

Blaze at Bashundhara City

7 killed, 20 injured; 6 top floors gutted; govt orders probe; electric short-circuit suspected; mall closed for 2 days

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A raging blaze yesterday reduced the upper levels of the capital's Bashundhara City shopping complex to a skeleton, killing at least seven people and injuring 20 others.

Ill-equipped to douse high-rise flames, the fire fighters could do little as the fire that broke out on the 17th floor at around 1:45pm swallowed up two floors above and three below.

Later, military, police and Rab personnel joined them and brought the flames under control at around 9:00pm.

For hours, they fought an uphill battle with miserably inadequate equipment at their disposal.

Since Fire Service and Civil Defence's only aerial ladder cannot gain access beyond 13th floor, six floors of the 20-storey mall-cum-office tower remained out of the fire fighters' reach to be left in ruins.

Black plumes of smoke from the high rise spiralled upward, while blazing windowpanes, furniture and other objects rained down on the pavement.

Of those dead, Baki Billah, a member of Bashundhara's own firefighting department, slipped and fell trying to climb down a rope.

Three others however made safe landing while an air force chopper rescued another fireman from the rooftop.

The injured were rushed to nearby clinics and hospitals and treated for burns and smoke inhalation.

Lt Commander Shahidul Islam, who led a 36-member rescue team from the navy, said they searched through the affected floors, but found no-one.

However, locals said a number of people might be trapped inside as smoke and heat made it difficult to come out to safety. Their fears came true as the rescuers in a post-fire search found six bodies beside the elevator doors on the 17th floor.

Witnesses said none of the corpses could be identified as they were charred beyond recognition.

Some staff of the shopping complex, the largest in the country, said they were afraid the bodies retrieved might be their six missing colleagues'.

Earlier, hundreds of panic-stricken shoppers scrambled for exits as summer winds fanned the flames on the floors overhead.

Those who were in the cineplex and gymnasium in the shopping centre were brought out of the building through gates on the west.

The sight of upper Bashundhara burning fiercely caused panic among occupants of the neighbouring buildings.

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PHOTO: SHAWKAT JAMIL AND SHAFIQUL ALAM

Plumes of smoke rising from the Bashundhara City were visible from long distance in the capital yesterday afternoon. Inset, a fireman on a ladder tries to get closer to the raging fire at the southern part of the building. More pictures on page 3.

Automated fire system fails

Complex's water reservoir found empty

HELEMUL ALAM

Even though Bashundhara City building in the capital had several fire hydrants inside, the building's reservoir had no water. This helped the fire to spread and claim the lives of seven persons yesterday.

Director General of Fire Service and Civil Defence Abu Nayeem Md Shahidullah said the hydrants were useless as there was no water in the tank. "We initially had to pump water from nearby Unique Trade Centre," he said.

Prof Nizam Uddin Ahmed of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) said the fire hydrants not functioning and combustible items inside helped the fire spread fast.

"If the hydrants worked, the fire might not have spread so fast," he said.

A fire service official said Bashundhara City's own fire fighters had very little training and they could not control the fire.

Architect Foyez Ullah, who was involved in the construction of Bashundhara City, said Bashundhara had central fire-management system with all the modern fire-safety equipment for a tall building but those were not functioning at that time.

Former fire service high official Selim Newaz Bhuiyan visited the spot and said since it was the weekend the electricity might have failed and the fire detectors might have malfunctioned, both of which could have helped the fire spread.

It was very fortunate that it happened on a Friday, otherwise

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No firefighting beyond 13th floor

Firemen waited for blaze to come down

RAIHAN SABUKTAGIN

Fire fighters could not douse the flames on upper floors of Bashundhara City shopping complex in the capital yesterday as they do not have required logistics and equipment to tame a blaze beyond 13th floor of a building.

Despite reaching the spot immediately after the fire broke out, they had nothing to do but watch it helplessly.

Later, they started drenching the lower floors of the high-rise and adjacent small buildings to save those from being engulfed by fire. And they just waited until the flames came down to 13th floor raging through the six upper floors.

"We are capable of putting out fire up to 13th floor of a building by using our TTL (turntable ladder). But the fire at Bashundhara broke out on 19th floor," said Motiur Rahman, a fire fighter, who was trying to operate the faulty hydrant system at Bashundhara City.

Until last year, Fire Service and Civil Defence department could fight fire up to seventh floor. It bought the TTL after the inferno at 11-storey BSEC building.

The higher authorities appear to have learnt little from the previous fire incidents at high-rises in the capital, resulting in the lack of preparedness to face recurrence of such fire.

Successive governments neglected the need for building an efficient fire fighting system for the capital.

The city now has 12 fire stations equipped with about 20 vehicles including water carrying lorries and pick-up vans for carrying pumps. The number of stations, workforce and equipment is too small to provide service to the 1,530-square

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Mall all abuzz before hell broke loose

WASIM BIN HABIB and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

It was 1:40pm yesterday. The Bashundhara City Complex was buzzing with activity as usual. Shoppers were busy bargaining with sellers while a few people were taking exercise in the gym. The food courts were bustling with customers. Movie lovers were eagerly waiting to watch film at the Star Cineplex.

Suddenly everything changed as the news of fire on an upper floor of the shopping

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MEGA-MALL

- Bashundhara City is a 20-storey building
- It houses over 2,500 shops
- Eight levels for the shopping and recreation complex
- 20 floors for the office tower (where a fire broke out yesterday)
- Bashundhara boasts a gym, a food court, an indoor theme park and Bangladesh's first multiplex cinema

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A battle in the dark

Sky-lift fails to reach top floors

ARUN DEVNATH and EMRAN HOSSAIN

A small crowd lingered into the night, hours after fire fighters battled out the blaze at the Bashundhara City shopping mall yesterday.

Shards of glass glinted in the light streaming from an 'emergency' lighting unit set up by the Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD), just across from the mega-mall that lost six of its floors to the blaze.

Many spectators lined the edge of the road, past Bashundhara City, only to see the folded Bronto ladder that had sky-lifted firemen to hose down the raging blaze earlier in the day.

The Bronto sky-lift (F54 HDT), a truck-mounted hydraulic ladder, was not long enough to reach out to top floors. Many complained that the Fire Service was not equipped enough.

Md Shawkat Hassan, assistant director (store and purchase) of the FSCD, told The Daily Star that the aerial ladder used by the firemen yesterday has a 54 metres outreach.

"For the first time after purchase, we have used this ladder in operation," he said.

The entire product range of Bronto Skylift includes about 50 models between 16 to 104 metres working height, but the advanced modularity allows countless client-specific variations.

Abdul Khaleque Mollah, who has been with FSCD for 31 years, was a quiet team player in the battle against the inferno.

He was manning the emergency lighting unit, powered by a generator, to light up the site with six bulbs. "This is my duty for today."

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Baki goes to office, for good

EMRAN HOSSAIN

Like every other day Baki Billah had to "escape" his two children playing tricks to attend office yesterday. But like other days, the fireman of Bashundhara Group did not return.

Baki Billah was one of the seven persons to die during the fire that broke out at the Bashundhara City Shopping Complex yesterday. As soon as he heard the fire alarm, he rushed for the 17th floor to douse the fire but the black smoke did not let the brave fireman come back. He suffocated to death.

"Abbu (dear son), drink milk. I will just go and return by the time you finish drinking," Baki last said to one of his children before leaving for office at 1:00pm. He had to spend hours playing hide and seek with his sons. The kids locked the entrance to their residence several times to prevent their father from going to office.

"My sons never liked their

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9 sedition cases filed against 15 Tahrir men

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Nine sedition cases were filed yesterday and Thursday against 15 activists of Islamist outfit Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Officers-in-charge of Gulshan, Uttara, Pallabi, Mirpur, Darsus Salam, Ramna, Sabujbagh, Mohammadpur and Khilgaon police stations filed the cases against 15 out of 27 Tahrir men arrested after the carnage at BDR headquarters in Pilkhana.

Gulshan and Uttara OCs each accused four Hizb ut-Tahrir men.

Anwar Hossain, deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police Mirpur zone, told The Daily Star, "The cases were filed after getting the required government approval."

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Armed Chhatra League cadres are chased by activists of Islami Chhatra Shibir during their clash near Bangabandhu Hall in Rajshahi University yesterday. More photos on page 14.

Shibir, BCL go on the rampage at RU

Shibir leader killed, 100 injured in clashes; RU, RMC, Rajshahi College shut down

ABU KALAM, RU

Rajshahi University (RU) was closed for an indefinite period yesterday following sporadic clashes between Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) and Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS) that left university unit ICS general secretary Sharifuzzaman Nomani killed and at least 100 people injured.

The RU authorities at an emergency meeting held at 1:00 pm also asked the male students to vacate their dormitories by 5:00 pm yesterday while the female students by 10:00 am today.

Rajshahi Medical College (RMC) and Rajshahi Government College were also closed sine die following the RU clash.

Sources said, the RMC authorities at an emergency meeting also asked its students to vacate their hostels by 5:00 pm yesterday. The male students of Rajshahi government college were also asked to vacate their dorms by

5:00pm yesterday while the female students by 10:00 am today.

RU sources said the clash ensued on RU campus yesterday following Wednesday's attack by ICS men on the BCL activists.

Besides the BCL and ICS men, some general students, journalists, police, local businessmen, local Awami League (AL) activists were also injured in the yesterday's violent clashes while around 100 rooms of BCL were ransacked.

Seriously injured 60 persons, mostly BCL men, were admitted to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) while the rest were given first aid at RU Medical Centre and private clinics.

Additional police were deployed on the campus where a tense situation was prevailing.

POLICE RAIDS AND SHIBIRATTACK
Earlier on Thursday night, BCL RU unit president Ibrahim Hossain Moon filed a case against

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