

Ensure safety for mosques

Authorities, mosque committees should pay heed to PM’s directives

FOLLOWING the deadly fire in a mosque in Narayanganj on September 4 that has already claimed the lives of 25 people, and severely injured 12 others, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has highlighted the necessity of ensuring that mosques all over the country are built with proper designs and permissions of the authorities concerned. The Religious Affairs ministry has also instructed all mosque committees across the country, especially those that have air-conditioners installed, to take necessary measures to examine and repair electrical connections to avoid accidents.

We reiterate the Prime Minister’s position that it is of utmost importance for mosque committees to pay attention to the issue of building and fire safety while designing, constructing and maintaining the mosques that are supposed to be safe havens for Muslims across the country. Mosques that were built without due permissions should urgently address any structural, fire or electrical risks posed to its congregation. In addition, the authorities concerned must carry out their tasks as per their mandate to ensure that the mosques are safeguarded, and that regular inspection and monitoring is carried out in a systematic manner. After all, the onus is on the authorities to ensure due diligence. Reports over the last few days have already highlighted how the accident could have been avoided had the authorities, particularly Titas Gas pipeline, acted in a timely and responsible manner following multiple complaints from the mosque authorities.

The Prime Minister has instructed all concerned to find out the cause of the explosion and to investigate whether there were any irregularities. Four separate probe committees have been formed by four different bodies to investigate the incident. However, we have witnessed too many occasions when nothing concrete came out of such probes despite promises from the authorities that justice will be served. We urge all to pay heed to the Prime Minister’s concern and directives and ensure a speedy and fair investigation. While it will not bring back the deceased, it may give some form of solace to their bereaved families and community and prevent such accidents from happening in the future.

Bangladesh holds pole position in int’l robotics challenge

Remarkable display of determination by the youth of the nation

WE are delighted by the news that Bangladesh has ranked number one so far among 174 participating countries over the last five weeks at FIRST Global Challenge (FGC)—an international robotics competition, held annually for high school students. In order to emerge as the winners of FGC 2020, Team Bangladesh must hold on to the position for five more weeks. Team Bangladesh has been on a journey to the top ranks of the challenge, from being in the first hundred to ranking 7th among 190 countries in the 2019 FGC which was held in Dubai. This year, it is being hosted online due to the pandemic.

FGC is the largest robotics competition for high schoolers, often referred to as the equivalent of the robot Olympics, which aims to encourage the youth of the world to pursue Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and facilitate learning. Bangladesh has been participating in the FGC since its inception in 2017. Every year, young minds passionate about STEM are given a challenge that is intended to solve some of the greatest challenges faced by humanity, including the 14 Grand Challenges for Engineering. Through this promising and engaging competition, students across the world are inspired to acquire the skills they will require to make their imaginations into realities. This year’s theme—connecting communities—aims to integrate social, cultural elements with the creativity and innovation behind STEM, and our youth are surely putting up a promising participation.

Team Bangladesh, ranked numero uno as of September 2, exemplifies what our young bright minds are capable of achieving when provided with the appropriate support. We hope the government takes notice of this and acknowledges the importance of STEM. In order for the students, along with their determined mentors to accomplish crucial breakthroughs and emerge as the champions, they have to be supported by every means necessary, as their endeavours will surely serve humanity. With education institutions in an uncertain hiatus, such competitions must be encouraged more so that the bright minds of our nation can remain active and in turn, give wings to their dreams. Our best wishes for Team Bangladesh whose efforts are achievements to celebrate and be proud of.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Post-pandemic uncertainty or hope?

It is no surprise that we are currently going through a global recession owing to the crippling pandemic, and this situation is not likely to get better any time soon. The pandemic has surely opened new job opportunities in the pharmaceutical, e-commerce, creative media, agro-food, etc industries. However, the flip side of it is that thousands, if not millions of jobs have been wiped out due to this pandemic, and many workers are at risk of losing their jobs. Since job losses will inevitably outnumber the job opportunities, it is necessary that both the private and public sectors work together to promote entrepreneurship in an attempt to save the economy from its impending doom.

Anika Nawar, by email

EDITORIAL

NARAYANGANJ MOSQUE FIRE

Authorities must pay for their negligence



TAQBIR HUDA

ON Friday night, a massive explosion took place in Baitus Salah Jame Masjid in Narayanganj, killing 24 people and injuring dozens more, most of whom have sustained over 70 percent burn injuries.

Eye witnesses described that they heard a huge explosion, the shattering of windows and sparks of fire escaping, followed by screams of despair coming from inside the mosque. Then the worshippers started fleeing, many burnt from head to toe, and in a desperate attempt to douse the fire, started rolling on the ground and helplessly pleaded onlookers to be saved. The onlookers wanted to help but feared for their own safety as the road leading to the mosque was clogged with drain water, and they suspected that the water may have come in contact with electricity, which could then electrocute them.

The locals clarified that the road has been perpetually clogged with drain water, irrespective of rainfall, due to lack of maintenance. The water clogging has itself caused accidents, since many pedestrians have slipped and injured themselves in the past, while it also makes the mosque inaccessible to cars and rickshaws. Therefore, the rescuers had to carry them by foot to the vehicles. They blamed the authorities for this lack of repair: “If the authorities had repaired this road, we could have tried to rescue the burn victims much earlier”.

It is only after the fire service came and started their rescue mission that the locals felt confident enough to also join in. Yet they were aghast at the sheer extent of injuries: entire bodies burnt, head to toe. They could not find the courage to touch them—because not one part of the body looked like it could withstand even the slightest touch. There were four children inside the mosque, one of them had become totally unrecognisable. Not one hair was left unburnt. This was possibly

the body of the seven year old child Jewel, who is listed among the casualties.

Primary inspections by the fire services found that a Titas Gas pipeline is situated underneath the mosque floor and caused a gas leak. As the windows were shut, the gas had accumulated inside the mosque, causing six air conditioners to burst one after the other, possibly when the power was triggered.

Four separate “probe” committees have

negligence in the district administration’s probe committee conducive to an effective investigation?

The President of the mosque committee, Abdul Gafur, alleged that the mosque committee had informed Titas of the gas leak in December 2019 when it first appeared, and requested for it to be repaired. The committee made a verbal complaint yet again last month, when the gas leak became even more



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.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

been formed by four different bodies to find out the cause and who is at fault: Narayanganj district administration, Narayanganj Fire Service and Civil Defence, Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd or the Dhaka Power Distribution Company (DPDC). While a prompt response is always welcome, when was the last time any such probe body helped deliver justice and amounted to more than just palliative eye wash? As for the probe body formed by Titas Gas itself, can a company really be expected to objectively ascertain its own negligence? Additionally, the Narayanganj Zone Manager of Titas Gas, Mofizul Islam, is part of the five member committee formed by the Narayanganj district administration. Is the presence of a manager of the very company accused of

apparent. However, Titas allegedly refused to carry out the repairs unless Tk 50,000 was paid as “bribes”. The committee was unable to accumulate the demanded sum, and therefore the gas line remained unrepaired. While breaking into tears, Abdul exclaimed, “Their negligence and greed for money claimed so many lives. Who will be responsible for this now?”

Titas Gas Managing Director, Ali Mohammad, spoke to the press while visiting the site of the explosion, and “warned its employees of stern action if their negligence is found”. Yet who is going to take stern action against Titas Gas, as an entity, if negligence (which is seeming increasingly apparent) is found on their part? Under general principles of tort law (which deals with negligence and personal injury), if Titas Gas employees

TRIBUTE

Remembering two key 1971 commanders we just lost

HAROON HABIB

AT a time when Bangladesh is planning the historic celebration of the 50th anniversary of independence next year, the demises, in quick succession, of two great commanders of the Liberation War, are too shocking. Major General Chittaranjan Dutta, Bir Uttam, best known as CR Dutta, who led Sector 4 in the Sylhet region, and Lieutenant Colonel Abu Osman Chowdhury, the commander of Sector 8 covering Kustia, Jhenaidah and Chuadanga, passed away on August 25 and September 5, 2020 respectively.

The nation paid tributes to the two key Mukti Bahini commanders who served in the Pakistan army but revolted at the call of the nation. Their bravery and patriotism are printed not only in the pages of history; I am certain they will remain a source of inspiration for all Bangladeshi generations to come.

I didn’t have a personal acquaintance with the two commanders during the war, as I was on a different warfront in sector 11, which covered parts of greater Mymensingh, including northern Gaibandha and Kurigram. But I had the opportunity to know them quite closely in the crucial post-1975 era, when the newborn country was witnessing a severe trauma following the brutal assassination of the nation’s founding father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. The acquaintance deepened when the Sector Commanders’ Forum-Liberation War 71’ was launched as a national platform under the leaderships of all the living war commanders from that time.

I recall, despite conflicting political standings that divided them, thanks to the post-1975 military and pseudo-democratic rulers, all the key war commanders of 1971 came out in unison to defend our history, and to restore the blood soaked ideals of three million people who laid down their lives for the cause of freedom and justice. It was in 2006 when those ideals were publicly challenged by the resurfaced collaborators of the genocidal Pakistan army and their political backers, who pronounced in public that there were no *Muktijoddha* in Bangladesh, and what happened in 1971 was a “civil war”. The Liberation War commanders, like Air Vice Marshal A K Khandakar, Major General K M Shafiqullah, Major General CR Dutta, Colonel Kazi Nuruzzaman, Lieutenant General Mir Shawakat Ali, Lieutenant Colonel Abu Osman Chowdhury and Major Rafiqul Islam, most of whom are the second highest gallantry award

holders, stood united for trials of war criminals who had actively collaborated with the marauding Pakistan army to commit a brutal genocide (including mass rape and destruction) against unarmed Bengali civilians.

CR Dutta was an exceptional officer who entered into the army when the Bengalis in general, and religious minorities in particular, were meticulously excluded in Pakistan. His love for the land he belonged to was unflinching. After the Partition of British India in 1947, the young man from a Hindu family did not migrate to India, which he could easily. As a true soldier, he took part in the 1965 India-Pakistan War. But having awakened to the reality of the dire situation, Dutta, then a Major, could not abandon his people. He believed it was time to stand up against West Pakistani colonialism, to seek justice.

In many private conversations with us, he said, whilst he was enjoying a long

the Pakistani army to the joint command of Bangladesh and India on December 16, 1971, Dutta held various vital military positions in the new country. He built up the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) as the force’s first Director General, and was the chief of the Muktijoddha Kalyan Trust. He retired in 1984 after over 30 years of service.

In the latter part of his eventful life, General Dutta advocated for the rights of minorities, which made him a target for religious extremists. The successive military regimes gradually removed the founding state principles of secularism, and in 1988, Islam was declared as the state religion. Dutta, along with key minority leaders, founded the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council and campaigned for the return of the properties of the Hindus confiscated under the Vested Property Act to their rightful owners. Unlike many others of his time, he was not willing



Major Gen CR Dutta and Lt Col Abu Osman Chowdhury

leave in his hometown in Habiganj, he heard the thunderous March 7 speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He made up his mind then, and after consultations with retired Colonel MA Rab, who later became the Chief of Staff of the Mukti Bahini, Dutta joined the war against Pakistan.

In fact, Habiganj had a rare combination of a lucky trio: Colonel MA Rab and Commandant Manik Chowdhury, both members of national assembly, and Major CR Dutta. They raised a resistance force against the Pakistani occupation army who were then burning houses, raping women and murdering unarmed civilians to suppress the Bengali rebellion for freedom. The war sector that Dutta had led, manned by 2,000 regular army members and 8,000 guerrillas, was comprised of the areas between Sylhet Sadar in the north and Kanaighat in the south. The border area extended 100 miles along the India-Bangladesh border.

After the unconditional surrender of



to compromise on the principles he believed in. He shared those principles with the fellow war veterans at the Sector Commanders Forum. Now a few remarks about Colonel Abu Osman Chowdhury, whose leadership in the Mukti Bahini from March to September 1971, was unparalleled. Colonel Osman, as I knew him closely, was a hero plagued by tragedy. This was not only for the reason that his wife, a fellow freedom fighter, was shot dead by renegade soldiers during the so-called “revolution” on November 7, 1975, but also for the painful oversight of being the lone Sector Commander who was not conferred with a gallantry award, despite the heroic role he played in the Liberation War. That Colonel Osman was not given the gallantry award that he rightfully deserved, is a tragedy in our history. He was later awarded with the *Suadhinata Padak* (Independence Award).

Osman, a Major in 1971, was in

are in fact found to have been negligent, then Titas Gas, as their employer, is vicariously liable for their employees’ negligence and must compensate the victims who were harmed. Through vicarious liability, tort law forces corporations like Titas Gas to behave more responsibly, since a corporation cannot simply escape responsibility by scapegoating a handful of its employees whenever a horrible disaster takes place and harms human lives. By being forced to pay a price, corporations are subject to institutional accountability and compelled to ensure their actions (or inactions) do not cause harm to other people. Yet corporations in our country have been free to harm as many people as they like in their relentless pursuit of profit, since tort law remains largely unenforced and underdeveloped. Whenever disaster strikes and outrage manifests, a handful of poor, usually uneducated, employees are thrown in jail, while corporations escape accountability.

From Nimtoli to Chawkbazar to FR Tower to United Hospital, greed-induced negligence has killed scores of people, because time and time again, corporations were allowed to profit at the cost of human lives. Now, the Narayanganj mosque fire has killed even more people, because not even the house of God is safe from the perils of human negligence. With each of the past fire disasters, probe committees were duly set up, strong statements were made in the press promising justice, accountability and change. Yet after the initial outrage eventually dissipated, business carried on as usual since tort law, the one action that could have created lasting accountability, remained inaccessible to the victims.

How many more wholly preventable fires have to break out and burn our fellow citizens, before we realise that until negligent corporations are slapped with a price to pay for putting profit above human lives (through the proper enforcement and development of tort law), nothing will ever change?

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command of the 4th EPR Wing in Chuadanga. He was staying at Kushtia on the night of March 25 to March 26 when the news of the Pakistani genocide in Dhaka reached him. Sensing imminent danger, he left Kushtia for Chuadanga. On March 27, the Pakistani flag flying at the EPR Wing headquarters, was ceremoniously lowered and the tri-colour Bangladeshi flag was hoisted by Major Osman. His deputy, Captain AR Azam Chowdhury, also played a valiant role here.

The whole of the region west of the Padma was under his command, comprising of parts of Kushtia, and parts of Faridpur, Jessore and nearby Khulna. The Bengali personnel from the defence, paramilitary, police, ansar, mujahid and students of the area were all under Osman’s command. They attacked the 27 Baluch of the Pakistan Army stationed in Kushtia, and after hours of fierce fighting, eliminated almost two company strengths of the Pakistani army occupying Kushtia. The battle of Kushtia was later an important part of our war history.

Major Osman held the position till the division of war commands into 11 sectors by the Mujibnagar government in mid-July 1971. The South Western Command was renamed Sector 8, with some revision of the command area, and Osman continued to hold the position of Sector Commander till Major Abul Manjur, another war hero, took over in September 1971. After his premature retirement in 1976, Osman was engaged as a vocal advocate for democracy and justice.

After the demise of two such widely known sector commanders of the Liberation War, the nation recalled them with profound respect. I am sure, thousands would have been in the Dhaka streets to bid farewell to the heroes had there been no pandemic. The unimpeachable roles they played in 1971 will give us the courage to preserve the ideals and the spirit of the War of Liberation.

Both General Dutta and Colonel Osman were the Vice Chairmen of the Sector Commanders’ Forum that I also belong to. Both of them were direct witnesses to the tortures that the Pakistani state inflicted upon the Bengalis during the 23 years of united existence. And they were convinced, like all their fellow freedom fighters, that a land of liberty and constitutional rule, supported by the core principles of secularism and democracy, would emerge for the Bangladeshi generations. I hope we will continue to show the greatest respect for these unforgettable war heroes.

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