A Disaster That Could Be Better Managed

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What kind of help do the victims of the Rana Plaza collapse need? What is the price of a lost leg or hand? How much is a human life worth? The answers depend on what side we are on. From the perspective of the wounded or the families of the dead, no amount of help is enough. Ordinary people understand that. That's why they have raised funds, donated medicine, blood, oxygen, masks, and worked alongside government agencies and other organisations even though they are fully aware that the latter are doing their best to help the victims. According to news reports, the government sent some 1,000 soldiers and firefighters to the site although it is believed that the majority of the rescuers who went into the rubble were volunteers. Equipped with little more than their bare hands, hammers and hacksaws, they crawled into narrow holes in the rubble breaking through concrete and steel bars and working ceaselessly to drag out the victims. On any given day, we value heroism because it is rare. In the aftermath of the Savar tragedy, we value heroism because it is everywhere.

While the courage and altruism of general people has been invaluable in the rescue efforts in terms of the number of lives saved, the idea of allowing untrained, inexperienced civilians into dangerous areas may lead to serious consequences.

The cracks in the nine storey building were visible to all. And yet the owner and some local officials ignored those ominous signs thinking this would not happen to them. A fatalistic outlook on life took over rational thinking. Did they think even if they do not follow building code and even if they do not use proper materials for constructions nothing will happen to them? The law of cause and effect seems to have no meaning to them. They forgot the simple rule of life: if something can go wrong, it will. And wrong it went. As of May 5, the death toll reached 610.

Brigadier General Ali Ahmed Khan psc, Director General, Fire Service and Civil Defence Directorate, commander of the search and rescue team at Rana Plaza says, "Our workers have risked their own lives to save the victims. The enthusiasm of many volunteers inspired us. But they lacked in proper skills and training. They did not have the technical know-how to use the equipment used for such rescue operations. They were cutting rods with the reciprocating saw. And it was causing sparks. Inside the building there were highly flammable materials that were catching fire. We were entering the wreckage vertically because the structure was unstable. If we went through the sides of the building, the whole thing might have collapsed. Some people were doing just that. We told them not to do it. But they were emotional."



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Equipment such as ground-penetrating radars (GPR), fibre optic cameras and remote visual inspection devices are essential for rescue operations of this kind yet Bangladesh, despite so many building disasters, does not have them. GPR can be used to locate survivors in the wreckage of a collapsed building. The camera captures images from inside the wreckage.

"We have to understand the local context. For example, the equipment used for locating bodies using heat sensor did not function at Savar due to the high temperature inside the collapsed building. We need a radar system for locating bodies," says Mohammad Abdul Wazed, Director General, Department of Disaster Management, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. "A proposal to buy different equipment worth Tk 160 crore has been put forward by the Planning Commission in April, 2013. Bangladesh National Building Code