

Laws are for the breaking

High-rise owners did not care to notify the Fire Service and Civil Defence Department (FSCD) about their in-house arrangement for fire fighting, which has been mandatory by law since March this year.

The law on fire fighting formulated this March requires the high-rise owners to notify the FSCD about their protection against fire and security arrangement. The deadline for notification expired on September 6, but the FSCD has received no reply from the high-rise owners, a senior official of FSCD said.

"We are thinking of surveying the high-rises and the homeowners' initiatives for protection against fire because we don't know the number of such buildings," said Anwar Farid, FSCD director general.

The FSCD will soon instruct its fire stations to identify the high-rises at risk because of lack of fire-fighting equipment, sources said.

"We have not enough manpower and infrastructure to enforce the law," he added.

The law states that a building with seven storeys and above will be classified as a high-rise and its owner will have to collect licence from FSCD.

The law also says no high-rise or commercial building will be approved without FSCD fire-protection licence.

"The high-rises mushrooming in the city by the day do not care about safety measures as most owners have built them as apartments for making business," said a FSCD source.

The law prescribes three years in imprisonment as the maximum punishment to a violator. The infrastructure might be demolished or removed too.

"Many are not aware of the new law that is another hurdle to its implementation," the FSCD director general said.

Cry for water to douse fire

Firemen face another problem with disappearance of water bodies in the city

WITH the disappearance of city's natural water reservoirs and hundreds of ponds and wetlands, fire fighters find it increasingly difficult to work during a crisis.

In an inter-ministerial meeting held in 1996 the authorities directed the concerned officials to ensure water retention ponds at every ward of the DCC on an urgent basis as the city has limited arrangement for fire fighting, sources said.

According to the direction, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) was supposed to keep at least one water reservoir at each of the 90 DCC wards to face emergency situations.

Besides, Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) was supposed to build 'water hydrants,' using the water of the Buriganga river that would meet fire related emergencies. The decisions have so far remained 'ignored' while the fire fighters warn that in case of a major fire they might not be able to perform as expected.

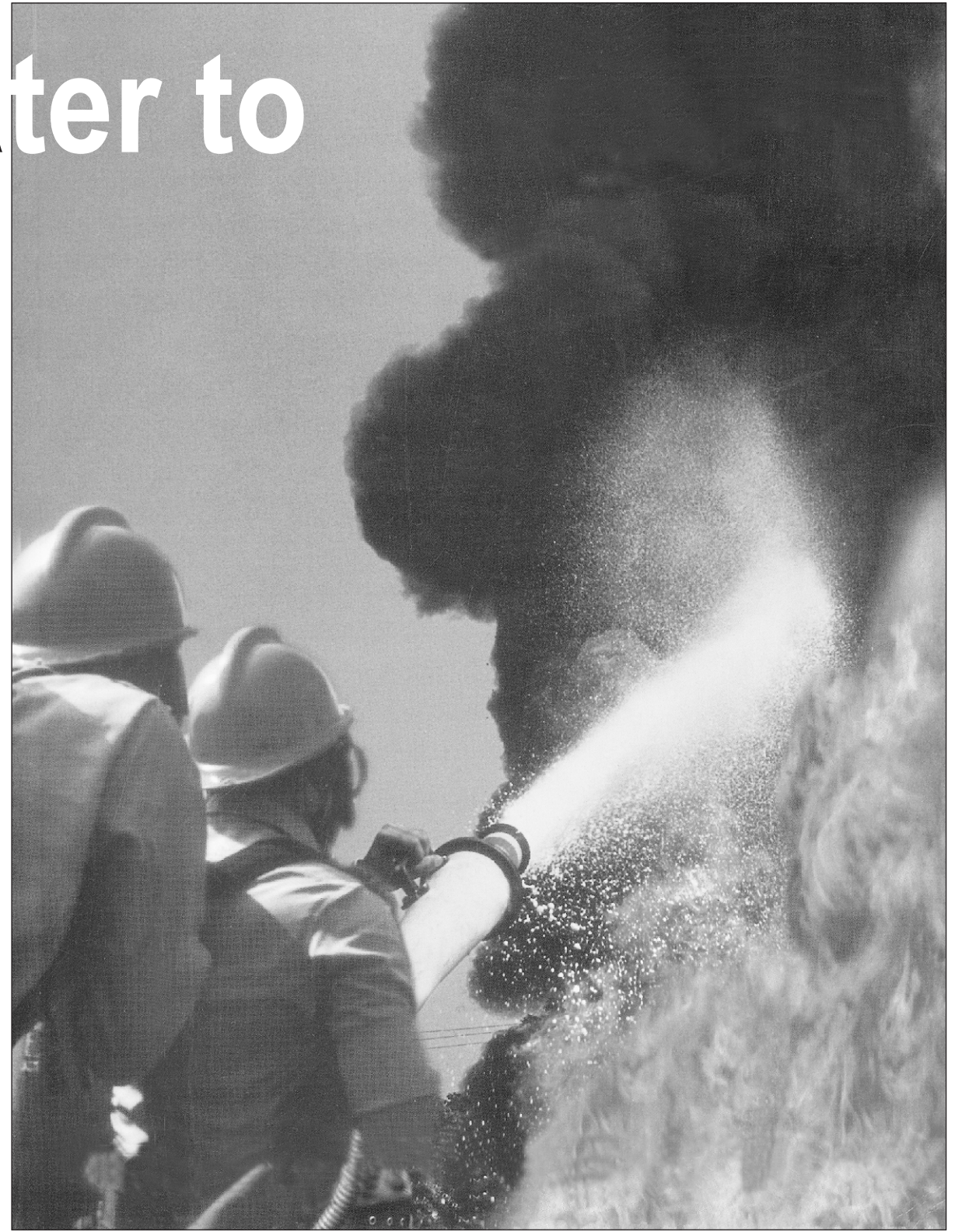
"If we want to save Dhaka from fire related disasters, we need water hydrants, otherwise we are unable to face a major disaster," said a senior official of Dhaka division fire service.

"The city was blessed with a fantastic network of natural ponds, wetlands and canals which were extremely helpful for fighting fire, but now filling those up have added to new hazards for the city dwellers," the officials added.

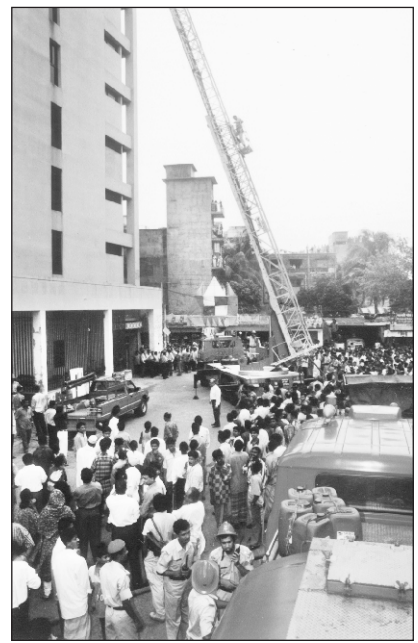
A total of ten fire stations of the city are equipped with only 15 water tenders, including two large water each having a capacity of carrying 1,400 liters of water.

"The number of fire stations and capacity of water tenders is grossly inadequate for such a large city because if a fire occurs far from fire station it not only takes time to reach the spot but also poses additional problem to find water for the job," said a fireman having long experience in fire fighting.

However, the City Corporation Ordinance says in clause 121 that the corporation would be responsible for the civil defence of the city and it would perform such functions as prescribed.



Firemen fight a fire during a recent drill.



Firemen in sorry state

For the last thirty years not much has changed for the firemen who are trying to protect ten million people



The Fire Service and Civil Defence Department (FSCD) is not equipped enough to fight fire, but the number of high-rises in the city is growing by the day in an uncontrolled fashion, increasing the risk of fire.

"The set-up of the fire brigade has not changed much over the last 30 years. But the city has grown without taking adequate fire-fighting measures," said Anwar Farid, FSCD director general.

"The city population has tripled to about ten million over the years, but equipment and staff of the fire brigade are not sufficient to tackle a big fire," he added.

With 11 fire stations in the city, the fire brigade has a fleet of 45 specialised vehicles and a manpower of about 330 to extend their service to the ten million people. Some of these vehicles are age-old and out of order.

FSCD sources said they have only one 'turntable ladder' (mechanised ladder) that can reach up to 12 storeys for fire control. If there is a fire in a building taller than 12 storeys, the fire brigade may not be able to douse it.

Moreover, the disappearance of ponds and other water-bodies from the city has made the firemen's work even more difficult. Fire officials said firefighters cannot access some areas because of extreme urban build-up without proper roads for the fire fighting vehicles.

The city had once 26 underground water reservoirs for the firefighters, but due to lack of awareness among the departments concerned, the reservoirs were demolished, Dhaka Division fire service sources said.

"People living in congested flats without exits are at risk all the time. The risk is even higher for them as most modern furniture and home decorative items are highly inflammable," a firefighter said.

"I don't know what will happen to the city if a massive fire strikes, as the fire service department does not have sophisticated equipment," he said.

High-rise buildings are vulnerable to disasters as most have ignored fire safety aspects. Firemen say they are equipped to tackle fires on up to 12 storey high buildings. Any fire above that height is fought virtually manually.

All stories on this page have been compiled and written by Sultana Rahman photo courtesy: FSCD

Garment workers toil under constant threat of fire

In the city most garment factories are situated in rented premises where there is no proper fire exit or equipment to face an emergency

Working in a garment factory has a high risk, but the authorities seem apathetic about it and workers took it as another fact of struggling life.

At least 198 garment workers died and more than 1,000 were injured in fire-related incidents in 1990-2001, according to Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS).

Of the 14 serious incidents of fire across the country during the same period, 13 took place in Dhaka.

The risks of fire and fire-related incidents are high in most of the 2,308 listed garment units in the city. This is because the authorities responsible for ensuring a safe atmosphere for thousands of workers appear reluctant in acting against factory owners who ignore basic safety requirements of their units.

Rather, the factory owners get 'preferential' treatment, as the readymade garment sector is the largest foreign currency earner in Bangladesh. The authorities apparently go soft on them because upsetting them can evoke a negative reaction from foreign buyers.

The steps that have been taken to address the safety situation are mired in controversy too. The Department of Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD) formulated a law mandatory for the factories to have an emergency or fire exit to avoid fire-related casualties.

But many factories are half-hearted in complying with the rule: they only install cheap and flimsy staircases that engineers say may not withstand the emergency rush of the workers.

It is also widely alleged that fire-safety certificates can be bought from the authorities.

BGMEA and FSCD officials admit that some fire exits are faulty but defend themselves by saying those were built before formulation of the fire safety law.

According to the fire service ordinance, an entrepreneur has to obtain a licence before establishing a garment factory. A factory set up in a multistorey building has to have emergency exits. These factories must also be equipped with heat and smoke detectors and an alternative electricity system.

FSCD certified about 105 garment factories at Goran in Khilgaon, but locals say there are more than 250 factories without fire escapes in the area.

FSCD officials say only four inspectors supervise 2,308 garment units in the city. Such an inadequate inspection team can hardly monitor the safety measures in the garment industry.

Guideline for High-rise buildings (above seven stories) to prevent fire. Source: FSCD

- At least 30 feet wide gateway should be made so fire-fighting lorries can enter.
- Each kitchen should have at least two 5 kg ABC dry chemical fire extinguisher.
- Water reservoir of at least 50,000-gallon water capacity should be kept at the basement floor. For extinguishing fire, fifty per cent of the water should be always there. A diesel pump should be fixed to meet the emergency in case of power failure.
- Electric overhead line should not be there in front of building to ensure free fire extinguishing.
- A control room should be established at the 1st or 2nd level of the building with internal and external telephone connection to ensure proper communication.
- Smoke detector (Ionisation Type) should be connected at each room of the building. Detection system of the building including panel board, repeater board, alarm system should be controlled from the control room.
- Fireproof door with smoke free safety lobby should be established in front of emergency exit door of the building.
- Gas and heater point of a building should have controlled use.
- Each floor of a multistoried building should have proper first aid kit and other necessary treatment facilities. Car parking over the under ground water reservoir should be strictly prohibited.