



MORE THAN A TRAGEDY

Clockwise from top, people walk in the debris of Tazreen Fashions; burnt stairs of the garment factory; firefighters try to control the blaze; a missing worker's ID card; equipment reduced to ashes; people taking photos on mobile phone to identify bodies; anxious wait for missing persons a day after the fire; the rear of the building, which has no emergency exit. The photos were taken by Sk Enamul Haq, Rashed Shumon and Palash Khan over the two days since Saturday as the worst garment factory fire in the country's history shook the entire nation.



Death trap

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room for airing or little scope for breaking in or out.

And nary an exhaust fan was in sight.

The upper two floors of the sprawling structure were not operational and hence padlocked, meaning it was difficult to rush to the rooftop in case of fire.

Even if one can make it to the rooftop, the absence of any water source denotes it would not be of much respite from the looming danger.

Inside, the building has only three staircases for 2,200 workers -- and faulty fire extinguishers.

Panic erupted on the second, third and fourth floors of the building with the sounding of the fire alarm.

Governed by the sense

of self-preservation, the workers rushed down the stairways only to be summoned back by the managers -- saying the alarm system was acting up.

But the workers quickly sensed there was a fire, a fierce and deadly one. They again rushed to the exit point -- to find it locked from the outside.

It was too late. Trapped and engulfed in smoke, they died like chickens in gas chambers.

As the fire made its way in, it gobbled up parts of the floors -- and everything that came in its way.

Adding to the desperately sorry scene was the narrow road leading to the factory, as the fire-fighters fought to manoeuvre their vehicles to the site. There was no source of water closeby, either.

In the aftermath of the country's worst factory fire, hundreds of people flocked to the site and wondered why and how it happened.

One witness described the building as a death trap. Mohammad Sharif, a grocer in the neighbourhood who lost his parents-in-law in the blaze, said he saw a pile of dead bodies on different floors of the building. He turned 21 bodies over, but none of them were his in-laws.

After a visit to the factory site yesterday, Mubasshar Hussain, president of Institute of Architects Bangladesh, summed up it all: "All stairways lead to the warehouse on the ground floor. It was as if the workers were descending into infernal fires."

The saviour

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whose prompt action the death toll from the worst garment factory fire in the country's history would have been higher by at least 200.

"We were enveloped by intense heat and smoke. We ran from one floor to another, looking desperately for an escape route," said Khairul, who worked on the second floor of the garment factory as a quality inspector.

"While on the second floor, I suddenly noticed a window towards the south and saw a flicker of hope. I could see the roof of a three-storeyed building adjacent to ours."

He tried to remove the steel grille, which was not that easy. He asked several others to give him a hand. After about 10 minutes, they managed to pull off the grille.

"I have no idea how I leapt across," he said. "Later when I checked the space between the buildings, the thought of the leap made me scared."

As soon as Khairul was on the other side, he found a few bamboo poles on the roof. He placed the bamboo poles across and made a bridge between the roof and the window. The others got out of the building using the bamboo bridge.

Garment workers Ilias, Javed, Russel, Rozina, Shahida and Soheli told The Daily Star that they were among the 200 or more people who were led to safety by Khairul and a few others.

Khairul comes from Piruzali in Joydevpur. He lives in a rented house close to the factory in Nishchintapur village with his wife and their nine-year-old daughter.

"Now the only thing that worries me," he said, "is the future of my family. Because of the fire I lost my colleagues and I lost my job too."

Grief-struck

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and maintenance), said the fire-fighters found a gate on the staircases locked and had to cut a padlock open during the rescue operation.

The workers rushed through the other staircase to escape the flames. As they were half way down the escape route, they were told by their supervisors to get back to work. The supervisors assumed that the fire was a small one and would die down soon. But it was the other way round.

The blaze spread from floor to floor, burning its way in. Clouds of smoke filled every corner of the eight-storey building. The lights went out.

Flames spread fast from the fabrics and yarn stored on the ground floor, and trapped the workers inside the building. Many died after jumping off the building in an attempt to escape the flames while some escaped climbing down the scaffolding attached to the building.

Fire-fighters took half an hour to arrive at the scene, and the 18 units of fire service toiled more than 11 hours to put out the blaze.

The factory's safety system was below standard as the building has three staircases that lead to a lone exit on the ground floor. About 1,800 workers were working in the factory when the fire broke out in the warehouse on the ground floor.

Delwar Hossain, managing director of Tuba Group that owns the factory, claimed that the factory had adequate fire safety measures, but the

workers could not use those during the incident.

He said they had arranged a fire drill at the factory a few days ago.

According to Delwar, the workers died from suffocation as they failed to escape because of thick smoke in the three staircases and the ground floor.

Documents posted on Tuba Group's website included a letter purporting to be from Wal-Mart's ethical-sourcing department for the US and Canada informing Tazreen Fashions that a May 2011 audit had found it to be a "high-risk" factory. The letter said two more such findings within two years would lead to Wal-Mart suspending orders from that factory for at least a year, reported The Wall Street Journal.

The workers said bundles of fabrics and yarn stacked in the factory's corridors and passages had ignited, turning the escape routes into death traps.

Kamrun Nahar, who worked as a sewing machine operator on the fifth floor, said they tried to rush to the ground floor as the alarm went off, but found the gate on second floor's staircase locked.

The supervisors told her to return to work.

"I helplessly waited for two minutes and then ran towards another staircase. Around 50 men and women followed me and we reached the exit on the ground floor, where all the staircases meet. We felt heat and saw smoke when we came down."

Many workers escaped through the adjacent

building by breaking metal bars of windows. The owner of that building, Mahmud Ali Sikder, said a makeshift bridge was made to connect the two structures.

He claimed that more than 400 people were helped to escape through his building.

About a dozen workers tried to extinguish the blaze with water after the fire spread on the ground floor.

"We tried to bring the fire under control but the highly flammable fabric and yarn fuelled the flames, and we gave up," said Mominur Rahman, who was working on the first floor of the factory.

"Since we were on the first floor, we sensed the danger within minutes. We tried to extinguish the fire for the next 15 minutes," said Mominur, who received minor injuries.

"We had a fire drill only a week ago, and 15 of us received training on how to douse fire with water or extinguisher, but nothing worked in this case," he said.

Electricity went out within minutes, and flames swept through the corridors and staircases cutting off all exit points, said Mominur.

He suspected that the fire had started much before it was detected.

The extent of the damage started to emerge as fire-fighters finally brought the flames under control at about 6:00am on Sunday. Charred bodies and debris were on every floor.

In the aftermath of the factory fire, people were in

a desperate search of their loved ones. Some of them were crying, some stood still gazing at the blackened, sprawling building. Some others dashed to the playground of the school nearby, where the dead bodies were laid down.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association put the death toll at 113.

At least 55 charred bodies were kept at Dhaka Medical College morgue and samples were collected from the bodies for DNA test yesterday. The unidentified bodies will be buried today at the Jurain graveyard in the capital.

Afghan student killed in sectarian clash

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan student was killed and eight others wounded in clashes between Sunnis and Shiites at Kabul University, a senior police officer said Saturday.

"It seems the clash between some Sunni and Shiite students erupted when Shiite students wanted to perform the Ashura mourning ceremony in a dormitory mosque," said Mohammad Zaher, head of Kabul's Criminal Investigation Department. "One person was killed and eight were injured," he said, adding that the situation was now under control and an investigation underway.

Ashura is a religious ceremony marking the murder of Imam Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, by the armies of the Caliph Yazid in 680.

Why culprits should not

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within two months a list of garment factories across the country, and a report on whether the authorities of the factories comply with the relevant laws to run those, and what steps they have taken to save the workers from fires.

The court also decided to form an independent committee to probe Saturday's fire, and ordered the chairman of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and chief executive of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association (BELA) to suggest names of some eminent persons within 10 days for constituting the probe committee.

An HC bench comprised

of Justice Mirza Hussain Haider and Justice Kazi Md Ejarul Haque Akondo that issued the rule said it will form the committee on receiving the names of its members from the NHRC and BELA, as per a proposal from Dr Kamal Hossain, counsel for the petitioners.

In the rule, the court asked the authorities of Tazreen Fashions Ltd, where the fire broke out, to state in detail what compensations they have given to the families of the workers killed and the injured, and what measures they have taken to ensure treatment of the injured staffers.

It also asked the government to explain what steps it has taken to implement the HC directives issued in

2001 to ensure safety and security of garment workers, and to form an inspection committee to monitor whether the garments authorities abide by the relevant laws in running their factories.

Four rights organisations -- Ain O Salish Kendra, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Nijera Kori, and Brac -- had jointly filed the writ petition.

During its hearing, Dr Kamal Hossain told the court that the entire nation is concerned at the incidents of fire in garment factories, and a consensus of the government and the judiciary is needed to bring people responsible for such incidents to book.