

Knitting factory fire

FROM PAGE 1
graveyard in Siddhirganj after conducting autopsy at Narayanganj General Hospital.

The injured were rushed to different clinics and hospitals in the vicinity and in Dhaka.

A number of workers suspected arson by the owner, who has been unable to pay their salaries for the last five months, an allegation the factory owner, Rahmat Ullah, brushed aside as baseless. The firemen, too, said it did not seem like sabotage to them. The workers were supposed to get their pays yesterday.

CONFINED, THEY DIE
Witnesses said sparks from an electric cable at the ironing section on the first floor caused the fire at around 9:15 Thursday night.

"Cloths piled at the ironing section caught the fire first. Within seconds, the entire floor was engulfed by raging flames," said Meherunnisa, a cutting section worker, who rushed downstairs with others to escape the hell.

In a minute or two, the fire spread to the other floors fuelled by fabrics scattered around and the power went out.

"A frightened man was screaming 'fire', 'fire' and asking the security in-charge to phone the fire brigade," Lal Mian, who was at the main gate, told The Daily Star.

Panicked workers running for their life found only a side door open that allows only one or two to pass at a time. The main entrance to plant was locked.

Surrounded by flames, people started to cry for help, but none came. Many of them climbed back to the second floor to escape through a rear exit, but that too was closed.

A group of workers managed to come out by breaking open a window on the first floor.

"I saw many of them faint and collapse on the second floor and trampled down by rushing crowd," Meherunnisa recounted yesterday afternoon.

As the fire engulfed the entire building, "Dense smoke covered the night sky and the desperate screams of the dying employees filled the whole area. It was a terrible experience," said Lal Mian.

The air was soon filled with the acrid smell of burnt human flesh. "We stood helplessly outside and saw them get roasted alive."

Two fire fighting units from Narayanganj, two from the fire brigade headquarters and one each from Sadarghat and Demra rushed to the spot at 12:10am yesterday. About a hundred firemen started to run seven pumps to extinguish the fire.

Fire fighters, the survivors and the locals who rushed to the area to help recovered 20 charred bodies that night from the building. Two more bodies were found in the morning.

"They are so badly burnt that it is difficult to tell who are males and who females," said Deputy Assistant Director of Fire Brigade and Civil Defence Farid Uddin Ahmed.

They succeeded in putting out the inferno at 3:40pm yesterday.

Fire fighters said, "There were enough fire extinguishing materials on every floor, but no-one used them."

Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) estimated the loss at more than Tk50 crore.

Police said a process is underway to file a case.

27 MISSING

At 4:30pm yesterday, the heat on the third floor, where firemen had been

Teenage boy

FROM PAGE 12
Car Nicobar by the Indian air force on Wednesday and met by the Andaman and Nicobar island's chief administrator Ram Kapse after a full day's rest.

"I did not know how to swim and so I clung to the tree for 10 days as sea waters did not recede from my village which is called Tapai Ming," the bruised teenager said.

Air force rescuers said Murlitharan finally toppled off the tree where he sheltered for 10 days and fell into the waters Tuesday but was saved by a tribal woman who looked after him until they arrived.

Murlitharan's parents are hospitalised in the southern coastal Indian city of Madras after their evacuation earlier this week from Car Nicobar which bore the brunt of the tsunami waves on December 26.

Lieutenant General B.S. Thakur, leading a mammoth relief operation in the ravaged Andamans, said he was elated to rescue 17 survivors himself Thursday from the Katchal islands where more than 4,600 people are missing.

"When we landed in Katchal two boys of this group walked 16km through very difficult terrain and told us about the survivors stuck in slush and surrounded by sea waters in West Bay.

"We first called a recon helicopter and sent one of the boys and guides after locating these 17 we used a heavy-lift helicopter to winch in each of the survivors on board. It was a very difficult task," Thakur said.

"If we had not taken one of the boys as guide we would never have found these people. The area is so devastated," he said.

"These people were stuck in the slush since December 26 and survived on coconuts and bananas but no water. It is a miracle," he said.

No clue yet to blast at Sylhet ex-MP's house

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Police could not yet find any clue to the December 24 bomb blast at the Sylhet residence of former Awami League lawmaker Syeda Zebunnesa Haque.

Even after two weeks into the incident, the five-member probe committee formed to investigate the blast too had made barely any headway with the enquiry. On Thursday it was granted for the second time an extension to finish the task, sources said. Earlier on 28 December, it was given a one-week extension. The committee headed by Additional Superintendent of Police (South) Shah Alam Faruqi was formed a day after the blast. It was asked to submit report within 3 days.

When contacted yesterday, Faruqi declined to detail the development of the enquiry, but said it would take some more time.

Meanwhile, Syeda Zebunnesa Haque, who sustained shrapnel wounds in the blast, had been treated in a hospital in Kolkata. She underwent an operation last week and had some of the splinters removed from her body, said a family source yesterday.

Ruby Fatema Islam, general secretary of Sylhet district Mohila AL, is still receiving treatment at Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital while six other injured had been discharged from the same hospital.

Police so far have arrested three in this connection. They are Luthfur Rahman Dulu, Zebunnesa's maid Hamida and nephew ZM Ilyas.

A magistrate court tomorrow would hear a petition for ZM Ilyas and Luthfur Rahman to be remanded. The hearing could not be held last week due to absence of the case docket (CD) in the court.

Apart from the arrestees, police quizzed six of the injured, but failed to extract any clue, said sources.

Eight people including Syeda Zebunnesa Haque, also the president of the Sylhet district Mohila AL, were injured when a powerful bomb went off at a meeting of the party unit on December 24, 2004.

55 followers of Atroshi pir injured in road accident

UNB, Natore

At least 55 followers of Atroshi pir (religious leader) were injured in a road accident on the Natore-Bogra Highway at Baksorhat yesterday today.

District Fire Service sources said the accident occurred when a Faridpur-bound bus, carrying 70 followers of the pir, overturned at about 12:45pm as the driver lost control over the steering.

Of the injured, 28 were admitted to Natore Sadar Hospital, while the rest released after first aid.

All the passengers, who hail from Indaheer, Raghunathpur, Gorail, Chhatragram and Mandighat villages in Kalai upazila of Joypurhat district, were going to Atroshi in Faridpur to attend the annual urs.

Fire devours

FROM PAGE 1
this?" Nurunnisa said while struggling to hold back her tears.

Like her son, daughter and son-in-law, scores of the employees of Shaan Knitting and Processing Ltd did not get their salaries for the last five months.

Her son Mamun, daughter Nargis and Nargis' husband Jahangir died inside the factory when the devastating fire burnt down Thursday night.

Sitting anxious at her house in Ailpara in Siddhirganj as her children did not return a few hours after their break, Nurunnisa heard fire destroyed their workplace.

She learnt about a few casualties while rushing to the factory. With the worst thoughts running through her mind, she rushed to the hospital to be sure of her apprehension -- all the three died.

"They were together at the morgue even after their death," she said after identifying them.

Wife of freedom fighter Siddiq Mian of Barisal, Nurunnisa moved to Narayanganj several years back and was living in Siddhirganj with the three.

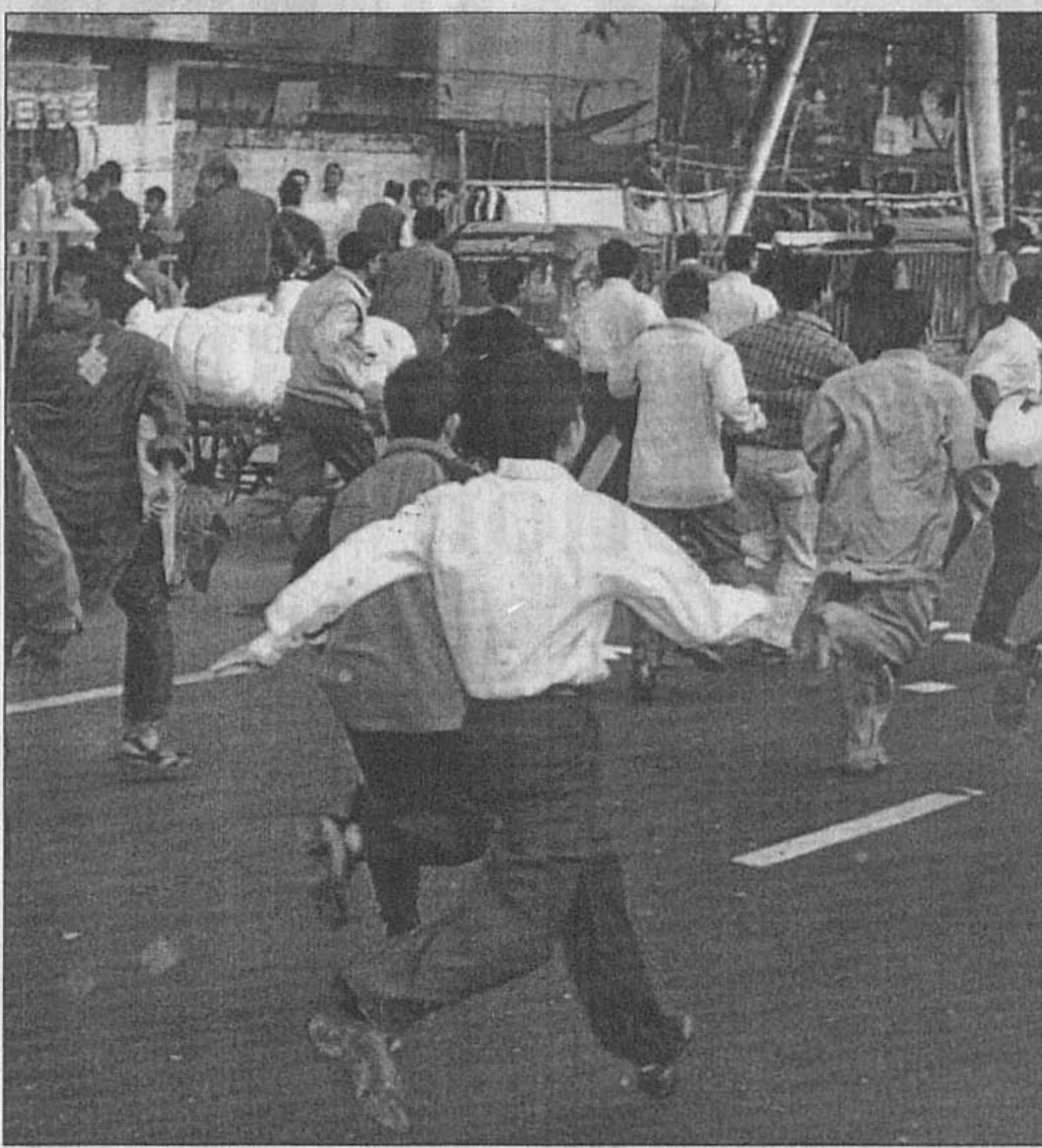
Seventeen-year-old Sofia had no food at her house when she left for the factory.

"She was starving and said she would return with rice and vegetables after getting her salary after five months," Rahima, her elder sister, said while mourning at the morgue.

Husbands of Sofia's sister Halima, Fatema and Shahera and some of their sons also worked at the factory. "Everyone but her returned," Rahima cried.

"We planned her marriage after the Eid-ul-Azha this month. But it will never take place, she'll never come back," Halima sobbed as she was holding Rahima in empathy with her.

The sisters failed to identify her from the lined up charred bodies. "We know she is dead and lying here," said Halima.



Activists of the Awami League and its front organisations run for cover as police swing into action on their procession in support of today's countrywide hartal near Mukhtangan in the capital yesterday.

Health sector programme

FROM PAGE 12
to grant a loan of \$200 million for the HNPSF in March.

The WB laid out this schedule recently in a draft aide-memoire based on the report of an appraisal mission of the donors that had visited the country on November 21 to December 8.

The aide-memoire said before the final negotiations the government should develop a preliminary project pro-forma and get that cleared by the Executive Committee on National Economic Council (Ecne).

The pro-forma has to chalk out a procurement plan and an action plan, both for an 18-month period, of the HNPSF. The first will specify what and when the government wants to purchase for the programme and the second will lay out how the government keeps a number of commitments in the next 18 months.

The commitments include to allocate at least 25 percent of the health budget for the poorer districts, develop a regulatory frame-

work for private health practitioners and finance them to set up healthcare facilities where there is no government ones. Besides, the donors want the government to increase its per capita health budget.

The planning ministry has expressed its reservations about the preliminary project pro-forma, saying the concept does not comply with the Planning Commission's rules and regulations.

But the donors have categorically told the government that without the pro-forma they will not commit any finance, sources said.

The government launched the HNPSF last year with the target to continue it up to 2006 without any donor finance. But, in case the donors agree to fund, the government has prepared a strategic investment plan (SIP) for the programme for 2003 to 2010. The SIP envisages a \$2.4 billion programme budget with donors' contributions accounting for over \$1 billion.

"So far the donors have indicated their willingness to finance up to 600

million dollars," said a source at the Economic Relations Division.

Canadian CIDA may contribute \$70 million, the United Nations Family Planning Association over \$35 million, and German donors GTZ and KfW \$12 million, he said, adding others have not specified how much they want to provide.

The source said, two-thirds of the donors' funds, if received, will be spent for the core components of the HNPSF and one-third for health sector reforms.

The HNPSF aims to ensure that at least 65 percent of the health allocations are spent for the most-needed healthcare services, besides improving the service delivery. It also attaches financial and service priorities to the backward communities through decentralisation of the sector.

The programme also functions as the sole government platform for co-ordinating all development initiatives in the health sector, where donors can put in their contributions.

Plight of survivors

FROM PAGE 12
was perched oddly on a mound of debris. Resorts were deserted and sand filled the pools.

Train tracks were twisted, broken and washed away in some areas but the roads appeared largely intact and the occasional traveller was seen.

Powell's motorcade drove through the centre of Galle, where homes and shops were crushed by the massive waves and dozens of fishing boats still litter the streets.

"I had a chance to witness the destruction first hand and only by seeing it on the ground can you really appreciate what it must have been like on that terrible day," Powell said through an aide.

"But I am impressed to see people cleaning up, helping their neighbours, starting to clean up shops and homes."

Meanwhile, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan yesterday toured the devastation from Asia's tsunamis as the world body took charge of the relief operation for the disaster, which left over 165,000 dead.

A day after making an impassioned plea for almost a billion dollars in immediate aid, Annan flew into the Indonesian province of Aceh for a tour of the region which was the worst hit by last week's killer waves.

His visit comes two days after a stop here by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who told a crisis summit Wednesday in Jakarta that Washington had disbanded a five-nation "coalition", criticised as a challenge to UN authority.

The United Nations is mounting its largest ever relief operation to help tsunami victims but warned its efforts faced major obstacles as transport links and communications in Aceh had "essentially collapsed" in the disaster.

Indonesia, and especially Aceh, should receive about 371 million dollars of the 977 million dollar overall appeal by Annan, the UN's humanitarian coordination agency said.

"As many as two million people there are in need and one million of them require immediate assistance," Assistant Emergency Relief Coordinator Yvette Stevens told journalists in Geneva.

The confirmed death toll from the catastrophe soared to over 165,000 Friday as over 19,000 more deaths were confirmed. Indonesia's health ministry said the death toll in the country had risen to 113,306.

But the United Nations has warned that tens of thousands more dead may be as yet unaccounted for in Indonesia.

World attention was also focused on the desperate plight of many survivors living in camps with limited drinking water and poor sanitation in Sri Lanka, where 30,615 people have been confirmed killed.

The United Nations said some 167 million dollars from the emergency relief money would head to Sri Lanka.

"We are hungry, people are searching for food," says Pakeela Ummah, a 48-year-old mother of three crammed into one of the makeshift camps in Kattankundy on Sri Lanka's battered eastern coast.

Survivors in the camp said they had only enough to make one meal a day of rice and lentils, with little powdered milk for babies and just two litres of drinking water per family with an average of six children.

"The main problem is we don't have food. The government is still sending more refugees but there is no assistance from the government," says K. M. Muhad, who was appointed by the community to take charge of the camp.

In India, the United Nations Children's Fund Unicef said it was counselling more than 100,000 children who were traumatised by the death of relatives in the tsunami-hit southern state of Tamil Nadu.

Fifty-two countries have reported dead or missing in the tsunami disaster, leading to the unprecedented level of pledges to help survivors.

Bangladesh

FROM PAGE 1
entertainment as the pair notched 62 runs in an explosive 10-over stand in the second session.

Rafique hit six fours and four sixes in 97 balls while Mashrafe, on way to a career best innings, smashed eight fours and one six before being the last man out.

New ball bowler Christopher Mofpu returned with an impressive 4-109 on his Test debut.

When the tourists -- tired after chasing leather for over five sessions -- came out to bat, life was difficult.

Stuart Matsikenyeri contributed 28 off 30 balls with five boundaries during a 31-run opening stand but his partner Barney Rogers was yet to open his account when Tapash Baisya made the breakthrough for the hosts.

Tapash removed Matsikenyeri in the eighth over when Bangladesh captain Habibul Bashar held a low catch to his left at first slip. There was no respite for the Zimbabweans as Rafique, brought into the attack, struck in his third over. The left-arm spinner trapped one-down Visu Sibanda leg before when the batsman played back to a straight ball.

Rogers' struggle came to an end when the left-handed opener was run out in the 20th over.

Having painstakingly reached five from 47 deliveries, the debutant was caught out of his crease when Hamilton Masakadza's straight-drive off Enamul Haque was flicked onto the stumps by the bowler.

Zimbabwe slumped to 59-4 after nightwatchman Graeme Cremer was adjudged lbw by another slider from Rafique without adding anything to the total.

Masakadza, a Test centurion on debut, was batting on 28 with Brendan Taylor accompanying him on eight.

Businesses smell a rat

FROM PAGE 12
servant to run the trade body, they alleged.

The BGMEA has meanwhile decided to go to court to prevent the administrator from taking over charges.

"We're surprised to learn that only the government, the defendant No. 37, among 37 parties, got copies of the notice," BGMEA President Anisul Huq said.

Several business leaders pointed out there is an arbitration tribunal in the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) to settle any dispute among the trade bodies. They said it is a usual practice to appeal to this tribunal to solve any dispute before going to court.

FBCCI President Abdul Awal Mintoo said: "The FBCCI tribunal is the responsible body for settling disputes among trade bodies. In the last two years the tribunal settled over 30 cases. It's not good sign that businesspersons directly go to the court bypassing the tribunal."

He said the government should never get involved in the disputes of trade bodies. "Unfortunately, it has been observed that the government tries to take political advantages from such internal disputes which is undesired."

Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) President Kutubuddin Ahmed, also former president of the BGMEA, said the appointment of the administrator will tarnish the image of our garment sector.

"It may have negative impact on apparel export. We're passing one of the most critical phases in the garment sector history with only seven days into the post-MFA era. We all need to work for our survival in the competitive world market, but such a move can dampen exporters' spirit," Ahmed said.

President of Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters Association Quazi Monirul Haq said the BGMEA leaders should be given a chance to defend themselves before appointing an administrator. "The appointment is not acceptable as there is no administrative failure in the BGMEA."

President of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association Md Fazlul Hoque said he did not know much about the court ruling. He said it is unfortunate that

the BGMEA was not given a hearing to defend itself before the court passed its ruling.

In the order of appointment, the government directed the administrator, Joint Secretary of Industries Ministry Mohammad Ayub Miah, to take over charges "immediately" and conduct election of the new office bearers within the next six months.

The administrator has also been directed to run daily business of the association.

MA Masud had filed a petition with the Court of Second Assistant Judge against the government. The content of the petition, on which the judgement was based, could not be known immediately.

Meantime, Oikya Jote, a platform of garment factory owners that pulled out of the 2003 election race, yesterday expressed the hope that the administrator will be able to hold the upcoming BGMEA election in a free, fair and peaceful manner in six months.

A press statement signed by SU Haider, principal coordinator of Oikya Jote, said the previous BGMEA election was undemocratic that snatched franchise of general owners of garment factories.

Gas field fire

FROM PAGE 1
control at 11:30pm, Nico sources said. The drilling of the well began at 7:00 pm on December 31 to reach 800 metres till yesterday evening, a Nico official told The Daily Star.

"As we noticed some gas leaks in the well at about 7:30 pm yesterday, we apprehended a blow out. Then we fired at a point (flare line) about 500 metres off the well. It was done to avert a severe blow out from the well. Gas soon spread around and started coming out in bubbles, proving the method worked," he said.

"The major threat is over," the official claimed at midnight.

Some locals said however over mobile phone at about midnight gas was coming out with big bangs at several points around the gas field even two hours after the fire broke out.

Local lawmaker Kalim Uddin Milon, who visited the gas field, said over mobile phone that almost all officials of both Nico and Bapex had left the area. Additional police contingents from the district headquarters were on way to Tengraia.

The upazila administration asked locals through loudspeakers to move to safety.