

Bomb scare halts theatre activity

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

Theatre activities came to a halt, as activists feel insecure after the August 21 grisly grenade attack on an Awami League (AL) rally.

At least 85 theatre groups under Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation decided to stop performance for a week.

The city has a few theatre halls convenient to stage plays and the Guide House and Public Library Auditorium of them closed for renovations. Some groups have even

shooter if we had any problem," said Mamunur Rashid, chairman of Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation.

"She was friendly with everyone," recalled actor Rokeya Rafique Baby.

They said the bomb blast left them to live in anxiety and a sense of insecurity is haunting them. "We have been lucky that we have not received any threat yet," Mamunur Rashid said.

"If they can attack Ramna or Udichi function, how long will it take them to attack

As the activists do not feel safe, it is not possible for them to ensure security of the audience.

Theatre enthusiasm was waning when a series of bomb blasts rocked cinema halls in Mymensingh in December 2002.

The activists dealt with the panic with security measures and continued staging their production. But the attack on the AL rally on Bangabandhu Avenue that killed 19 people spread fresh fears.

Liakut Ali Lucky said security measures,

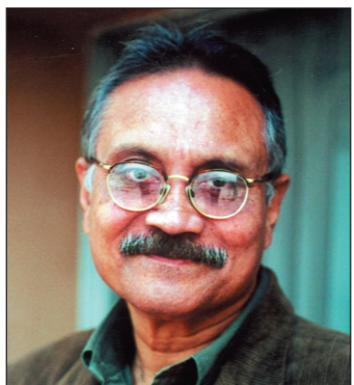
Tabibul Islam, chief secretary of Natyangan, said there was no attack on cultural activities in the Pakistani regime. "I feel ashamed as a citizen of this country where such an unprecedented incident takes place," he said, indicating cinema hall blasts.

The activists were dissatisfied as no blast case was probed. "Bomb blasts might have stopped, if intervention had been timely," Aly Zaker said.

Still, they believe extremist forces cannot stop the theatre or other cultural activities.



Ramendu Majumdar
... struggle to go ahead



Aly Zaker
... situation too tense



Mamunur Rashid
... not far from threat



STAR PHOTO

An empty surrounding shrouds the Mahila Samity theatre after the grenade attacks on August 21.

stopped rehearsals.

Mahila Samity Auditorium, a high-profile theatre hall, wears a dismal look, as the usual sight of theatre activists thronging the auditorium is missing. With the main gate closed, the caretaker was the lone human there.

The death of Ivy Rahman, president of Mahila Samity, from wounds in the grenade attack damped the spirit of everyone involved with the theatre hall.

"It is unimaginable that she will not be here anymore. She worked as a trouble-

maker?" he said.

"We cannot go unaffected as culture or theatre is not outside the society," said Aly Zaker, director of Nagarik Natya Sampad.

"The situation is so tense that if I go for a morning walk, I am not sure whether I will be back. How can we nurture our culture in such a situation," he said.

"We need to ensure security to our audience when they come to watch a play," said Liakut Ali Lucky, secretary general of Bangladesh Group Theatre Federation.

especially the use of metal detectors, would be taken to handle the situation and theatre groups would seek help from law-enforcement agencies to tighten security at theatres.

The rise of fundamentalist forces scared most theatre activists as they threaten cultural activities. "They tend to attack anything progressive," Rokeya said.

"Our stage is a reflection of cultural tradition of Bangladesh and extremist forces have a grudge against it," Lucky said.

"Theatre helped people express their opinion when there was a struggle against an autocratic rule. We have to pull it on at the present situation," said Ramendu Majumdar, president of Bangladesh Chapter of International Theatre Institute.

Activists plan to stage street plays to protest the fundamental forces, he said.

FOUR YEARS INTO RAMNA BOMB BLAST

Investigations fizzle out, masterminds evade arrest



April 14, 2001 saw a carnage that shocked the nation. Criminals are still at large as many blame political influence for their escape.

SULTANA RAHMAN

The police have apparently failed to identify masterminds, more than four years into the bomb blast at Ramna Bataamul that killed at least 10 people, although officials say they will wrap up their investigation in a month.

The latest finds show some Islamic extremists were involved in the blast at traditional Bangla New Year celebrations on April 14, 2001, but officials of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) declined to name them. They say the criminals will easily escape arrest if their names are published in newspapers.

Soon after the carnage that shocked the nation to the core, the police arrested 13 people who confessed to their roles in the blast.

Mizanur Rahman Shawdhin, Jahangir, Mamun, 'Boma' Yasin, Ibrahim, Khalil, Maulana Matiur

Rahman and Maulana Abdul Auwal were among the accused, but all were released on bail and the government lawyer did not argue against the bail petition weakening the case, a CID official said.

Many blamed the criminals' escape on political influence.

Dr Sanjida Khatun of Chhayanaut, a cultural organisation that organised the New Year programme, said the police headquarters screened the video of the statement of a man behind the blast.

"He said he planned in a Mohammadpur residence to plant the bombs at Ramna Bataamul. How could he be released on bail? What action have the authorities taken?" Dr Sanjida asked.

In the first two years of investigation, six investigative officers (IO) were charged making the probe lengthy.

"The three officers were transferred to Chittagong Hill Tracts as

punishment," a CID official said, asking not to be named.

Initially, the Detective Branch (DB) was investigating the case, which was later transferred to the CID. DB Additional Commissioner Akhtaruzzaman Bhuiyan and inspectors Abu Yousuf Molla and Awlad Hossain were the IOs of the case for the first two years after the incident.

Abu Hena Mohammad Yousuf of the CID is now investigating the case.

On the progress of the investigation, Yousuf refused to talk about the issue saying: "I cannot provide you with information without higher authorities' permission."

CID officials pointed to a recent circular from the inspector general of police that forbids release of information on bomb blasts to newsmen.

A former head of the Department of Forensic Medicine of Dhaka

Medical College said experts gave the police evidence on a victim carrying the bomb in a sack tied to his abdomen, another opening the sack -- his eyes close to the bomb -- and yet another helping others.

Incidentally, the bomb exploded on impact before it was thrown.

"The police did not think about our finds and carried out the investigation in their own way," he said.

Bomb attacks over the last seven years have killed at least 134 people, but investigators were clueless.

Experts say when a bomb is found, the army is usually called in to tackle the situation or examine the device and there's no doubt that the army can tackle bombs much better than the police or any other security agency in Bangladesh.

"But unfortunately, the army too does not have a specialised unit that deals with explosives," an expert said.



TALE RETOLD ...

Waterlogging in the rainy season is very common in Dhaka. But just a half an hour of heavy rain even in the dry season causes severe waterlogging in some areas of the old quarters of the city. Residents in Bakshibazar Lane and Nazimuddin Road complained that their areas go under rainwater because of the dilapidated drainage system, which can not pump water out of the area.



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN