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Promises yet to be kept

Families of Chawkbazar fire victims get no compensation, no help in one year

ZYMA ISLAM and NILIMA JAHAN

As bodies after bodies were wheeled into Dhaka Medical College's morgue on February 21 last year, there was no dearth of offers of help.

There was a realisation of the fact that the Chawkbazar fire was the result of a collective failure of the state and the society. The government as well as many from the private sector stepped in with promises of financial aid for the victims and their families.

A day after the tragedy, on February 21, the Ministry of Labour and Employment promised a compensation of Tk 1 lakh for the families of each of the deceased, who were either street hawkers, rickshaw pullers or workers at different establishments in the area. A press release signed by Monnujan Sufian, state minister for labour and employment, stated such.

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THE INFERNO THAT TOOK 71 LIVES

On the night of Feb 20, 2019, Old Dhaka experienced one of the deadliest fire incidents in the country's history. The blaze originated from Haji Wahed Mansion at Chawkbazar before spreading to five buildings like wildfire. Firefighters took 14 hours to douse the fire.

The 71 victims include pedestrians, people travelling on rickshaws and cars, residents of the buildings, owners and staffers of the shops. Cause of fire is still unknown. But probe bodies suggest flammable chemicals fuelled the fire and caused it to last longer.

Fire risk in Old Dhaka is not over. The area still has hazardous stocks of flammable chemicals and many plastic factories.

There are no visible efforts to relocate chemical warehouses and stores from Old Dhaka. The government is still working on the issue.

Traders relocated some chemical warehouses to other parts of the city on their own.



Haji Wahed Mansion now

Victims get no compensation as of now (except Tk 20,000 each for burial expenses).

Owners of the chemical warehouses at Wahed Mansion are still off the hook.

Building owners are on bail.

Victims' post-mortem reports are yet to be submitted.

Blaze over, not danger

WASIM BIN HABIB and MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The walls scorched black. A thin film of soot covering the burnt-out pillars and roofs. A smell of burnt remnants still wafting through the air around it.

This is Haji Wahed Mansion, a building in Chawkbazar's Churihata where a chemical-fed fire last year left 71 people burnt to death a year ago.

The inferno forced the government to take a flurry of measures like sealing off and removing chemical warehouses in the area. Another major plan was to relocate chemical stores from the densely-populated neighbourhood to somewhere safe.

Still, Old Dhaka houses extremely hazardous stocks of flammable chemicals and risky factories without any safety measures whatsoever, putting lives of hundreds of people at serious risk of fires.

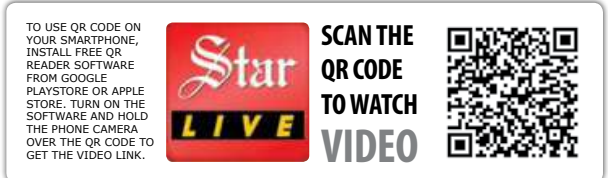
The government is still working on relocating chemical warehouses and factories from residential areas to a chemical industrial park, a move that began around 10 years ago following the Nimtoli blaze.

Shifting chemical factories and warehouses was one of the recommendations by the home ministry's committee formed after the Nimtoli tragedy. But the government could not complete it, thanks to problems in land acquisition and bureaucratic complexities.

Even the government's work to set up a temporary chemical hub is yet to be completed.

"There were huge hue and cry after the fire incident. We've seen mobile court drives and sealing off chemical warehouses. But as the public focus moved away from the Chawkbazar tragedy, many have restarted their business,"

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ZIA TRUST CASE HC to hear Khaleda's bail plea Sunday

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court will hear the bail petition of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia on Sunday.

She has been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in the Zia Charitable Trust corruption case by a lower court.

The bench of Justice Obaidul Hassan and Justice AKM Zahurul Huq yesterday set the date after Khaleda's lawyers requested the judges to hold the hearing.

Before setting the date, the judges said the same bench had earlier rejected her bail petition and the Supreme Court's Appellate Division also upheld the order.

The court asked why a similar bail petition was brought before it.

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Sinking into the depths of despair

70 Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia unpaid for months; employer yet to renew their work permits

PORIMOL PALMA

Unpaid for five months, over 70 Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia are living at a factory dorm in Balakong with money borrowed from relatives.

Their employer -- SSN Medical Products Sdn Bhd -- also did not have their work permits renewed, even though those had expired last year.

This has left the workers even more vulnerable as law enforcers can now take actions against them, said the migrants and an independent researcher based in Kuala Lumpur.

"We were paid no wages since October last year. We are now borrowing from relatives or friends either in Malaysia or in Bangladesh for our survival," migrant worker Sagor Khan of Tangail told this paper over phone yesterday.

"For over a year, we were charged 150 Ringgit [Tk 3,000] every month for renewal of the work permits, but our company did not renew those. So, it is now risky for us to go outside the factory because police can detain us."

According to the workers, 130 Bangladeshis went to work for the company in February 2018 through Unique Eastern Pvt Ltd recruiting agency. However, over the last five months, some 60 of them left for not being paid.

The workers said they had to pay between Tk 3.5 lakh and Tk 4 lakh for the jobs in Malaysia.

The company had promised, in their contracts, that they would not have to pay for renewal of work permits and accommodation. But their employer took RM 200 from their salaries every month.

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COVID-19 CASES IN S'PORE

One Bangladeshi patient in 'very critical condition'

Says foreign minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

One of the five Bangladeshis infected with coronavirus in Singapore is in "very critical condition", Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen said yesterday.

Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs Vivian Balakrishnan gave the updates during a telephone conversation with his Bangladeshi counterpart earlier in the morning.

The 39-year-old Bangladeshi patient who has been kept in the intensive care unit (ICU) for the last 13 days has not been responding to the medicine given to him, the minister informed referring to the updates.

The patient had been suffering from respiratory and kidney disease before he got infected with coronavirus.

"They [the Singapore government] are doing their best to take care of him with medical services of the highest level," Momen told reporters following the inauguration of an OIC meeting in Dhaka.

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CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Death toll tops 2,000 in China

Number of cases drops; passengers leave Japan, Cambodia cruise ships

AGENCIES

Hundreds of relieved passengers finally disembarked a coronavirus-stricken cruise ship in Japan yesterday after testing negative for the disease that has now claimed more than 2,000 lives in China and spread panic worldwide.

With 542 positive cases, the Diamond Princess is easily the biggest cluster outside China, and Japan has faced mounting criticism for its quarantine arrangements as the passengers disperse into the wider world.

"I'm relieved... I want to take a good rest," said a 77-year-old Japanese passenger, who declined to give his name. He said he would be boarding Japan's famously crowded railway system home.

A fleet of yellow-dotted city buses, plus a dozen or so taxis, whisked away the passengers, many of whom dragged their luggage behind them and waved to former ship-mates on balconies as they disembarked.

The promising sign out of China came from the National Health Commission, which reported 1,749 new confirmed cases, the lowest tally since Jan 29. Hubei - the epicentre of the outbreak - reported the lowest number of new infections since Feb. 11, while outside of Hubei there were just 56 new cases, down from a peak of 890 on Feb. 3.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

As we move towards an era of rampant digitalisation, the youth have taken the opportunity to innovate and re-construct the way we look at issues such as employment, empowerment and equality. Find out more in the fifth and the last instalment of The Daily Star's five-part special supplement series, titled "THE YOUTH IN THE ERA OF DIGITALISATION", which is out today. MAKE SURE YOU GRAB A COPY OF THIS COLLECTOR'S ITEM FREE OF CHARGE FROM YOUR HAWKER!

BUSINESS GP in a tight spot

The ongoing legal battle between Grameenphone and the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) over unpaid dues has reached a critical point.

The telecom regulator has refused to accept payment from the network provider to continue negotiations on a Tk 12,580 crore audit claim.

Meanwhile, Grameenphone's review petition, which seeks permission to pay Tk 575 crore in instalments against the dues over a 12-month period, was scheduled to be heard by the court today.

However, since the case is listed at 182 on the Supreme Court's cause list, there is little chance for the hearing to be held as scheduled.

Should Grameenphone fail to pay their dues on time, the telecom regulator will appoint administrators to run the company's operations, according to BTRC officials.

STORY ON B1



A fine arts student painting a language movement-themed graffiti on a wall of Central Shaheed Minar at Dhaka University yesterday. Preparations for February 21 are being made across the country.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Woman dies in police custody

Family alleges torture; DB men picked her up not finding husband

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

A mother of two died several hours after she was picked up from home by Detective Branch of police in Gazipur on Tuesday night.

40-year-old Yasmin Begum's son said he saw multiple injury marks on her body. However, a doctor at the hospital, where she died, said there was none.

Her 17-year-old-son Yasin Arafat Jisan said about 4-5 men in plain clothes, who introduced themselves as DB officers, showed up at their home in Bhawal in the evening and said they were looking for his father Abdul Hai over allegations of drug dealing against him.

When he and his mother told the men that Abdul was not at home, they started beating her up and took her into custody, he told The Daily Star.

Jisan said his sister, aged around 12, was at home at the time. Around 11:00pm, Jisan received a phone call from someone who told him that his mother had fallen ill and had been taken to Gazipur Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmed Medical College Hospital.

Due to difficulties in finding transport, he reached the hospital around 1:00am yesterday and saw that her mother had died.



Yasmin Begum

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