethal weapons, against protesters to disperse peaceful, albeit often disruptive, protests. From 19 July until the end of the protests, they fired lethal ammunition indiscriminately at protesters in Dhaka and elsewhere, resulting in many extrajudicial killings and injuries.

The Dhaka Medical College Forensic Medicine Department has found that over 78% of all deaths in Bangladesh were caused by firearms (including bullets from military rifles and shotguns loaded with lethal metal pellets) used by state security forces, which are not readily available to civilians. Of these, about 66% of deaths were caused by bullets fired from high-powered military automatic and semi-automatic rifles, and 12% of deaths were caused by shotguns loaded with lethal metal pellets. Victims of bullet wounds were typically struck by standard military 7.62x39mm lethal ammunition. Bangladesh Police, BGB, RAB, Ansar/VDP (Bangladesh Ansar and Village Defence Party) and Army members were seen (in video footage and images) wielding SKS (Soviet Union-made semi-automatic rifle), Type 56 and BD-08 rifles that use this calibre of ammunition. In some cases, they even used special armour-piercing ammunition against unarmed civilians, which is designed for combat situations against body armour and not for law enforcement applications and is available only to the Army or paramilitary forces such as BGB and RAB.

Al Amin, a seventh-grade student aged 14, was shot by 22 pellets, one of which injured his right eye. Despite his injury, hospital authorities refused to admit him as the authorities ordered the removal of all patients injured in the protests by that night, forcing his mother to seek treatment at multiple hospitals (Sammadar et al., 2024). The treatment was delayed further as the other hospitals were overwhelmed with injured patients too, according to the victim's mother. These type of cases were common, as the OHCHR report confirmed that police and intelligence agencies such as Detective Branch (DB) Police, Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), National Security Intelligence (NSI) obstructed medical care by blocking ambulances, raiding hospitals, seizing medical records to conceal evidence, identifying and arresting injured patients, and intimidating health-care provider medical staff to falsify reports or deny treatments (OCHR, 2025). Testimony received indicates that this obstruction was undertaken based on orders given at higher levels, including during visits from senior officials to hospitals, confirms the OHCHR report. The National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh is deemed non-compliant with the Paris Principles due to its lack of independent members and inability to

investigate violations by law enforcement agencies (Saha, 2023). Therefore, it has failed to hold authorities accountable for human rights violations during the protest (OCHR, 2025).

Discussion

The impact on victims

The eye injuries sustained during the protests have had devastating consequences for the victims, many of whom were young adult males, students, or primary breadwinners for their families. Among the 19 known people who lost sight in both of their eyes, six were students; two each were labourers, drivers and job holders; one was a teacher, while others' professions remained unknown (Chambugong, 2024). The long-term effects of blindness and other physical disabilities have drastically reduced their ability to work, leaving their families in financial crisis.

Habib (age 30), a sanitary worker who lost his right eye to a pellet bullet, cannot avail of expensive treatment (implanting an artificial lens in the right eye) to regain his vision due to lack of funds as his entire family is financially dependent only on him and they live from hand to mouth. He explained his current financial sufferings and the pressure he felt to repay them in the future as follows (Rayhan, 2024),

"As a sanitary worker, I used to earn Tk 700 daily, and when I did garbage disposal work, I earned Tk 900. But now, I can't see with one eye and am unable to work [at least for some days]. Today, I borrowed Tk 200 from someone just to buy food for the family. The landlord sent someone to collect the rent today, but I couldn't pay it."

Similarly, construction worker Delwar Hossain, who lost both of his eyes after being shot by police, explained (Chambugong, 2024),

"When I tried to run away from the police firing tear gas shells, I was hit by pellets in both eyes. Now I cannot see, and my wife, who works as a domestic worker, struggles to support our three daughters."

Losing sight in one eye or being partially sighted can significantly impact livelihood, too, in some occupations. For example, Mohammad Raju Islam, an autorickshaw driver from Thakurgaon who lost sight in his left eye, shared his feelings (Lohani & Supriya, 2024),

"There are two rear mirrors in the autorickshaws. Now that I have only one functioning eye, how can I go back to my normal life and drive my auto?"

The loss of vision not only impacts the victims' ability to earn a livelihood but also affects their mental health. According to a survey by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), which was conducted on 55 injured people in the mass protest who were undergoing treatment at the NIOH, about 74.5% showed symptoms of depression, and more than 27.3% of them were suffering from severe depression (The Daily Star, 2024c).

Riyad, a 16-year-old student, described his shattered dreams after being shot by police (Lohani & Supriya, 2024),

"My dream was to grow up and join the Bangladesh Army. I lost my eyesight and the opportunity to join the military. I worry if I will be able to take the SSC [Secondary School Certificate] exam next month."

Treatment and medical care

Many victims faced challenges in accessing timely medical care due to overcrowded hospitals, as victim Al Amin's mother said (Samaddar et al., 2024),

The hospitals were flooded with patients, which caused delays.

Victims reported being turned away from hospitals or discharged prematurely due to orders from higher authorities (Samaddar et al., 2024). The delayed treatment due to that may have exacerbated the severity of their injuries, which Al Amin has faced. At the authority's order, doctors asked his family to take him home despite multiple pellets still inside his body, including in the eye.

In some cases, victims received insufficient treatment. Kazi Faruq, a restaurant worker, explained (Samaddar et al., 2024),

"It is painful to be shot amid celebrations after such a successful revolution. Doctors are trying hard. If I can see at least with one eye, that's a lot for me. But the hospital cannot provide all the necessary medicines, and people are helping me buy them."

Legal and human rights concerns

The indiscriminate use of force by law enforcement during the protests raises serious concerns about human rights violations. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

guarantee the right to peaceful assembly and prohibit excessive use of force by the state. However, the response of law enforcement during the protests, including the use of pellet bullets, constitutes a violation of these international standards as well as domestic laws. Bangladesh urgently needs to update its outdated colonial-era police legislation in line with international human rights norms and standards.

Al Amin, an eye injury victim, described his experience (Samaddar et al., 2024),

"That day, I went to help my seniors and classmates. They were being attacked indiscriminately. But I never thought that the police would shoot and fire bullets at us."

Limitations

This study relies on secondary data, which creates potential limitations regarding data accuracy and comprehensiveness. The number of deaths, injuries, and eye injuries (mentioned in Table 1) is provisional and must be corrected. Future scopes of studies with primary data could provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of their experiences, especially on the long-term effects of the injuries. A longitudinal follow-up in the future can be done to fully understand the long-term physical, emotional, and financial impacts on the victims.

Conclusion

The 2024 job quota reform protests in Bangladesh not only highlighted the need for governmental reforms but also exposed the severe human rights violations committed by law enforcement. The use of excessive force, particularly pellet bullets, resulted in devastating eye injuries that have left at least 19 individuals blind and more than 300 partially sighted. These injuries have far-reaching consequences, both for the victims and their families, as they face an uncertain future with limited prospects for employment and financial stability.

The interim government has pledged to cover the medical costs of those injured during the protests (The Business Standard, 2024c), but long-term support is needed to ensure these victims are not left behind. Also, the implementation of this decision has reportedly encountered problems. Proper rehabilitation, financial aid, and job training programs must be implemented to provide these individuals with the means to rebuild their lives. The interim government should also ensure effective remedies for serious human rights violations following international standards to prevent the recurrence of such violations in the future.

Although Sharif, a day labourer who was a victim of eye injury in the protest, lost his sight in his right eye, a sense of satisfaction and contentedness filled his heart with peace as the movement succeeded. He noted (Barta24, 2024),

"Although I lost one of my eyes, I am very relieved now that the autocratic government has fallen. The oppression, injustice, and cruelty have now ended. It seems that I am reborn in a new Bangladesh."

The contributions and sacrifices of these eye injury victims should be acknowledged and remembered.

Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge Dr. Anna Fierz (Switzerland) for providing critical feedback on this work and the July Smriti Songrokkhon Parishad for its support. This organization was founded in memory of the deceased and disabled protesters of the July Massacre.

Disclosure statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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Submitted 18th of Dec 2024

Accepted 12nd of April 2025