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MALL FIRE PUTS CITY ON EDGE



FROM LEFT... One of Bashundhara City's own fire fighters being rescued by a chopper after he was stranded on the roof. A man breaks down in tears trying to reach his brother over cell phone who he believed was stuck inside the building on fire. Onlookers on Panthapath make it very difficult for emergency vehicles to go in and out of the spot. More photos on page 3. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Workers returning in alarming numbers

Overseas employers send many of them on long vacation

PORIMOL PALMA

The number of Bangladeshi workers returning from South East Asian and Gulf countries is increasing every day, as their employers cannot afford to employ or pay them due to the economic meltdown.

Many returned from the United Arab Emirates said their employers sent them on long vacation due to the slowdown especially in construction sector.

Around 300 workers returned home in the early hours yesterday. About 160 workers came from Malaysia, 90 from Singapore and 40 from the Maldives on board a Malaysian Airlines plane around 1:00am.

Around 90 more workers were scheduled to depart from Singapore yesterday night.

"The number of workers returning home from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia has increased significantly since mid-January," said an official at Zia International Airport (ZIA).

A source said the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET), which records the number of deported workers and those with out-passes, reported that in February 8000 workers returned from different countries, while the number was only 4000 in January and 3500 in December last year.

Out-pass is a document issued by the Bangladesh missions abroad when the workers become illegal immigrants after visa expiration or are taken to custody for violation of laws.

Till March 11, over 3000 workers were deported with out-passes. BMET, how-

ever, is not keeping records of those returning with proper documents for long vacation.

Nayeem, a worker who just returned from Malaysia yesterday, said he went to Malaysia two years ago, but was provided with jobs only for six months. For the rest of the time, his agents kept him and many other Bangladeshis confined in different places.

"I did not receive any cooperation from our High Commission," he told The Daily Star, adding that his employer did not renew his work permit though he gave assurance repeatedly.

Another returnee Abul Kalam said he went to Singapore last March, but was not provided with any jobs.

"We were 500 Bangladeshis altogether."

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Bashundhara architect not sure what went wrong

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Architect of Bashundhara City Mohammad Foyez Ullah firmly believes the fire that broke out in the country's largest shopping complex could be extinguished in only 10 minutes had the fire fighting systems worked or used in time.

He also thinks that the fire could be doused with the help of interior system of the building. He said all the modern equipment, including automated fire, smoke and heat detectors are kept in the building.

"The building is a model one where every single equipment is installed to douse the fire within some minutes. But I don't know what was wrong

SEE PAGE 15 COL 6

High risk at highrise

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The fire at Bashundhara City Shopping Complex once again points to the authorities' negligence in ensuring fire safety in high-rise buildings in the capital.

There should be regular fire drills at regular intervals, including a big annual one, at all high-rise buildings, said Dr Nizamuddin, architecture department chairman at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) and an expert on urban fire security.

According to the Fire Prevention and Dousing Act 2003 and the amended Building Construction Act 1952, all high-rise buildings should have their own fire security measures and fire escape and the owners have to conduct fire drills at regular intervals.

However, no government agencies monitor if the rules are being violated.

Prof Mehdi Ahmed Ansary of Buet said most high rises including markets in Old Dhaka do not have any fire fighting equipment. High rises in the new town do have fire fighting equipment but that is not satisfactory.

"Most modern furniture and decorative items are highly inflammable and people living in flats in congested buildings having no fire exists are at great risk all the time," he said.

Experts discourage unplanned urbanisation, especially risky construction of buildings and setting up industries in non-industrial areas or in improper ways. However, the authorities concerned have already approved a number of housing projects and hundreds of high-rise buildings without proper planning, urban experts said.

Fire-fighting vehicles cannot enter most roads in the old part of the city and most areas in Mirpur, Pallabi, Kafur, Kazi Para, Tejgaon, Pirebagh and Sabujbagh as the roads are not more than six to eight feet wide, Prof Mehdi said.

Haphazardly set up electric wires in Old Dhaka also create obstacles to the vehicles, a fire service official said.

Urban planning expert Prof Nazrul Islam said urbanisation should be planned, maintaining quality - there should be enough open space, fields and water resources. "It could be very easy to get water if the Hatirjheel-Begunbari canal project were completed now," he said.

While fighting the fire at the BSEC Bhaban in 2007 fire fighters faced a crisis of water and had to fetch water from Sonargaon Hotel and the adjacent Wasa Bhaban.

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BDR CARNAGE Witnesses start to give statements

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) yesterday began to take statements of witnesses to the carnage at the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) headquarters.

On the first day eight witnesses gave their statements to the CID.

The CID also showed 12 more persons arrested.

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WORK VISA CANCELLATION Govt team to go to KL next month

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A high-level delegation led by the Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister will visit Malaysia early next month to discuss on the manpower issue arose following Malaysia's cancellation of 55,000 work visas to Bangladesh workers.

As there will be a general election in Malaysia on March

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PHOTO: STAR

The two assault rifles, ammunition and grenades seized early yesterday in Roangchhari upazila of Bandarban. Two people were arrested in this connection.

Zardari given 24 hours to control situation

Hundreds of activists detained as Gilani may reach out to PML-N under army pressure

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, PTI, AFP, Islamabad

Under a new deal 'backed by Washington, London and the army establishment', Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari has been given 24 hours to act on the lawyers' stir for overturning the controversial measures of former ruler Pervez Musharraf, a media report said yesterday.

Authorities have detained hundreds of politi-

cal activists and lawyers in recent days, seeking to thwart a protest movement that is challenging the government's shaky year-old rule.

Intelligence officials said more than 200 people, including prominent lawyers and local opposition party leaders, had been forcibly rounded up or placed under house arrest since early Friday in North West Frontier Province.

Most activists and lawyers went into hiding.

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M16, grenades seized

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

Army members seized two sophisticated firearms and ammunition from remote Aong Jai Karbari Para village in Roangchhari upazila of the district and arrested two indigenous siblings early yesterday.

Acting on a tip-off, the army led by Major Khaled launched an operation Thursday morning and recovered one M16 rifle, one

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Three Juba League men hurt in blast

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kustia

Three Juba League (JL) leaders including its joint convener of Chuadanga district were injured as unidentified criminals hurled bombs on them Thursday night.

Injured leaders are Chuadanga district JL convener Baharul Islam Ayon.

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Rejoinder

Supreme Court (SC) Registrar Abu Bakar Siddiquee has contradicted a portion of the news item headlined "Sentenced in absentia: No bail or no jail for at least 15 convicts" published in The Daily Star on March 10.

In a rejoinder dated March 12, he said the High Court bench concerned did not place the case records with the dissenting judgments before the chief justice until March

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