

Speech by Sheikh Hasina

Foreign Correspondents' Club of South Asia, New Delhi

Thank you very much. It is a great honour for me to be with you. Thank you to everybody present here and to those who are listening.

Distinguished journalists, members of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of South Asia, respected guests, friends of Bangladesh, ladies and gentlemen—Assalamu Alaikum.

I thank the Foreign Correspondents' Club of South Asia for giving me the opportunity to speak to you. I also thank the journalists who continue to follow events in Bangladesh with seriousness and courage.

Journalism has a duty to seek the truth, especially when those in power try to hide it. In difficult moments of history, that duty becomes even more important.

Today, I speak not only as someone who had the honour of serving Bangladesh five times as prime minister, but also as the daughter of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I speak as someone who has spent her life with the people of Bangladesh. I was forced away from my country, but I was never separated from my people.

Before I speak about the present crisis, I pay my deepest homage to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; to the slain national leaders; and to the three million martyrs of our War of Liberation. I also remember with profound grief the members of my own family whom I lost on 15 August 1975.

Today is also the birthday of my beloved brother, Sheikh Kamal, who was two years younger than me. He was a valiant freedom fighter, youth leader, sports organiser and cultural activist. His life represented the courage, creativity and patriotism of Bangladesh's younger generation. I remember him today with deep love, pain and pride.

Ladies and gentlemen, for the last two years, I have watched my beloved Bangladesh suffer. Fear has entered homes, workplaces and campuses.

This is not the Bangladesh we built. This is not the Bangladesh for which three million people sacrificed their lives in 1971.

Let me begin with the truth about July and August 2024.

It was not a peaceful student movement from the beginning. My government tried to resolve the issue peacefully through dialogue, legal processes and patience. But behind the language of reform, organised groups were working to turn the students' demands into a violent political instrument.

In 2018, responding to student demands, we abolished the quota system. In 2024, when the High Court annulled that decision, the government appealed because we wanted to uphold the abolition.

I personally took the initiative to hold a dialogue with the students and invited them to Ganabhaban, the prime minister's residence. Three ministers also held discussions with them.

A quota-reform movement was turned into a one-point demand for my resignation. False propaganda was spread in a planned way. Genuine students were emotionally manipulated, while organised groups used their movement as cover for violence and regime change.

Muhammad Yunus himself said that this was a meticulously designed movement led by a mastermind. His own words exposed the truth. It was not simply a spontaneous student protest.

There was no visible or responsible leadership. Instructions were given invisibly. It was organised, directed and used to create a path to power outside the ballot box.

From 15 July, the character of the movement changed. Killings, arson, attacks and looting began. State property was destroyed.

Bangladesh Television was attacked and set on fire. Different buildings and facilities—including Setu Bhaban, the Directorate General of Health Services, the EPI vaccination programme building, the Farmgate Metro Rail station, flyovers, the elevated expressway, scientific research facilities, the Disaster Management Office, the National Data Centre, a specialised COVID-19 hospital and Bangladesh Medical University—were attacked, vandalised or burned.

Residential hotels, industrial facilities, businesses and prisons, including Narsingdi and other district jails, were attacked, vandalised or burned. Terrorists and criminals were released.

Awami League offices were vandalised across the country. Leaders and workers were attacked and killed. The homes of ministers and senior figures associated with my government were looted and burned.

The media was also targeted. Nearly 50 media centres, private television stations and newspaper offices were attacked or set on fire. Journalists were killed.

Law-enforcement agencies came under organised attack. Police superintendents and other officers were killed, and their bodies were hung from flyovers. Around 460 police stations and outposts were attacked or set on fire. In some cases, personnel were trapped inside buildings and burned alive.

Weapons were looted and officers were beaten to death. According to persecuted members of the police, at least 3,000 personnel were killed, attacked, tortured or subjected to serious violence.

So, I ask a simple question: in such a situation, what is the duty of law enforcement?

When police stations are burned, government buildings are attacked, public infrastructure is destroyed, officers are killed and weapons are looted, does the state have no duty to protect life and property?

In every country, law-enforcement agencies have a responsibility to protect citizens, state institutions and their own lives. This is not a crime. It is the duty entrusted to them by law.

At the same time, I wanted the truth to be known. That is why I formed a judicial inquiry commission on 18 July 2024.

Its purpose was clear: every casualty had to be investigated, every incident of violence had to be examined and every family deserved to know the truth.

I met the victims' families, visited the injured and instructed the authorities to provide the highest level of medical treatment free of charge.

On 1 August, I strengthened the inquiry by expanding it into a three-member commission so that the investigation would be credible and comprehensive.

But after seizing power, the illegal interim government led by Muhammad Yunus stopped the investigation. They did not allow the truth to come out. They granted indemnity to those involved in the killings.

If they truly wanted justice, why did they stop the inquiry? If they had nothing to hide, why did they protect the killers?

That one decision tells the truth. They did not want justice; they wanted power. They did not want an investigation; they wanted the evidence buried.

Their own words exposed the truth. An NCP leader said the revolution would not have succeeded if police officers had not been killed and the Metro Rail had not been set on fire. A BNP leader in Sirajganj also said publicly that police stations were burned and police officers were killed to make the revolution succeed.

These statements show that the events of July and August became a coordinated assault on the constitutional order, driven by hidden instructions, organised violence and propaganda.

The conspiracy did not end on 5 August. After 5 August, violence became a campaign of political persecution.

The killing that began on 16 July with the murder of Shujat Ali, a Dhaka College student and Chhatra League activist, has not stopped.

Our Awami League leaders and workers are being killed, disappeared, arrested, driven from their homes and detained in false cases.

At least 10,000 people have been killed or disappeared, and 650,000 have been arrested over the last two years. Some 3,500 cases have been filed, with nearly 450,000 leaders, workers and supporters named as accused. More than one million others have been listed as unnamed accused.

More than 600 cases have been filed against me.

Women activists from the Chhatra League, Jubo League and other affiliated organisations are facing abuse, humiliation and torture in custody.

Many leaders and workers have also died in prison amid documented accounts of torture, denial of medical treatment, deprivation of food, negligence and denial of basic rights.

The persecution is not limited to members of the Awami League or minority communities. Judges, lawyers, intellectuals, cultural figures, journalists, professionals, workers, rickshaw pullers, farmers and ordinary citizens have been attacked, arrested or accused in murder cases.

No one who stands for the spirit of the Liberation War is safe.

Symbols and memorials of our Liberation War have been destroyed. Freedom fighters have been humiliated with garlands of shoes. The historic residence of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman—the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum at Dhanmondi 32—has been attacked and demolished in phases.

This is not random violence. It is an attempt to erase the spirit of the Liberation War from Bangladesh.

Muhammad Yunus himself spoke of pressing a “reset button” to wipe away the country’s previous history.

They want to erase the Liberation War. They want to erase Bangabandhu. They want to rewrite Bangladesh against the foundation upon which it was born.

Convicted war criminals have been released. Militants and top terrorists have been freed.

Even after a staged election brought the BNP to power, the situation did not change. Bangladesh remains in the grip of fear, terror, depression, economic hardship and deep insecurity.

Now look at the condition of the country.

The progress we built has been destroyed, and ordinary people are paying the price.

GDP growth has fallen to 2.22 per cent, compared with 6.8 per cent during the Awami League government.

Industrial production has fallen sharply for the first time in 54 years. The industrial sector has experienced negative growth.

Defaulted loans in the banking sector have reportedly risen from 13 per cent to 47 per cent.

Poverty has increased from 18.6 per cent to 46.8 per cent.

Investment has turned negative. Job creation has collapsed. More than two crore people have newly fallen into unemployment.

More than 500 industrial factories have closed. More than half of the country's industrialists and business owners are either in prison or have been forced into hiding.

The government is operating by borrowing between Tk 700 crore and Tk 900 crore from banks every day.

Project costs have increased by between 50 and 250 per cent.

At the same time, militancy is rising. Women and children are facing torture, rape and humiliation, while ordinary people no longer feel secure in their own lives.

Extortion, murder and kidnapping have become regular features of daily life.

These are not just numbers or isolated incidents. Behind each of them is a family, a worker, a farmer, a small-business owner, a mother who cannot buy food for her children or a young person who no longer sees hope.

But let me also remind you of what Bangladesh had achieved.

The welfare of the people has always been the purpose of my politics. My father, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, gave his life for this ideal, and I have carried that ideal with full commitment.

During my five terms as prime minister, we used long-term planning, sound financial management and disciplined implementation to place Bangladesh on a strong foundation.

After 2008, across 16 years and four consecutive terms, we implemented major projects such as the Padma Bridge, Dhaka Metro Rail, Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, Matarbari Deep Sea Port, Karnaphuli Tunnel and Bangabandhu Satellite.

We maintained GDP growth of between 6.5 and 7.5 per cent.

Our development projects were not vanity projects. They were part of building national capacity. Our social programmes were not charity; they were investments in human dignity.

We made Bangladesh stand tall. We made it known as the rising tiger of Asia.

Bangladesh's crisis is not only a domestic crisis. It affects regional peace, security, trade, development and human dignity.

That is why I call upon the international community and all friends of Bangladesh to stand with the people of Bangladesh in their struggle for democracy, justice and peace.

A stable Bangladesh matters to South Asia, the Bay of Bengal, development partners and every country that believes in democracy, the rule of law and justice.

The next decade can be a decade of recovery and renewal, but only if democracy is restored and the people are allowed to decide their own future.

That is why I make these demands clearly:

The ban on the Awami League must be lifted. Political prisoners must be released. False cases must be dropped. Freedom of speech must be restored. Media freedom must be protected. Judicial independence must be guaranteed.

Law-enforcement agencies must serve the people—not those who use power for revenge.

These are not demands for only one party. They are necessary steps to save Bangladesh.

Whatever fate awaits me, I will return to my people. I cannot stay away while my beloved countrymen are suffering.

I know that I may be detained. I may be sent to prison. They may try to enforce verdicts issued in fabricated cases. But fear cannot determine my duty to the people.

My life moved beyond considerations of personal safety long ago.

In 1971, I was imprisoned with my mother. My son Joy was born in captivity. In 1975, I lost my family. I spent six years in exile.

After returning home, I fought against military rule, dictatorship and political conspiracies.

There have been 19 assassination attempts against me. Even the grenade attack of 21 August 2004 could not stop me.

Therefore, I am not worried about my own future. I am worried about the future of Bangladesh.

I want to return because the people deserve security, development, prosperity and peace. They deserve a state that protects them, an economy that gives them opportunities and a democracy that gives them rights.

My return—and the return of the Awami League to the democratic process—is not about power. It is about putting Bangladesh back on the right track. It is about reviving the country's path of development, progress, secularism and stability.

I want to return to Bangladesh for one purpose: to stand beside the people and help improve their lives.

The people are the source of all power. I believe in them. I trust them. I love them, and I will return to them.

Joy Bangla. Joy Bangabandhu.

Thank you very much for listening to me and giving me so much of your time. Thank you.