

Most city schools lack fire fighting equipment

KAUSAR ISLAM AYON

About 5.4 lakh students and teachers of 533 government and private schools in the city are at high risk of fire accidents as most of these institutions do not have fire-fighting systems.

Students of these schools are not aware of fire safety since the school management do not impart any training on tackling emergency situations. None has an emergency fire plan to evacuate children in an orderly manner in case of a fire.

The structure of many school buildings, like that of Dhanmondi Government Boys' High School, is not suitable for students to escape during a fire incident.

The buildings are guarded by grilles with one or two narrow exit points that are kept under lock and key during the school hours, which makes the schools virtual tinderboxes.

About 1,000 to 1,800 students gather every school day in each of the big schools without any primary preparation to save themselves from fire incidents.

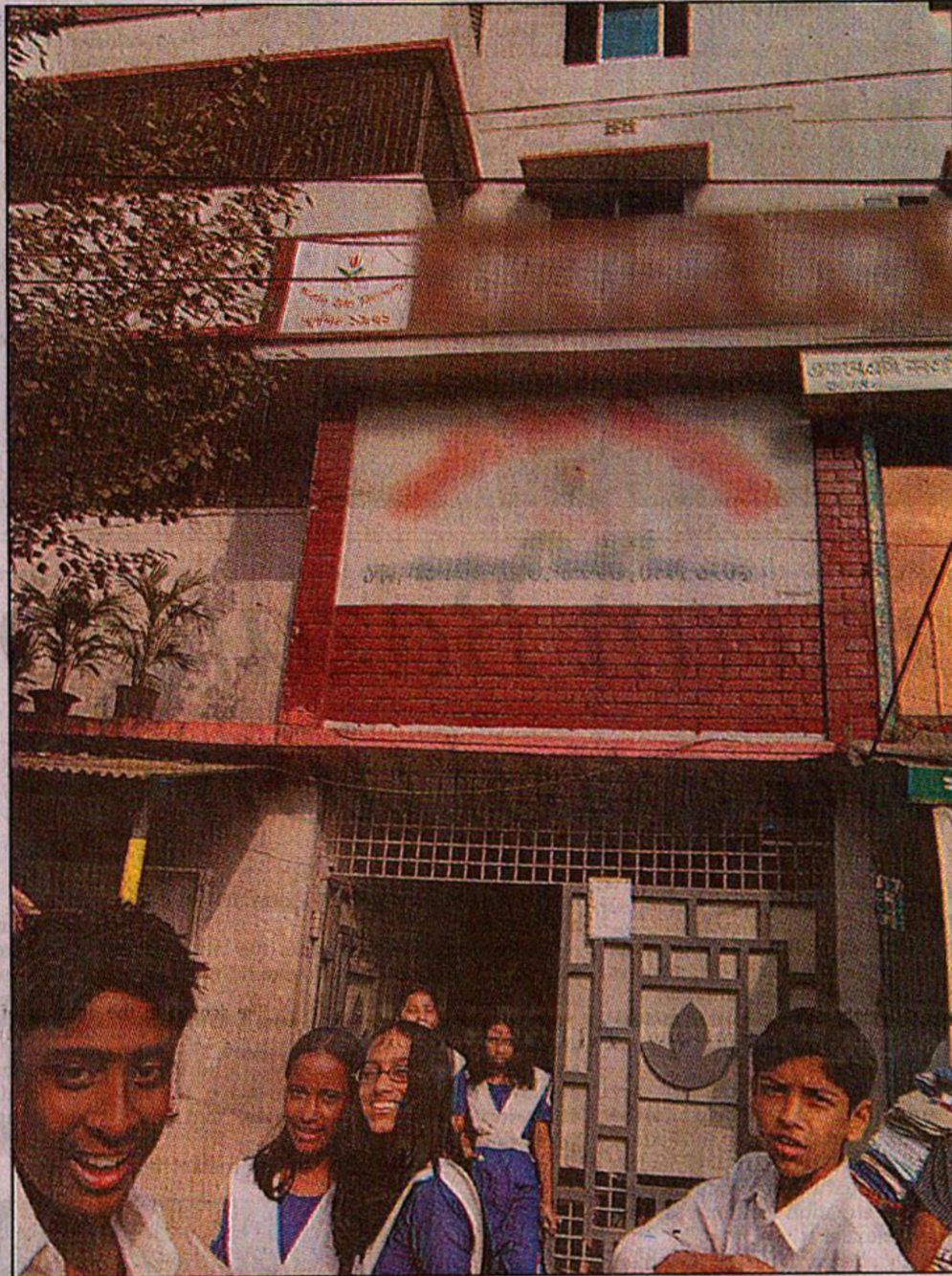
The schools in the old part of the city, mostly housed in age-old two or three-storeyed buildings, are highly unsafe because of their location in narrow lanes with only a single door that serves as both entrance and exit.

Fire service officials warned that a fire at these schools might cause great loss of life and property as in most cases the firefighters would not be able to reach the spots on time passing through the narrow, congested lanes.

"We request the school management to install at least one fire extinguisher for every seven classrooms and teach their students and teachers how to use these equipment. This would save hundreds of lives," said an official.

Although all the heads of the institutions feel the necessity of having fire-fighting equipment at their respective schools, they said they are helpless, as decision-makers have no interest in doing so.

"The issue was discussed on many occasions during the meeting with the ministry but no action has been taken yet," said a headmaster of a government high school. "We want to train our students but we need the equipment for training."



Many schools like this one in Dhanmondi have only a narrow single open space for exit and entrance without any fire fighting equipment.

The guardians are worried over the situation. "The schools do not have even primary preparation to save our children from fire incidents," said Akramuzzaman Khan, father of a student of Dhanmondi Govt Boys High School.

He said although there are two staircases in the school building, both of these lead to one narrow exit point. "I'm sure the students will not be able to come out of the building crossing two or three

collapsible gates during any accident."

AKM Mostafa Kamal, headmaster of the school, said they keep the exit point open during school hours. He admitted the fact that the school does not have any fire-fighting equipment but said: "We often teach our students on how to escape a fire accident."

The age-old building of Motijheel Govt Boys' High School where some 2,000 students gather

every day is also at high risk, as the building may collapse any time and there is no fire extinguisher installed there.

Syed Hafizul Islam, headmaster of Government Laboratory High School, said they do not have any fire-fighting equipment although his predecessor Abul Hasnat Faruque had taken an initiative to install such equipment in the school.

Prodeep Rozario of Holy Cross Girls High School, a school with

around 2,500 students, said that they do not have any preparation for fire accidents and they never taught the students on how to tackle such incidents.

The city's renowned schools like Udayan School, Viharunisa Noon School and College, Wills Little Flower School, Ideal School, Kamrunnessa Girls High School, Narinda Govt High School, Lalmatia Girls High School, Motijheel Govt Girls High School and Dhanmondi Govt Girls High School are running without any fire safety arrangements.

"There is no first-aid box at our school, let alone any fire-fighting equipment," said Tanya, a student of Ispahani Girls High School and College.

A few private schools, mostly the English medium ones, have installed fire extinguishers and fire alarms that work when smoke breaks out. But in most schools the authorities do not regularly refill the extinguishers. They never arrange any fire drill for their students.

"We have fire extinguishers at our classrooms but we need to be trained to use the equipment," said a student of Scholastica.

Management officials of some schools claimed that some of their students who are members of the Red Crescent Society, Bangladesh National Cadet Corps (BNCC) and Scouts are trained on tackling fire incidents.

The officials of fire service department said they have informally requested the school management to take safety measures at their respective institutions.

"They can mark the exit with an arrow sign on the wall and yellow line on the floor so that no one is lost at the time of an accident," Selim Newaz Bhuiyan, assistant director, Fire Service and Civil Defence, Dhaka.

State Minister for Education ANM Ehsanul Haque Milon told Star City that the government does not have the capacity to provide fire-fighting equipment for all schools at this moment but fire drills could be arranged in every school.

"We will make fire drills mandatory in every school at least once a year and engage BNCC, Red Crescent Society, Scouts and Girls Guide to train the students," he said.

Freedom fighters' hospital awaits reopening

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

The Muktiyoddha Kalyan (Welfare) Trust Hospital in Mirpur might reopen under a new arrangement according to officials of the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs.

Founded in 1979, the four-storeyed hospital was designed to provide freedom fighters with healthcare and also treatment for their families at a subsidised rate.

The Muktiyoddha Complex Fund Committee ran it from 1981-1993 before it was leased out to a non-governmental organisation on January 15, 1994 for ten years.

But that contract was scrapped four years later and the Muktiyoddha Kalyan Trust took over the hospital again on December 29, 1998. However, the hospital has not been functional since.

A committee, headed by the cabinet secretary, formed to finalise the names of freedom fighters decided in a meeting on October 14 that the hospital would be turned into a 50-bed orthopedic facility for all but would provide free treatment to freedom fighters.

"The project is still in a conceptual level," said a high official of the ministry. He informed there would be a meeting soon with the Muktiyoddha Kalyan Trust, Muktiyoddha Sangsad and the Complex Fund Committee to draw the outlines of the project.

"We will discuss about the hospital and offer the Trust and the Muktiyoddha Sangsad the opportunity to run it," said the official. He added that the number of hospital beds to be kept reserved for freedom fighters would be fixed later.

When contacted Noafel Miah, managing director of the Muktiyoddha Kalyan Trust, said that only the Muktiyoddha Complex Fund Committee, which is headed by a minister, had legal authority on the hospital.

"We can deal with it only if the committee tells us to," said Miah when asked why the hospital had remained closed for so long.

State Minister for Liberation War Affairs Rezaul Karim had told Star City last December that the ministry had invited tenders to lease out the hospital to a private

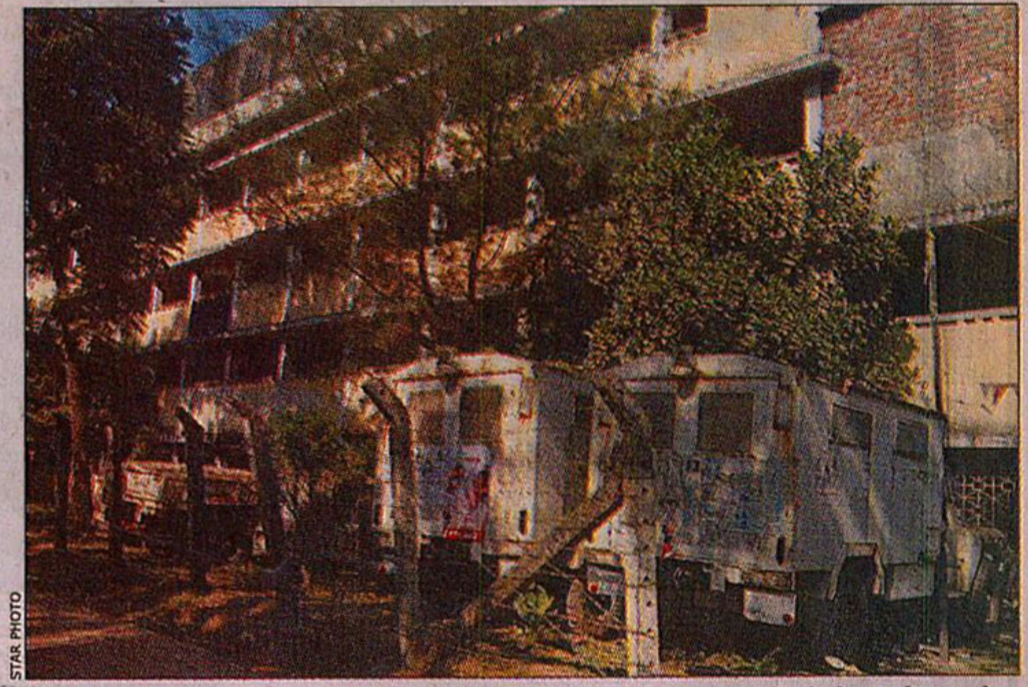
institution. But no suitable candidates apparently emerged as all of the bidders were reportedly inexperienced in hospital management.

"That is why the ministry is now thinking of converting the hospital," said an official. He confirmed that the hospital would be a charity organisation providing free medical facilities to freedom fighters. "It would not help the freedom fighters if the hospital provides treatment even at a low cost as they can not afford that also," he added.

A team of 10 ansars personnel and two officers have been posted at the hospital to look after security as valuable medical equipment have remained stored there. However, sources in the Muktiyoddha Kalyan Trust were skeptic about the quality of the equipment, which have not been used for a long time.

"Besides, they are quite outdated compared to the latest medical gadgets," said one Kalyan Trust official.

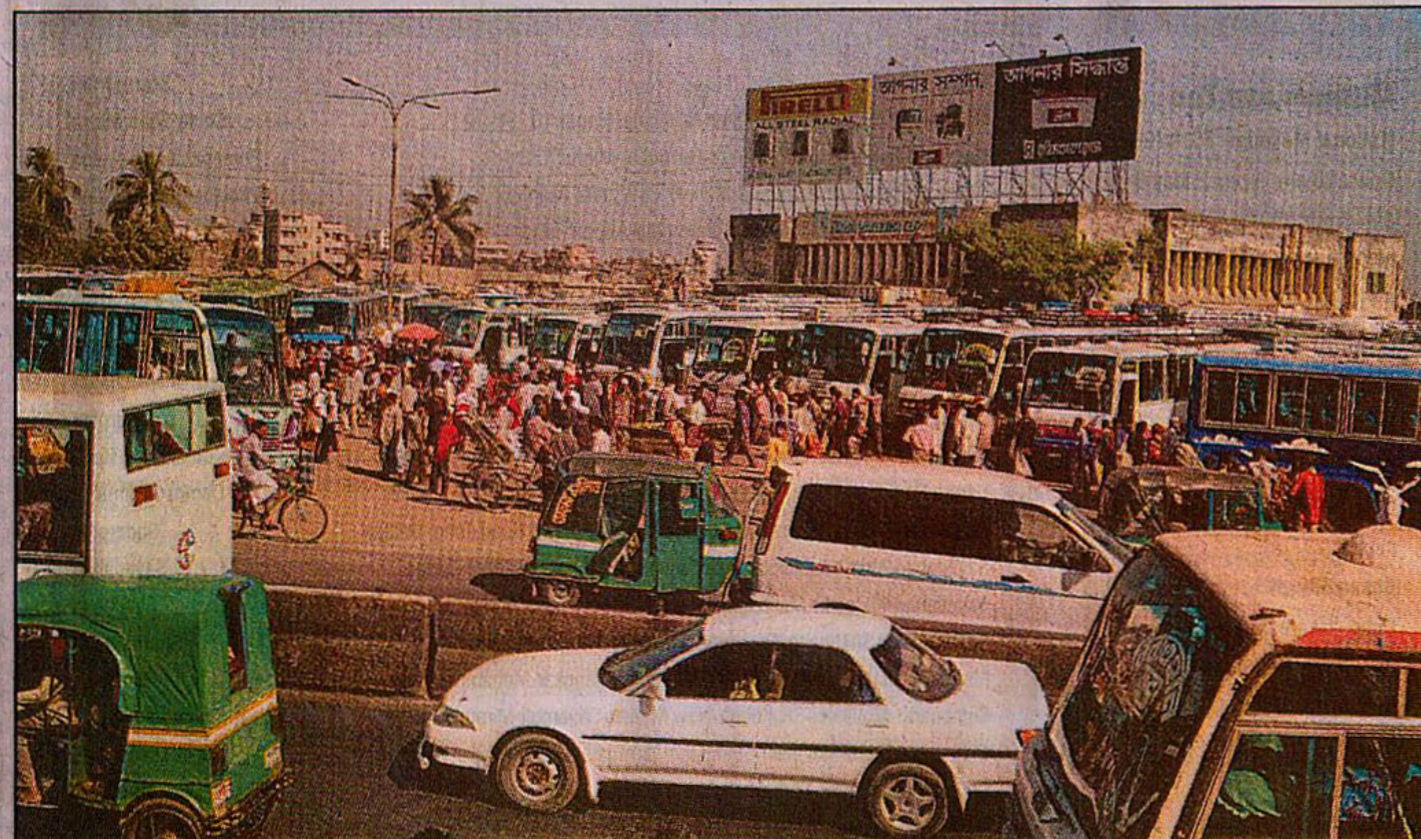
However a concerned official assured that the equipment will be checked and replaced if necessary once the hospital re-opens.



The hospital which has been lying neglected for the last few years now awaits the hope of reopening.

SAYEDABAD & MOHAKHALI BUS TERMINALS

Battle between DCC and Rora continues



SYED TASHFIN CHOWDHURY

Gross mismanagement and differences between the private company and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) have led bus owners, passengers, porters and those involved with the reconstruction of the Sayedabad bus terminal to untold suffering for the last six months.

Work that started in 2003 still continues, while 80-90 ticket counters of about 200 service providers operate from whatever spare space they can find within and outside the terminal.

"We serve customers despite wearing weather conditions," said a Shaikhin bus service ticket salesman.

Prior to reconstruction, buses plying on the Chittagong, Noakhali, Sylhet, Comilla, Gazipur, Turag had their own platforms, but now pick up and drop is haphazard because of the chaotic situation of the terminal.

Yet over 2000 buses still run in and out of this terminal daily although the numbers were much higher previously, said a resident

of the area, and as buses cannot park inside the terminal, the adjoining Janapad-Bishuwa road and the Chittagong highway. This continuously causes traffic congestion, making commuting extremely difficult for residents as well as other vehicles passing by adding to the already prevailing accidents and crime especially at nights.

"Routes cover most corners of the country, and buses are always packed with passengers. Business is quite profitable in this area," said Siddiqur Rahman, counter manager, Sugandha Paribahan.

DCC signed a contract with Rora Enterprise, a private company to maintain the Mohakhali and Sayedabad bus terminals to meet a World Bank condition to disburse Tk 44 crore to upgrade them under the Dhaka Urban Transport Project (DUTP). The upgrading of the Gabtoli bus terminal too, under the supervision of Diba Enterprises, another private company, was included in these funds.

According to DCC sources Rora Enterprises was overseeing the

improvement of Mohakhali and Sayedabad and had taken over management of the terminals in October 2003, but the private company has a different story.

According to the contract, Rora Enterprises had to manage and provide maintenance and upkeep and lastly provide security.

"We were expected to collect tolls from bus owners and others using the terminals by the first clause and spend whatever is necessary under the two other clauses," explained Akhteruzzaman, Managing Director, Rora Enterprises. "The rest of the money was to go to DCC," he said.

The toll for each bus was previously fixed at Taka 30 per trip, but DCC sources said in February this year, two notices were sent to Rora stating the contracts were cancelled a month from the date the notices were issued.

One notice stated that Rora had not paid lease money for four months, amounting to Taka 4,760,400 and Taka 2,182,360 in VAT for Sayedabad terminal.

"We did make the first month's payment but later on, we could not do so since we did not collect any tolls," said Zaman adding that the payments they make are losses incurred by Rora amounting to Taka 40 lakhs.

Zaman also said that tolls were collected by toll-collectors appointed by the local commissioner and paid directly to DCC.

"According to the contract, tolls were to be collected only by our personnel," said the managing director, mentioning that according to these incidents, corruption within DCC is transparent.

Rora enterprises have already filed two cases with the High Court against DCC under petition no. 3762 for Mohakhali and 3763 for Sayedabad bus terminals.

"Such allegations are totally baseless," said Mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka. In the meantime the rest of the work has been handed over to Panama enterprises.

"The project will be complete by December," the mayor said.