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Security Update: Bangladesh

Risk Assessment: Sheikh Hasina's Planned Return to Bangladesh

Executive Assessment

Former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has confirmed that she intends to return to Bangladesh in December 2026, accompanied by senior Awami League figures, and surrender to the authorities. The December timetable was first disclosed during a Reuters interview on 10 July and was publicly reiterated during an audio address from New Delhi on 5 August. She has not disclosed an exact date, arrival point or agreed mechanism for the return. There is currently no public evidence that the Bangladeshi government, Indian government or courts have agreed to facilitate it. The announcement should therefore be treated as a credible political intention rather than a confirmed movement plan.



Should Hasina physically return, immediate arrest is almost certain because she was sentenced to death in absentia in November 2025 and remains subject to additional legal proceedings. An immediate execution is considerably less likely; her detention would first generate legal challenges, demands for judicial review and intense domestic and international scrutiny. The more immediate security concern would be the reaction of Awami League supporters, opponents of Hasina, student organisations, Bangladesh Nationalist Party activists and the security forces.

The announcement raises the probability of short-duration but potentially severe political unrest, road blockages, police operations and communications disruption during the days surrounding an actual return. The principal threat to seismic operations is indirect operational disruption rather than deliberate targeting of field crews.

The assessed risk to seismic operations is presently Moderate, rising temporarily to High in Dhaka, on major access roads and for movements involving explosives or Chinese personnel if a return date is confirmed. Direct attacks against remote seismic teams remain a Low to Moderate risk, unless crews are caught near demonstrations, politically sensitive sites or local disputes.

Background

Sheikh Hasina is the daughter of Bangladesh's independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and has been one of the country's dominant political figures for several decades. She served approximately 20 years as prime minister across several terms, including an uninterrupted period from 2009 until August 2024. Her

governments oversaw substantial economic and infrastructure development but were increasingly accused of restricting opposition activity, weakening democratic institutions and using security agencies against political opponents. Hasina and the Awami League have denied many of these allegations.

In July and August 2024, demonstrations initially associated with public-sector employment quotas developed into a wider anti-government uprising. Violent clashes involving demonstrators, police, security forces and Awami League supporters resulted in extensive casualties. A subsequent United Nations assessment estimated that nearly 1,400 people may have been killed. Hasina left Bangladesh for India on 5 August 2024 as her government collapsed.

An interim administration led by Muhammad Yunus assumed office and initiated political, institutional and legal measures against Hasina and senior Awami League figures. The Awami League was subsequently prohibited from political activities and barred from participating in the February 2026 election. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party won that election by a large margin, and Tarique Rahman became prime minister.

In November 2025, Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal sentenced Hasina to death in absentia for crimes against humanity connected to the suppression of the 2024 uprising. She denies ordering unlawful killings and characterises the tribunal, charges and verdict as politically motivated. Bangladesh has repeatedly requested her extradition from India, while India has stated that the request is under consideration.

The Return Announcement

During an interview on 10 July, Hasina stated that she and several senior Awami League colleagues intended to return around December and surrender before the courts. She acknowledged that she could be arrested or killed but said that continuing repression against party leaders and supporters compelled her to return. Former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, who also faces a death sentence, was among those reportedly expected to return, although Reuters could not independently confirm the plans of all involved individuals.

Hasina reiterated the plan on 5 August during her first direct media interaction since entering exile. She called for the Awami League ban to be removed, political prisoners to be released and the cases against her to be withdrawn or reconsidered. The address was delivered by audio rather than video, and she stated that the precise date and arrangements would be announced later.

The Bangladeshi foreign ministry strongly criticised India for permitting the media event, describing it as harmful to Bangladesh's sovereignty and bilateral relations. The government also warned Bangladeshi media organisations that publishing Hasina's speeches could breach an existing court order. Anti-Hasina demonstrators in Dhaka burned an effigy of her while she was speaking. These reactions illustrate the high degree of political sensitivity surrounding even remote appearances by Hasina.

Why Hasina Intends to Return

Political survival of the Awami League: The principal objective is to prevent the Awami League from being permanently removed from Bangladesh's political system. The party remains banned, many senior members are imprisoned or abroad, and its organisational structures have been severely disrupted. Hasina's return would force the government and courts to deal directly with the former prime minister rather than continue prosecuting her in absentia. A voluntary surrender could allow Hasina to present herself as a political prisoner rather than a fugitive. It would also provide the Awami League with a renewed focal point around which remaining supporters could organise. This represents a calculated attempt to transform a legal vulnerability into a political mobilisation opportunity.

Reasserting personal leadership: Extended exile creates a risk that the Awami League will fragment or develop alternative leadership structures. By announcing her return, Hasina is signalling that she remains

the party's leader and intends to control its political direction. The inclusion of senior exiled colleagues suggests an attempt to demonstrate collective resolve rather than an isolated personal decision.

Challenging the legitimacy of the current order: The February election produced a functioning BNP-led government, but it excluded the Awami League. Hasina argues that an election without what was previously Bangladesh's largest political party cannot provide full democratic legitimacy. Her return would intensify domestic and international debate over whether the Awami League should remain prohibited.

Personal and symbolic considerations: Hasina has said that she wishes to return to the country where her parents are buried and where much of her family was killed. These remarks are likely sincere, but they also carry strong symbolic value for Awami League supporters because the party's identity is closely connected to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Bangladesh's independence history.

Pressure on India and Bangladesh: Her continued residence in India has become a significant bilateral irritant. A voluntary return could relieve India of an increasingly difficult political burden while allowing Hasina to claim that the decision was her own rather than the result of extradition. Conversely, merely announcing the return may be intended to encourage negotiations over her legal treatment before she travels. Reuters assessed that a return could aggravate domestic divisions but potentially reduce one source of tension between Dhaka and New Delhi.

Potential Political and Security Impact

Government response: The Rahman government is unlikely to permit Hasina to arrive publicly, conduct rallies or address supporters before entering custody. The most probable government plan would involve arrest at the airport, border crossing or another controlled location, followed by rapid transfer to a secure detention facility.

The security forces would probably deploy in depth around Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, major courts, government buildings, central Dhaka, Awami League-associated locations and key road junctions. Restrictions on gatherings, vehicle movements and media coverage would be likely.

Bangladesh has already demonstrated a willingness to deploy the military pre-emptively in response to possible Awami League activity. In June, troops were deployed in Dhaka, Chattogram, Narayanganj, Gazipur, Faridpur and Gopalganj because authorities believed party supporters might organise gatherings around the Awami League's anniversary.

Awami League mobilisation: Despite the party ban and arrest of many leaders, the Awami League retains pockets of support, particularly among older party structures, local political networks and communities historically associated with the party. Supporters may attempt to assemble along arrival routes, outside courts or in district centres.

Large, sustained nationwide mobilisation would be difficult because of the party's weakened organisation and government restrictions. Smaller gatherings, flash protests, road blockages and symbolic acts are more probable. Underground or informal party networks could also attempt coordinated demonstrations in several districts to stretch police resources.

Counter-protests and communal violence: Student groups and families of those killed in 2024 are likely to oppose any political rehabilitation of Hasina. BNP activists and other anti-Awami League organisations could organise counter-demonstrations. The greatest violence risk would arise where rival groups attempt to occupy the same location or where police use force to disperse crowds.

Potential incidents include stone-throwing, attacks on vehicles, arson, vandalism of party offices, improvised roadblocks and assaults against perceived political opponents. There is no current indication of

an organised armed insurgency linked to Hasina's return, but isolated firearms or improvised explosive incidents cannot be excluded.

India–Bangladesh relations: The return issue will remain closely connected to relations with India. Dhaka has criticised New Delhi for allowing Hasina to conduct political activity while in exile. An unmanaged public departure from India could further damage relations, whereas a discreet and negotiated transfer could reduce bilateral tension.

Stability of the Rahman government: Hasina's return would create a serious political test but would not, by itself, threaten the government's survival. The BNP possesses an electoral mandate, state institutions remain under government control, and the Awami League is organisationally weakened. The more significant risk is a prolonged cycle of protest, arrests and political retaliation that delays institutional normalisation and discourages investment.

Recommended Risk Treatment

Immediate posture: August to October 2026

Organisations should continue operating under a heightened monitoring posture, without a general suspension. Security management should identify all staff locations, accommodation, medical facilities and primary and alternate routes. Organisations should maintain a daily political-event tracker covering Hasina, Awami League announcements, government statements and Bangladesh–India discussions.

Escalation triggers

Organisations should move to an enhanced posture when any of the following occurs:

- Hasina announces a specific return date, flight, border crossing or surrender location.
- The government announces military deployment or nationwide political restrictions.
- The Awami League calls for supporters to assemble.
- Student groups or BNP organisations announce counter-demonstrations.
- Police restrict access to Dhaka airport, courts or major highways.
- Credible reports emerge of arson, transport attacks or political killings.

A specific return date should trigger enhanced measures at least seven days beforehand, rather than waiting for violence to occur.

Movement controls

From 72 hours before a confirmed return until at least 72 hours afterwards, non-essential travel into Dhaka should be suspended.

Field travel should remain daylight-only. Drivers should receive instructions not to force passage through roadblocks, photograph protesters or discuss politics with crowds or security forces.

Liaison

Organisations are advised to establish direct liaison with local police commanders, district administration officials, BAPEX or BGFCL counterparts and community representatives. Liaison should focus on road conditions, planned demonstrations, planned movements and emergency access rather than political intelligence gathering.

Personnel communications

Bangladeshi and expatriate employees should be instructed not to comment publicly on Hasina, the Awami League, the BNP, the 2024 uprising or the tribunal proceedings. Company communications should emphasise political neutrality.

A redundant communications system should be prepared, including mobile phones on more than one network, satellite communications where available, radio networks and scheduled check-in procedures. Rumours concerning Hasina's location or return should not be acted upon without verification through multiple reliable sources.

Future Outlook

There is a medium probability that Hasina will physically return by the end of December. Her repeated public commitment increases credibility, but the absence of an exact date, agreed legal process or confirmed arrangement with India leaves substantial scope for postponement.

The most likely return scenario would be a managed surrender, involving discreet travel, immediate arrest and heavy security. This would probably produce demonstrations and isolated violence over several days, but not a sustained nationwide collapse of public order.

A second plausible scenario is that negotiations continue and the December timetable slips into 2027. Even without her physical return, periodic announcements, court developments and Awami League mobilisation attempts would continue generating short security alerts.

The highest-impact but less likely scenario would involve an abrupt or highly publicised arrival followed by large crowds, rival mobilisation and forceful police intervention. Under this scenario, Dhaka could experience several days of severe disruption, with secondary unrest in politically active districts and on major highways.

The appropriate response is advance preparation and trigger-based movement control, not an immediate shutdown. A organisation-wide suspension of activity should only be considered if violence becomes geographically widespread, government control of key roads deteriorates, or security forces impose restrictions that prevent safe operational activity and medical evacuation.