

Timely action averts fire tragedy at Banani high-rise

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

This could have been another tragedy like last year's FR Tower fire if the situation was not brought under control promptly, fire officials said after dousing the blaze at 22-storey Ahmed Tower yesterday.

The fire originated at the office of Redington (BD) Ltd, which provides IT related services, around 11:34am on the 15th floor of Ahmed Tower, a high-rise next to FR Tower in Dhaka's Banani where a fire claimed 27 lives.

Eight firefighting units doused the fire within an hour, said Saleh Uddin, assistant director at Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence.

"We rushed to the scene very fast with the experience of last year's incident at FR Tower. Fortunately, the fire didn't spread. Otherwise, it could have been another devastating tragedy," he said.

The cause of the fire could not be known immediately. No casualties were reported.

Due to the fire, panic gripped people working at the offices in the building. Many came down to the street.

Witnesses said that the fire did not spread as it was controlled with their fire

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Once a waterlogged waste dumping ground, *inset*, Abdul Alim playground has become a popular destination for Old Dhaka residents, attracting old and young alike. This much-needed green space is part of a DSCC project to renovate all 31 parks and playgrounds under its jurisdiction.

PHOTO COURTESY: SHATOTTO

A place to breathe

DSCC sprucing up 19 parks, 12 playgrounds; work for 4 already completed, rest by June next year

HELEMUL ALAM

First-grader Hasibur Rahman Anu was elated while playing at the eastern side of the Hazi Abdul Alim playground in Old Dhaka on Saturday.

Nowadays, he often comes here along with his cousin Zunayed, a class-3 student, under the watchful eyes of their parents.

But it was not like this before. Just a few years ago, a large portion of the field used to be occupied by trucks while Old Dhaka locals avoided the place as it was a den for anti-social activities. Many also used the spot as a garbage dumping ground.

The field was renovated and opened in November last year with a complete facelift.

Now, with a big lush green space in its middle, there are separate places designated for children of all age groups to play. Besides, there are walkways around the main playground where different age groups' exercise even at night as the field has sufficient lights and sitting arrangements.

A two-storey building houses a gym and a coffee shop at the north-east corner of the field, which continues to increase people's interest to spend time there with family or friends.

And the good news is that this is not the only field with these features. All the 31 parks and playgrounds under Dhaka South City Corporation are being modernised as part of a project "Jol Sobujer Dhaka".

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Subsidise internet for disadvantaged groups

Speakers tell BIGD webinar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a webinar yesterday underscored the need for improving economic conditions and subsidising internet costs for the disadvantaged groups to reduce digital divide.

The webinar, titled "Digital Inclusion Webinar Series: Digital Divide in Rural Bangladesh" was organised by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD).

A research paper by Professor of Economics at Dhaka University Dr Muhammad Shahadat Hossain Siddiquee and BIGD research associate Md Saiful Islam was presented.

It was based on a survey carried out on 6,500 sample rural households between September and November 2019. The most "digitally literate" individual in a household answered digital literacy questions for the survey.

The research said education plays a vital role on people's internet usage. "The higher

the level of education, more likely of access to internet," reads the research.

The researchers recommended scaling up public access points of internet and ICT programs to bridge the digital divide.

BIGD Executive Director Dr Imran Matin suggested to adopt micro-digitisation strategy to bridge the gap.

Pointing out that women have low access to internet, Mehnaz Rabbani, lead of Research for Policy and Governance (RPG) at BIGD said women are lagging behind due to poor access to internet.

"If the number of female internet users cannot be increased, years of struggle of the government to reduce gender inequality will become futile," she added.

Policy advisor Anir Chowdhury said the use of internet varies from person to person. "A person who needs old age allowance has different kind of demand from internet than a youth has," he said, underscoring the need for creating specific skills for special needs among people.

N'GANJ MOSQUE TRAGEDY

Electrician who 'set up illegal line' held

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

A Narayanganj court yesterday placed an electrician on a two-day remand after he was arrested the same day in a case filed in connection with the blast at Pashchim Talla Baitus Salat Mosque in Narayanganj that left 33 people dead so far.

Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court placed the arrestee -- Mobarok Hossain (35) -- on remand after he was produced before the court by law enforcers, said Asaduzzaman, inspector of Narayanganj Court Police.

Criminal Investigation Department arrested Mobarok Hossain from Narayanganj Sadar upazila.

CID Inspector Babul Hossain told The Daily Star that during investigation, they found an illegal electricity line in the mosque and the connection was set up by Mobarok, who is not a staff member of the power department.

The CID official said the explosion would not have occurred on September 4 if this illegal line was not there.

According to fire officials, the explosion was caused by the accumulation of leaked gas from an underground Titas Gas pipeline that somehow came in contact with an electric spark.

On Saturday, eight officials of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited, who have been suspended over the blast at the mosque, were arrested by CID.



Rehearsal room now the stage, 20 seats now housefull. This is how Prachyanat, a leading theatre troupe, is staging their plays. PHOTO COURTESY: TUKKIR AHMED TANVEE

Curtains rising, cautiously

Theatre artistes resuming to stage in capital

PRIYANKA CHOWDHURY, Arts & Entertainment

As I was walking into Prachyanat's practice space, with my mask and gloves on, some familiar voices called out my name. For the next few minutes, it felt like I was back to my old theatre-going self.

As I went to the fourth floor, one of the troupe members held an infrared thermometer to my forehead. Along with paper decorations and oil lamps, the troupe was now prepared with disinfectant sprays, shoe covers and face masks.

After five months of stagnancy, they took the challenge of resuming work.

Productions of Prachyanat, a torch-bearer among contemporary theatre groups, offer some much-needed breathing space for Dhaka dwellers, although arranged on a limited scale. What was known to be a houseful show is also going through a massive shift.

They have stepped up their comeback with a full-fledged monthlong theatre festival titled "Mahala Magan" at their rehearsal room in the capital's Kataban. With only 20 audience seats, festival organisers introduced an online ticketing system for the shows.

The pandemic has not only defined a "new normal" for theatre, but has also left its mark on the plays' storylines.

Hundred by Hundred, directed by Saiful Jarnal, for example, narrates the story of a garment factory worker, who began a journey by foot, in response to an unprecedented call from authorities, disregarding health risks of the pandemic — an incident that was not new to the audience who follow the news, but it returned as a reminder through the play.

Mostly, theatre artistes and practitioners attended the programme,

but regular citizens also showed up in small numbers. Among them was Farhana Satu, a professional photographer who watched the show with her friends.

"The production was interesting and so was the following session on mental health by Dr Helal," Farhana said. "They did their best to arrange the show, maintaining health guidelines. However, the seats were too close to each other, which did not meet social distancing requirements. Nonetheless, as an audience member, the show brought about some mental peace for me."

Additional health-safety naturally mean more expenses. And many artistes often say theatre in the country is not economically fruitful to begin with.

Regarding this issue, Jarnal said the amount received from these shows can cover rent of Prachyanat's practice space. With utmost priority to health factors, and trusting that the audience will take necessary precautions, the group wants to continue their programmes.

Similarly, Bangladesh Mahila Samity (BMS) reopened with the play "Lal Jomin" last month. BMS Management Officer Gazi Ibrahim Firoz said they took proper health precautions for the audience.

"We have decreased seats from 16 in a row to seven, to maintain social distancing, and wearing face-masks inside our hall is mandatory," he added. "Occupancy of 50-60 seats is now considered houseful."

Although authorities have given no formal instruction for reopening theatre shows and Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy is still working on their plan of action, BMS officials claimed that they got approval from Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation to resume work.

Verdict of arms case against Shahed Sept 28

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka tribunal yesterday fixed September 28 for delivering the judgement of an arms case against Regent Group Chairman Mohammad Shahed on completion of the trial within seven working days.

Judge KM Emrul Kayesh of Special Tribunal-1 of Dhaka fixed the date after defence lawyers completed their arguments.

During yesterday's hearing, the defence sought acquittal of their client from the case. They told the court that the prosecution has failed to prove the charges brought against him.

Shahed was arrested on July 15 from Sathkira when he was trying to leave the country on a boat.

On July 19, a team of DB police found Shahed's private car in front of a house in Sector-11, in the city's Uttara Paschim area. They then seized a pistol with a round of bullets from the car and later a case under the Arms Act was filed against him.

DB Inspector Md Sairul Islam on July 30 submitted the charge sheet to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka, showing 13 people as prosecution witnesses.

SUBMITTING FAKE DOCS TO SECURE BAIL FOR RAPE CONVICT

HC directs to file criminal case against forgers, including 2 cops

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court has found forgery committed by some people, including two policemen, to secure bail for a rape convict of Jhenidah through making false and manipulated documents and submitting them before this court.

After examining original and forged documents, the court yesterday directed its registrar to file a criminal case against constables Bishwajit alias Babu and Khairul, who were discharging duties in Jhenidah jail, and one Chandali Biswas who sworn the affidavit to file the appeal seeking bail for rape convict Kabir Biswas, who has been sentenced to life imprisonment by the trial court.

Bishwajit has been transferred to Kushtia and Babu is now discharging duties in Jhenidah Jail, Kabir's lawyer Sheikh Atiar Rahman told The Daily Star.

Yesterday, the HC said the investigation officer of the criminal case will implicate others, who will be found involved with the forgery.

The bench of Justice M Enayetur Rahim and Justice Md Mostafizur Rahman came up with the order during hearing a bail appeal filed by Kabir in the case filed in 2013 for rape under Section 9(1) of

Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000.

Deputy Attorney General Sarwar Hossain Bappi told The Daily Star that the Jhenidah tribunal on July 8, 2015 convicted Kabir, sentenced him to life imprisonment and fined him Tk 2 lakh for the crime.

The tribunal directed Kabir to give the money to the victim to bring up the disputed child born by Kabir and the victim.

Kabir filed an appeal with the HC, challenging the verdict.

He sought bail from the HC twice, which the HC on January 25 and May 30 in 2018 rejected.

During hearing another bail petition on December 15, 2015, the HC bench of Justice Enayetur and Justice Amir Hossain said this court will consider his bail if he agrees to marry the victim.

Kabir did not agree, DAG Sarwar said.

In this circumstance, Advocate Sheikh Atiar Rahman, a Supreme Court lawyer, appeared for Kabir before the HC bench on September 15 and placed some documents, seeking his bail.

It has been found in the documents submitted by him that Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Tribunal-2 of

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PREDICTED GRADES FOR O, A LEVEL EXAMS

English medium students seek govt intervention

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A group of English medium students formed a human chain in front of the Jatiya Press Club yesterday to seek the government's intervention for the upcoming Ordinary and Advanced Level exams. The students urged authorities concerned to not hold the exams amid the pandemic, as it will put students in severe health risks.

They also urged the government to contact relevant authorities to make sure the students are graded based on their previous results, a process known as "predicted grades".

Earlier, educational boards that arrange the exams globally decided to not hold the exams for the May-June session due to the outbreak. Instead, they prepared results based on predicted grades and previous academic records submitted by schoolteachers.

In light of this, students in Bangladesh demanded the cancellation of the October-November exam session in Bangladesh, and asked for predicted grading instead, as they don't want a gap in their education, they said. The students have so far contacted Deputy Education Minister Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury as well as other officials of the ministry, seeking their intervention.

"We want the government to intervene so that we are given predicted grades," said Nicholas Gomez, an A level examinee. "This is not a difficult task for the boards to accomplish if they have the will for it."

Alongside the human chain, the students had been staging a virtual movement on social media.

Contacted secondary and higher education secretary Mahub Hossain said he is yet to receive any formal request from anyone about it.

However, he said that British Council Bangladesh Director Tom

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Footbridges falling victim to hawkers is nothing new, as pedestrians swerve through vendors without batting an eye. But seeing gas cylinders on the stairs will surely take one aback. This footbridge at the capital's Kakrail acts as storage space for a restaurant underneath. Since they cannot keep the cylinders on the footpath, they chain them up here, but passers-by suffer either way. This photo was taken last week.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Ratargul watchtower becomes 'risky', closed off to tourists

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

A watchtower has become risky only six years after it was constructed right in the middle of the core zone of Ratargul Swamp Forest in Sylhet.

The Forest Department yesterday banned climbing up to the tower for tourists visiting the country's most popular freshwater swamp forest.

Saad Uddin Ahmed, forester of Sylhet Forest Division, said, "It [the watchtower] has been risky for a long time and we earlier put up a signboard instructing that only four to five persons can climb up at a time."

"But, it never worked well; sometimes ten times of the instructed number of tourists climb up to the tower on a regular basis, making it vulnerable," he told this newspaper.

"That's why we have closed the watchtower for tourists and the order will be effective until further notice," Saad added.

Ratargul Swamp Forest -- sprawling 504.50 acres of land in Gowainghat upazila of the district -- was declared as "Reserve Forest" in 1973 and went into oblivion for decades.

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