

# HC slams violent hartal, blockade

*Asks govt to take necessary steps, ensure smooth educational activities; issues rule on govt, 20-party to reply in 4 weeks*

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Questioning the legality of deadly hartal and blockade, the High Court yesterday ordered the government to immediately take steps to prevent violence, terrorism and other subversive acts in the name of such political programmes.

The court directed the relevant authorities to take measures to keep all the educational institutions across the country open during shutdowns and to

“Anyone can call political programmes like hartal or blockade, but no one can compel anyone to observe those.”

OBSERVES THE HC

ensure that students can take the SSC exams without any disturbance.

During hearing of two writ petitions, the HC also asked the government to take “serious actions” against those trying to upset the test schedule.

The written order is expected in a few days.

The directives come amid continued hartal and blockade violence that has killed at least 70

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people -- 44 of them in arson and bomb attacks alone -- since January 5.

The HC also issued a rule on the government and the leaders of the BNP-led 20-party alliance, including BNP chief Khaleda Zia, to explain in four weeks as to why political activities, blockades and hartals which are detrimental to education and people's lives and properties should not be declared illegal and unconstitutional.

In the rule, the bench of Justice Quazi Reza-Ul Hoque and Justice Abu Taher Md Saifur Rahman asked the respondents to show causes as to why they should not be directed to compensate the people who have become victims and suffered losses in the ongoing hartal and blockade.

In another rule, the court ordered the authorities to clarify why blockade and hartal during the SSC exams should not be declared unlawful and unconstitutional.

In this rule, the court asked the government to explain why law enforcers should not be directed to prevent shutdowns and blockades during the exams with all powers and forces at their disposal.

The petitions were filed by Shahinur Islam Shahin, a businessman from Keraniganj, and Shafiqul Azam Khan Barku, chairman of the managing committee of Ispahani High School in Keraniganj.

The petitions, both filed on February 12, challenged the legality of the deadly blockade and hartal being enforced by the 20-party opposition combine.

Citing the writs, the petitioners' lawyer Abdul Matin Khasru told this

correspondent that several people have been killed, properties damaged and torched and businesses, educational institutions and people's earnings hampered due to the continued blockade and hartals.

The future of more than 15 lakh SSC candidates have been thrown into uncertainty as they cannot take the exams due to such subversive acts, he told the court during the hearing.

Along with the writs, the petitioners submitted newspaper reports, including that of The Daily Star, of violence and deaths since January 6, the day the nonstop blockade began.

They also included a 2007 Supreme Court order that said hartal was a democratic right, but nobody could force anybody to observe such programmes and create panic and anarchy in the name of hartal and blockade.

A decision of the Indian Supreme Court that hartal is illegal has also been submitted along with the petitions.

Contacted, BNP chairperson's adviser Khandker Mahbub Hossain said they were against violence and anarchy in the name of hartal.

He said calling hartal was a constitutional right and added, “There is no relation between hartal and violence.”

Khandker Mahbub, also president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, said the HC, during hearings on its rules, would be convinced that hartal was a right guaranteed by the constitution.

He said it was the government's duty to identify the culprits who were creating violence during hartal and blockade and to put them on trial.