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News Analysis

Garments fire: A retold tragedy

Dr Nizamuddin Ahmed

The death of eleven more garments workers in yet another city fire on Monday brings up the burning question: How many more deaths before our garments factory owners are convinced that most of their work places are virtual death traps?

As in several other previous garments factory fires in the city, on Monday afternoon, the same sequence of events took place at Trimode France and Sunlex Fashion factories in Mirpur: short circuit was as usual ascribed as the cause of fire because apparently none can then be held responsible, there was panic, people could not escape as the gates were locked, the "darwan" with the keys was not at hand to unlock the gates immediately, flames and smoke quickly engulfed areas with combustible materials, inmates collapsed due to lack of oxygen, some were trampled in the stampede to flee because of fear, heat and the need to breathe fresh air.

It may be recalled with sadness that on 27 December 1990, twenty-five workers, including 16 women, died in a fire at Saraka Garments, on 11 February 1995, five female workers died in a fire at Prostar Garments and on 5 August 1995, nine women workers died at a fire at Lusaka Fashion Garments. The recent tragedy at Trimode and Sunlex Garments is a re-enactment of the past horrors. The most unfortunate part of the deplorable episodes is that perhaps all the deaths could have been avoided.

With a few exceptions, none of the garments factories have any precautions against fire. Most of them do not have a single fire extinguisher. Many do not have water even in their toilets.

For want of security, there is usually only collapsible gate of the size of a door used in residential buildings. That, too, remains always half-locked. Sometimes, the door is fully locked such as during lunch hour even though hundreds of workers may be inside. In the panic accompanying any fire, the "darwan" with the keys is usually the first to flee the scene.

Extracts from a previous write-up is being repeated below because the forewarning has remained unheeded.

Most garment factories are time bombs for a potential fire disaster. The factory floor and the escape route are crammed with work-tops and combustible materials. The risk of fire being ignited is omnipresent due to improper wiring and electrical design, illegal connections, and careless smoking and heating habits. The hazard is multiplied because (a) the narrow exits are often locked, (b) the



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addressing the secretaries and senior officers at the cabinet conference room in Bangladesh Secretariat yesterday. —PID photo

Hasina visits Tungipara today

By Staff Correspondent

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will visit her ancestral home Tungipara in Gopalganj this morning.

Prime Minister will leave Dhaka at 8 am and is scheduled to return to the city at 3:35 pm today, according to sources in the Prime Minister's Secretariat.

Ministers, state ministers and party MPs will also accompany the Prime Minister and offer fetecha at the grave of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at Tungipara.

Fire in garment units

BGMEA to give Tk 50,000 to each family of the dead

Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the garments factory owners will provide Tk 50,000 to each family of the workers who were killed in a factory fire on Monday, reports UNB.

BGMEA President Redwan Ahmed visited the fire-ravaged factories to see for himself the extent of damage and announced the compensation for the families of the victims, said a press release yesterday.

The BGMEA president thanked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for her instant visit to the two garment units.

The BGMEA has also greeted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her assumption of office.

The Bangladesh Employers' Association (BEA) yesterday alleged that Monday's devastating fire incident in the city's two garments factories occurred due to "carelessness" and called for proper enforcement of the labour laws to check recurrence of such incident.

Dhaka-Rajshahi rail link restored

SIRAJGANJ, June 25: Direct, train communications between Rajshahi and capital Dhaka was restored today with the resumption of Sirajganj-Jagannathganj ferry services after long 21 months, reports UNB.

Syed Morshed, General Manager of Bangladesh Railway, Western Zone, inaugurated the operation of the railway ferry.

Railway sources said ferry vessel 'Suhrawardy' left Sirajganj ghat at 11 am for Jagannathganj ghat with the passengers of Dhaka-bound intercity 'Padma' express train from Rajshahi.

The ferry services snapped in September 1994 as the Jamuna lost navigability for abnormal fall in the river water, the sources said.

Since then, ferry services in the route had not been restored, even in the last monsoon.

4th anniversary of Tin Bigha accord today

From Our Correspondent

RANGPUR, June 25: The fourth anniversary of the handing over of the Tin Bigha Corridor will be observed tomorrow at Dahagram and Angorpota enclaves amidst great enthusiasm and festivity.

A number of socio-cultural organisations have drawn up colourful programmes to mark the occasion. The programmes include cultural functions, sports programmes, discussion meeting milad mahfil and processions. Meanwhile sources say, the Indian Forward Bloc leader Kamal Guha, backed by other anti corridor activists has planned to stage demonstration demanding annulment of the Tin Bigha accord signed between Bangladesh and India in 1992.

No new minister

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colleagues anything about expansion of the council of ministers.

"Definitely, the newly-formed cabinet will be expanded, taking a number of ministers and state ministers. But, that time has not yet come," said the minister, who is also a central leader of the ruling Awami League.

Eleven ministers and eight state ministers took oath on Sunday after Sheikh Hasina was sworn-in as the 10th Prime Minister of the country.

The names of Abdul Mannan, Abdul Momen, Amir Hussain Amu and Salahuddin Yusuf are being discussed in the ruling party circles as would-be ministers.

Region-wise representation in the council of ministers is also being considered, the minister said. But sources in the cabinet and in Awami League were tight-lipped regarding the Prime Minister's plan about expansion of the council of ministers.

BNP to back govt to consolidate democracy

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) yesterday expressed the hope that the new government would continue the development programmes initiated by the BNP government, reports BSS.

In a statement issued in response to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's address to the nation on Monday, BNP joint secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan said his party would extend all-out support to the Awami League government in its efforts for strengthening constitutional process and ensuring welfare of the common people.

BNP chairperson repeatedly said that our party had served the people when it was in power and also struggled for people's right and protecting sovereignty while it was out of power, Mannan Bhuiyan added.

Mannan said, "We once again want to say unequivocally that the BNP will cooperate and sincerely support any efforts to strengthen the democratic-constitutional process."

He, however, warned that the BNP would not hesitate to resist any stroke on the people's rights, democratic process sovereignty and national economy with its whole strength.

The BNP leader said his party was surprised and hurt as the Prime Minister did not mention the name of Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman, who was the announcer of the

Int'l Day against Drug Abuse today

International Day against Drug Abuse will be observed in the world today, reports UNB.

Different organisations, including the Department of Narcotics Control, have chalked out programmes to mark the day.

In a message on the occasion, President Abdur Rahman Biswas called for taking a pledge to keep the future generation away from the disastrous influence of drug abuse.

"The young generation is being affected most by drugs. Family ties and discipline, social solidarity and harmony are all being jeopardised by the drug problem," said the President.

President Biswas also observed that drug abuse and its smuggling is one of the detrimental elements that are endangering the very existence of whole human society.

To observe the day, the Department of Narcotics Control has organised a cycle race at 6:30 am from Manik Mia Avenue, a colourful rally from Shishu Park at 7:30 am and a discussion at Shilpakala Academy at 10:30 am.

United Nations Association of Bangladesh (UNAB) will hold a discussion meeting at its office where eminent journalists Santosh Gupta will be the main speaker.

May 18-20 incidents Probe body led by SC judge demanded

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incident, Nasima, 26, admitted to the DMCH in a critical condition, was improving, the sources added.

Police was guarding the affected factories till yesterday. A large quantity of clothes, saved from the blaze, were kept inside the factories, police said.

The owners of the factories could not be contacted till last night. Pallabi police said that a relative of the owner of one of the factories came to the spot yesterday morning.

Some employees of the factories were also seen in the area, sources said. But some witnesses to the incident claimed that the guards and employees fled the scene as the fire broke out.

Meanwhile, the National Garments Workers federation has held the owners of the factories responsible for the death of the workers.

The reluctance and ignorance of the owners caused repeated accidents in the garments factories," federation President Mojibur Rahman and General Secretary Amirul Haq Amin said in a joint statement.

They demanded compensation of Tk one lakh for the families of those killed and Tk 50,000 for the injured.

Foreign ship

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tug of Bangladesh navy have been placed around the vessel so that it can not move and navy divers were engaged to ascertain the extent of damage to the ship.

The secretary of the shipping ministry Anwarul Islam arrived here and visited the ship and the KAPCO jetty.

The government has, meanwhile, set up a three-member committee with the chairman of Chittagong port Zahiruddin Mahmud as its convenor to determine the cause of the accident.

Probe body

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Hasina: Secys

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of the administration and put forward some suggestions to overcome those.

Later addressing the government employees Sheikh Hasina made a fervent call to the government employees to work hard to better the conditions of the common people.

"You are the employees of the Republic owned by the people," the Prime Minister said and called them for dedicating themselves to the cause of the people.

Addressing the huge gathering of employees inside the Secretariat Hasina assured that her government would create an atmosphere where they could work independently and free from any influence.

She referred to the harassment and repression on government employees by the previous governments and said her government would not be partisan in dealing with them.

Responding to the demand for a pay commission of the employees, the Prime Minister assured them of setting up a committee to work to this end. She said, "I know prices of essentials are going up everyday and it is difficult for the fixed income groups to run their families with such pay."

"We have the desire, but do not have the means. We'll try to meet your demand within the limited resources," Hasina said. She also sought time to look into the multifarious problems facing the country.

Earlier, Secretariat Employees Union leader Syed Mohiuddin congratulated Sheikh Hasina on her assumption of the office of Prime Minister and called for announcing the pay commission.

Jahanara Imam's anniversary of death today

By Staff Correspondent

The second anniversary of the death of Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam will be observed throughout the country today.

The national coordination committee for Muktijoddha Chhetoma Bastabayan and Ghatika Dalal Nirmur, has drawn up programmes to mark the day.

As part of the programmes, wreaths will be placed at her mazar at Mirpur in the morning.

A procession will be brought out from the Central Shaheed Minar at 4 pm.

A discussion meeting will also be held at the Institution of Engineers at 5 pm.

National leaders will address the meeting to be presided over by Syed Hasan Imam, convener of the committee.

Economic diplomacy to be essence of foreign policy

Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad yesterday said economic diplomacy will be the essence of foreign policy of the present government, reports UNB.

The government will continue to follow the charter of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and endeavour to enhance the image of the country, he said while addressing the officials and employees of the Ministry.

Samad Azad said that the government would give special importance to strengthen relations with all the neighbours under the umbrella of SAARC.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abdul Hasan Chowdhury Kaiser, Foreign Secretary Farooq Sobhan also spoke on the occasion.

FAO Asia Pacific region director meets PM

Director of the FAO Asia Pacific region A Z M Obaidullah Khan called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office yesterday, reports UNB.

During the meeting, they discussed matters of mutual interest, said an official hand-out.

The Midnight File

Tamil suicide squad penetrates into Colombo

COLOMBO, June 25: A Tamil rebel suicide squad of 19 reportedly penetrated into Sri Lanka's capital Colombo under direct orders of rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, intelligence sources said today, reports Xinhua.

Identify problems, Home Minister asks dept heads

Star Report

Minister for Home Affairs Maj (rtd) Rafiqul Islam held a meeting with all the departmental heads under the ministry at his Secretariat office yesterday and asked them to identify their immediate problems and bring those to the notice of the ministry for necessary action, according to official sources.

The ministry has already instructed its relevant departments to chalk out an elaborate action plan to root out terrorism, the sources pointed out.

The departments represented at yesterday's meeting, chaired by the minister included Police, BDR, Ansar and VDP, Passport and Immigration, Fire Service and Civil Defence, Jail, Coast Guard, Metropolitan Magistrate and the Department of Narcotics Control.

More foreign leaders greet Hasina

More heads of state and government of various countries continued to congratulate Sheikh Hasina on her assumption of the office of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, reports BSS.

Deve Gowda

Indian Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda has felicitated Sheikh Hasina on her assumption of the office of Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

In a message, he said "It gives me great pleasure to extend to you my felicitations and good wishes on your assumption of the office of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. I am confident that under your leadership, Bangladesh would make progress towards greater prosperity and harmony."

His appointment provides us an opportunity to deepen and expand the ties between our two nations.

Li Peng

Chinese Premier Li Peng has congratulated Sheikh Hasina. In a message Premier Peng said: "the friendly relations and cooperation between our two countries will develop further and grow in strength during the tenure of your excellency."

Chandrika

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga has felicitated Sheikh Hasina. In a message President Chandrika said: "I recall the cordial discussion I had with you when I visited Bangladesh last year, and the lofty goals you had set for yourself to bring prosperity to the people of Bangladesh. I now wish you every success in your endeavours in realising these objectives."

King Wanchuck

Bhutanese King Jigmey Singye Wangchuck in his message congratulated the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and said "your excellency's election to this important post is a reflection of the trust and confidence reposed in your excellency's ability and deep commitment to serve your country."

King Wanchuck wished further strengthening the ties of friendship and cooperation existing between Bangladesh and Bhutan.

EC president

President of the European Commission Jacques Santer also congratulated Sheikh Hasina.

In his message, Santer said: "I hope that under your leadership, the friendly relations between the government of Bangladesh and the European Commission will be further strengthened."

Japanese envoy

Ambassador Kaneko also assured that his country would continue to support democratization of Bangladesh and remain one of its most important development partners.

Earlier, FICCI President Mahbub Jami felicitated the new government and said foreign investors were expecting that the government would pursue an economy driven by market forces as per its electoral pledge.

Representatives from multinational and other foreign firms operating in Bangladesh were present at the meeting.

Dhanmondi lake

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No 24 near Abahani field".

When a top official of the PWD was approached for his comment on the existence of the basti, he said, requesting anonymity, that he was not aware of it but assured that his department would "look into the matter".

It was alleged that despite employing a considerable workforce to look after the green space along the lake, the authorities have miserably failed to protect environment of the area.

"We have hardly anywhere to go to, this lake-side area was once so nicely maintained, but now there is no atmosphere for a family to have a walk. They (the authorities) do not care for us, they are after satisfying the officials with housing problem," said Nazneen, a social worker and resident of Road No 8, when asked for her reaction about the new housing units.

Many residents termed the decision "a conspiracy" to spoil the beauty of the place while the city was already having suffocating atmosphere due to lack of open space.