

Hartal coincides with SSC exams

Fate of 14 lakh students uncertain as 20-party calls fresh 72-hr shutdown from tomorrow

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The BNP-led alliance has not just spurned the pleas of guardians and the education minister to withdraw the blockade for SSC examinations, it has made things worse by calling a countrywide 72-hour hartal from tomorrow.

The fresh spell of shutdown announced yesterday in protest at "threats from Awami League leaders to arrest Khaleda Zia" is likely to upset the schedule of Secondary School Certificate exams beginning on Monday, affecting 14.79 lakh examinees.

The alliance in a press release, signed by BNP Joint Secretary General Rizvi Ahmed, said the hartal to be enforced from 6:00am tomorrow is also meant to protest "attacks on the houses and offices of senior BNP leaders and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent statements asking police to do whatever needed to stop the violence".

There was no official announcement yet from the education ministry on the fate of the SSC exams, but sources said the tests

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would possibly be postponed as in previous years.

An official told The Daily Star that the decision whether the exams would be deferred might come tomorrow as the ministry was waiting to see if the BNP changes its decision.

The ongoing blockade that passed its 25th day yesterday has led to arson attacks

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on public transport, huge economic losses and widespread violence leaving 35 killed and hundreds injured.

It also played havoc with education with most of the institutions, from primary schools to universities, failing to hold classes properly.

Already gripped by anxiety and uncertainty, students, guardians and educationists were infuriated by the announcement of the 72-hour hartal.

"Why do we have to suffer for their [politicians'] activities?" asked Atiqur Rahman, an examinee in Dhaka. "Should we concentrate on studies or worry about the exam schedule?"

His father, Waseq Rahman, said, "It's totally disgusting."

He added, "I don't think politicians really bother about children's education ... Don't they have children taking exams?"

Contacted, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid said this was unfortunate.

"We have repeatedly urged them [opposition] to withdraw the blockade. Now we are requesting them to at least spare the exams. Please don't destroy

students' future," he said.

Noted educationist Rasheda K Choudhury said, "As a citizen, I have started believing they [political parties] don't care about public sentiment ... none of them. Had they really cared, they would have shunned the path of violence."

A former adviser to caretaker government, Rasheda said, "Can't we spare just 16 examination days and reach a consensus for the sake of our children?"

She said students are the future of the country but because of politics, their life is being pushed towards uncertainty.

"What type of politics is this that does not think of people's welfare, life and livelihood and the younger generations?" said Rasheda, also the executive director of Campaign for Popular Education.

Meanwhile, National Front of Teachers and Employees, a platform for teachers and employees of non-government institutions, yesterday staged a sit-in and a token hunger strike at Central Shaheed Minar demanding withdrawal of the blockade for SSC examinations.