

They couldn't believe their eyes

Witnesses and family members describe the scene immediately after the explosion

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Abu Nayeem noticed an acrid smell of gas right after stepping inside Pashchim Talla Baitus Salam Mosque of Narayanganj on Friday night to say the Esha prayers. The smell became so overpowering that it made it difficult for him to stay inside for long.

"It was so suffocating that we could not breathe inside," he said.

Nayeem, a resident of Pashchim Talla, finished his prayers quickly. As he took a few steps out of the mosque around 8:35pm, he heard a loud bang.

A scene of devastation started unfolding before his eyes, such that he had never witnessed before, and the knowledge that he himself had narrowly escaped the blast.

"I couldn't believe my eyes. The worshippers were coming out screaming for water," he told The Daily Star at the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery in the capital.

This newspaper talked to half a dozen witnesses who narrated the harrowing events of Friday night.

After the offered prayers, they said, a number of younger devotees had already left and the rest continued with their prayers with six air conditioning units in the mosque running.

Faisal Ahmed, son of the mosque's imam, said he left three minutes before he heard the blast.

"I initially thought that the transformer had gone off. But then I heard screams. As I ran back to the mosque, I saw the devastation.

"No one had their clothes on, they had all been burnt in the fire. There was some water in front of the mosque,

where everyone was rolling around on the ground to douse the flames. Black smoke spewed out and shrouded the entire area," he said.

"I was so shocked that I couldn't figure out what I should do," Faisal said. Fahim Hossain, a witness who also escaped the explosion, said, "It was a hellish situation. I don't know what good deeds I have done as I escaped it, despite standing just two feet outside the mosque."

Hearing the screams, local people came forward. Some splashed water on those lying on the ground groaning while others were standing around dumbfounded.

The injured devotees were sent to a nearby hospital by CNG auto-rickshaws and other vehicles.

Many of them were so badly burnt that locals could not initially recognise them.

Rubi Aktar had been looking for her husband in the clogged water in front of the mosque after the explosion.

She looked at all the victims lying there one by one but could not identify her husband.

"People were rolling around in the standing water. Bodies were burnt in such a way that I could not recognise my husband," she said, wailing in front of the operation theatre of the burn unit on Friday night.

"I am yet to see my husband and yet to know about his condition," she said, with a blank look on her face.

Rahela Khatun, wife of Imam Hossain, an RMG worker, said, "Suddenly, I saw my husband screaming. 'Save me!' he kept screaming. He came out of the mosque and ran to the house. Then we came here."



The ground floor of the mosque in Narayanganj's Talla area is littered with warped blades of ceiling fans, charred remains of human flesh and prayer rugs, shards of glass and debris. At least 20 people have died in Friday's explosion there.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Gas leak behind mosque blast

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fire service to probe the incident, said they found an electric switchboard burnt. "But it's not possible to say anything clearly now."

Replying to another query, he said, "Had any AC exploded, there would have been a black spot on the wall. But we didn't see any such black spots. It seems the plastic body of the ACs was burnt in fire," he said.

"We need a couple of days more to ascertain the actual reason for the fire," he added.

Echoing a similar view, Rahmatullah Chowdhury, in-charge of Bomb Disposal Unit of the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC), said the entire ground floor turned into a "gas chamber" due to accumulation of gas leaked from the gas line.

The gas could not leave as the windows were closed for the ACs, he said after visiting the spot. He also said methane gas from nearby drains had gathered there.

Rahmatullah said a power outage had occurred before the incident and a spark on a switchboard after electricity was restored caused the explosion.

Md Al-Amin, religion affairs secretary of the mosque committee, said the second floor was under construction. The building had two electricity connections for uninterrupted power supply.

As power went out on Friday night, muezzin Delowar Hossain switched on the second line. As he switched on the first one after the previous

connection was restored suddenly, there was a spark on the switch board and then a loud bang, Al-Amin said.

Aminul Islam, a job-seeker who has been living in a room on the second floor for nearly a month, said he rushed down hearing a bang around 8:45pm.

"I saw people burning inside the room. They were trying to get out but many of them collapsed," he said.

He said he got injured while helping some victims come out. At that time, some jumped in water accumulated on the road outside the mosque.

Fire officials said a fire engine rushed to the spot on information and brought the fire under control within 10 minutes.

Contacted, Mofizul Islam, deputy manager of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited in Narayanganj, said, "All our connections are legal. If there is any line under the mosque, then it was put there before there was any mosque. If anyone builds anything on our supply lines, it is illegal. The mosque authorities never informed us anything about it."

PROBE BODIES Apart from the fire service, the district administration and Titas formed separate committees to investigate the incident.

A five-member probe body was formed with district magistrate Khadiza Tahera Boby as chief. It has been asked to submit a report within five working days, said Narayanganj

Deputy Commissioner Jasim Uddin. Meanwhile, the DC office announced that it would give Tk 20,000 for burial of each victim and Tk 10,000 for each survivor's treatment.

Titas also formed a five-member probe body headed by Abdul Wahab Talukder, general manager (planning). It was asked to submit its report within five working days.

Dhaka Power Distribution Company was also investigating. CASE FILED FOR NEGLIGENCE Police have already filed a case with Fatullah Police Station for negligence over the incident.

Mohammad Zaidul Alam, superintendent of police in Narayanganj, however, said the incident still seemed to be an accident.

Police are now working closely with the probe bodies and they will take action if any incident of negligence is found against anyone, he said.

THE DECEASED

Twenty people died of their injuries as of filing the report at 9:00pm last night.

Thirteen of the deceased have been identified as Rashed (30), Rifat (18), Mostafa Kamal (34), Zubair (18), Sabbir (21), Kuddus Bepari (72), Delwar Hossain (48), Zunayed (17), Humayun Kabir (70), Ibrahim (43), Jamal (40), Joynal (38) and Mainuddin (12).

The rest are not out of danger, said Dr Samanta Lal Sen, coordinator of the burn unit.

Finger pointed at Titas' neglect

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saying no one made an official complaint about the leakage.

Mosque management committee secretary Abdul Hamza Saud, now fighting for life at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, went to the Titas office about 20 days ago to inform them about the problem, said committee president Abdul Gafur.

Titas officials asked for Tk 50,000. "We have been collecting the money, but it happened before that," Gafur told The Daily Star.

Had the Titas given priority to the matter, the accident might not have happened, he said, "And our brothers wouldn't have to die."

Contacted, Sirajul Islam, manager of at Titas office in Fatulla area, said, "No one came to me, my subordinates or superiors to complain about the leakage."

Mofizul Islam, deputy general manager of Titas in Narayanganj, said a probe committee has been formed to look into the matter. "It is not appropriate to talk before the probe is done."

About the video clip, he said, "Yes, I've seen it too. But, without digging

we can't say for sure the reason behind the explosion. After the probe, we will know what had actually happened."

The mosque was established on four decimals of land donated by a charity in 1990.

The three-storey building was constructed in 2000. The top floor is being developed while the first two floors are used for saying prayers. There are narrow alleys around the building.

Inside, there were warped blades of ceiling fans, charred remains of human flesh and prayer rugs, shards of glass and debris all over the floor.

Prof Mohammad Tamim of the Department of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Engineering at Buet said "What could I understand from the incident is that gas trapped inside the mosque led to the explosion."

"Gas is lighter than wind and its nature is to go up. When gas is leaked in an open space, an explosion does not happen. There might be fire, but not an explosion," he said.

Meanwhile, Titas Deputy General Manager Mofizul Islam added that his company does not take connection lines underneath any private property.

"People often take connections underneath their temporary structures. But before construction of the building, it is their duty to inform Titas and request us to move the lines," he said.

Asked about the riser underground, the official said, "It can happen only when people do earth-filling to elevate a property's ground level. But it is very rare," he said.

COMMITTEES FORMED

Three probe committees have formed.

Deputy Commissioner of Narayanganj formed a committee whereas Fire Service and Civil Defence and Titas formed the two others.

Deputy Commissioner of Narayanganj Jasim Uddin said they formed a five-member committee headed by additional deputy commissioner Khadiza Tahera Boby.

The committee was asked to submit a report in five working days.

Titas has formed a committee led by its general manager of Dhaka office Abdul Wahab.

Fire Service Director (Operations) Lt Col Zillur Rahman is convener of the other committee.

Not theft gone wrong, its pre-planned

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Before them, Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam also visited the UNO, according to NINH officials.

Wahida's father Omar Ali, who came under attack while trying to save his daughter, is undergoing treatment at Rangpur Medical College Hospital. Wahida's brother Sheikh Farid Uddin told this newspaper that his father Omar Ali Sheikh has lost control over his legs.

Three people have been arrested in connection with the attack so far. They are: Nabirul Islam, Shantu Kumar and Asadul Haque. Of them, Asadul was a member of Ghoraghat Pouro Jubo League.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Administrative Service Association (BASA) yesterday claimed that the hammer attack on Wahida was pre-planned.

In a press conference at BIAM Auditorium, BASA president Helal Uddin Ahmed, also the senior secretary of the Local Government Division, demanded further investigation into the attack.

He said an observation committee led by Rangpur range divisional commissioner has already been formed to maintain communication with the investigating team.

"Some people are spreading rumours that it was an attempted theft gone wrong. We think it is a propaganda. The

miscreants did not steal anything. Even, her [Wahida] mobile phone was found on the bed," he said.

"We think many others are involved in the incident," Helal said, adding that people who failed to secure undue benefits from Wahida might be involved in the attack.

In response to a question, BASA's General Secretary Shaikh Yusuf Harun said Wahida carried out eviction drives against illegal extraction of sands from a Balu Mohal (sand field). It might have upset someone involved in the attack.

Meanwhile, talking to The Daily Star, different government officials working in Dinajpur said they had been facing tremendous pressure while performing duties due to the reckless attitudes of the ruling AL men.

The party men are involved in multiple offences, including tender manipulation, taking control of the lease of local rural markets and ponds, land grabbing and illegal sand lifting.

Such an attack has spread a sense of fear among the UNOs and other government officials in Dinajpur.

A gang of miscreants has allegedly been operating in Ghoraghat under the aegis of a top AL leader.

Locals said Jahangir Alam, Jubo League convener of Ghoraghat Unit, Masud Rana, president of the Shingra Union Jubo League in Ghoraghat, and Moinul Master, president of Palsha Union AL, have been using their

influence to make a quick buck.

Rab detained six people, including Jahangir and Masud, after the incident.

The two have been released after interrogation.

Even AL lawmaker of Dinajpur-6 Shibli Sadik and the district unit Jubo League President Rashed Parvez expressed disappointment over their activities.

Locals said UNO Wahida was supposed to conduct a mobile court drive to demolish several illegal structures at Dugdugi Bazar in the upazila on Thursday morning. But she was attacked a few hours before.

The land of Dugdugi Bazar was leased out to Moinul Master. But he illegally built structures on it and sold them to several people, locals said.

Meanwhile, Rab handed over Nabirul Islam and Santu Das to police on Friday night.

Police placed the two before the court of Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate Shishir Kumar Basu with a 10-day remand prayer.

The court granted seven days of remand for each of them.

Meanwhile, the case filed over the attack on UNO Wahida has been transferred to Detective Branch (DB) of Police in Dinajpur.

Imam Jafar, Inspector of DB in Dinajpur, has been made the new investigation officer of the case.

Sudan declares 3-month state of emergency after record floods

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan yesterday declared a three-month national state of emergency after record-breaking torrential floods that cost 99 lives.

"A nationwide three-month state of emergency has been announced as Sudan is considered a natural disaster zone," the interior ministry said on social media.

Floods caused by more than a month of heavy rains have killed 99 people, injured 46 and left 100,000 damaged properties in their wake, one of the worst natural disasters in decades, according to state news agency SUNA.

Rohingya team

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Noyon said the 40 Rohingyas from 34 Rohingya camps were mobilised at a transit camp at Kutupalong of Ukhiya on Friday night.

In the morning yesterday, they were taken to Chattogram from where they were moved to Bhashan Char on a Bangladesh Navy ship, reports our Cox's Bazar correspondent, quoting the additional RRRC as saying.

Shamsuddoza said the trip was part of a motivational programme.

The government has built 120 cluster villages on the 40 sq km island under a Tk 2,312 crore housing project for one lakh out of the nearly 1 million Rohingyas sheltered in cramped camps in Cox's Bazar.

Government officials said the houses have been built four feet above the ground with concrete blocks and are protected by a 13-km-long flood embankment. There are also 120 cyclone shelters, which are planned to be used as schools, medical centres and community centres.

The officials also said there are large swathes of land that could be used for rearing livestock and farming fish if the Rohingyas were relocated there. The refugees in Cox's Bazar camps have a very little work to do now.

The UN and aid agencies have been insisting that the island was isolated, flood-prone and would be hazardous for Rohingyas because of cyclones and tidal surges.

Against such a backdrop, a government delegation visited the housing project on February 13 and considered shelving the idea of relocation.

Speaking to The Daily Star, State Minister for Disaster Management and Relief Md Enamur Rahman had said the government would face difficulties in arranging food, healthcare and other necessary services for one lakh people in Bhashan Char without cooperation from those organisations.

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen had said if the Rohingyas were shifted to Bhashan Char, they might not agree to leave the place in future. Thus, the government was focusing on Rohingya repatriation, not relocation.

In a reverse of the plan, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen at a webinar on August 24 said the 306 Rohingyas rescued from the Bay of Bengal and sheltered in Bhashan Char were doing well. He also hinted at the "go-and-see visit" by the Rohingyas.

"If they find the place better than the cramped camps in Cox's bazar, we expect to start the initial transfer of Rohingyas there after the Monsoon season," he added.

Meanwhile, the UNHCR yesterday said it is aware of the "go-and-see visit" to Bhashan Char. It is an important part of ensuring refugees can make an informed choice about voluntary relocation to the island, the UN agency said.

"The safety and protection of refugees are the most important considerations," said Mostafa Mohammad Sazzad Hossain, assistant communication officer at the UNHCR Bangladesh.

He said the UN stresses on thorough protection and technical assessments before any relocation to Bhashan Char. He said they have informed the Bangladesh government that the UNHCR would be prepared to undertake a visit to Bhashan Char to assess the accommodation and protection mechanism of the refugees.

"We are awaiting feedback [from the government]. Several months have passed since a group of refugees were transferred to Bhashan Char, and it is now urgent for the UN to have access to them," Sazzad said.

Tests drop

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Ten of the victims were female. One of them died at home, the others at hospitals, shows DGHS data.

Three of the deceased were aged between 31 and 40, two between 41 and 50, five between 51 and 60. The rest 25 were over 60.

A total of 3,839 patients were admitted to the hospitals' general section while 318 to ICUs in the Covid-19 dedicated hospitals across the country in the 24 hours, according to the DGHS press release.

As many as 1,661 Covid-19 patients recovered in the 24-hour period, taking the total number of recovery cases to 217,852, which is more than 67 percent of all reported cases.



A woman grieves while her family members try in vain to calm her after her six-year-old son was pronounced dead at Dhaka Medical College Hospital of burn injuries he sustained in Friday night's explosion.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN