

AFTER THE FIRE

Clockwise from right, charred remains of machines on the second floor of Aswad Composite Mills in Sreepur, Gazipur; another burned down section on the floor; firefighters trying to douse the blaze at the RMG unit and relatives gathered in front of the factory for the missing. The photos were taken between 2:30am and 8:00am yesterday.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN



Alim escaped justice 40 years ago

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Investigations had been going on against Abdul Alim on charges of collaborating with the Pakistan army in committing war crimes during the Liberation War, when he was released on bail in 1974. Not long after that, with the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the violent overthrow of his government and the rise of extra-constitutional forces, he was able to escape trial and eventually walked free.

And yet, despite the forty-year gap between Alim's escape from justice and finally being hauled before the International Crimes Tribunal, the aging collaborator finally did pay the price for his crimes.

Following a long process of legal proceedings, Abdul Alim was sentenced to imprisonment until death yesterday over his role in the nine-month-long war in 1971.

Bringing to a close a sordid episode in Bangladesh's history, International Crimes Tribunal-2 yesterday decreed that the 83-year-old politician spend the rest of his life

in prison.

It may be recalled that Alim had surrendered before a court on February 28, 1972, following the government proclamation under the Collaborators Act, 1972. A case was filed against him under the same act on March 9, 1972, according to the defence.

Alim's son Sazzad bin Alim, who testified as a defence witness, claimed his father had been acquitted from the case in 1974 for lack of evidence.

But Alim's discharge petition says something different.

According to the petition, police had submitted a charge sheet against Alim on April 8, 1972, but following the submission of a petition by a special public prosecutor, a special tribunal ordered the law enforcers to carry out further investigations into the case.

On January 17, 1974, Alim was granted bail by the High Court. He was released from Bogra jail the next day, the petition noted. In the same month, he was arrested under Security Act. He was released on August 6, 1975, said the petition.

Interestingly, the defence petition also said, "In 1974, the then President Sheikh

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FEAR OF REPRISAL Many witnesses flee home

KONGKON KARMAKER, From Joypurhat

The neighbourhoods of Koroi Kadipur, Palpara, Koroi Hajipara and Chakpara villages were wrapped in silence after a war crimes court yesterday sentenced former BNP leader Abdul Alim to die in prison.

No cry of joy or pain could be heard from the many abandoned houses, belonging mostly to Hindus, when our correspondent visited the areas in Joypurhat, the home district of Alim.

Contacted over the phone, they said they had left their ancestral homes in fear of reprisals from Alim's supporters.

At least 371 villagers were massacred at Koroi Kadipur village on April 26, 1971, according to locals.

Bhabirodh Chandra Barman, 60, who lost four of his family members during the massacre, had testified against Alim. He sold his ancestral home at Koroi Kadipur and shifted to a village recently.

Refusing to disclose his current location for security reasons, he narrated how he had been harassed a number of times by Alim's family. He had informed the police about the matter. But to no avail.

"So I shifted my family members to a village at Panchbibi upazila in Joypurhat about one and a half months ago for the sake of their security," he said.

Despite all odds, he expected capital punishment for Alim, he said when informed about the verdict on the war criminal.

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Fight against fire

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largest garment exporter, tainted by the fatal collapse of Rana Plaza that killed 1,132 workers.

"Shortly after 5:45pm, I heard repeated fire alarms at the factory. At first I thought it was part of fire training. And then I saw flames and smoke billowing from the ground floor," said Rubel Ahmed, one of the 230 nightshift workers who were on duty during Tuesday's blaze.

"Suddenly I saw fire coming through a pipe," said Ansar Ali, another worker. It spread like a streak of lightning once it came into contact with yarns and fabrics.

The situation went out of control within 2-3 minutes. "I right away went for the exit and instructed everyone to do the same," Ali said.

Thanks to reasonable fire safety measures, most of the people could escape the inferno.

"But some of us who had fire-fighting training stayed back to contain the fire," Ali said.

Unfortunately, the flames were so ferocious that the fire extinguishers were of no use.

"Being a mechanic, I know how to operate those - that's why I felt the moral obligation to go there. But I had to leave the building as the extinguishers were not enough to fight the blaze," said Mehdi Hasan, an assistant at the factory's technical department.

To make things worse, there was no electricity connection, he added. "We did our best for one and a half hours to control the fire with those hose reels but it was not enough," said Mahmudul Karim, floor in-charge of the factory's garment section. Fire fighters completely extinguished the blaze at 4:00am, more than 10 hours after it started, with 16 water pumps from six fire stations, according to Mohammad Mahboob, director of operation and maintenance of Fire Service and Civil Defence. Meanwhile, the workers claimed that the firefighting units came in about two hours late. A fire service official said: "The closest fire station was 30 kilometres away and there was huge traffic jam. The units reached the spot one hour after the fire started." The cause of the fire was not yet confirmed by the authorities, but Nafis Sikder, the owner of the company, said it was not act of sabotage, but an industrial accident. Workers said the fire stemmed from a malfunctioning heating machine housed on the ground floor and flames leapt upward. Mahboob said a seven-member panel headed by Additional District Magistrate Md Mohsin is investigating the matter and would submit a report within seven working days.

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A team from Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association is also working to find out the cause of the fire.

The might of the fire could be felt even on the following day. Smoke was still billowing from some points of the building, and its steel walls and roof melting.

As Hasan was showing one of the correspondents around the ravaged building, his mobile phone rang.

"Ma, I am fine. Please don't cry. When you cry I feel bad," he told his anxious mother in Chuadanga district, more than 200 kilometres away from Gazipur.

"I am coming home for Eid. You can see for yourself that I am all right," the 24-year old said.

But for the families of those seven dead, there is no such silver lining to look forward to.

The dead are: AGM Rashiduzzaman, assistant general manager of the Palmal Group-owned factory, his nephew Nayeem, Minhazul, 24, Bulbul, 28, Rubel, 25, Raju, 27, and Khalil Mia, 25.

"All the bodies have been handed over to their family members following identification," Shahnawaz Dilruba, additional deputy commissioner of Gazipur district, told The Daily Star.

The factory has been declared closed indefinitely, Bazlur Rashid, a manager of Aswad Composite Mills, said.

EC set to register BNF amid criticism

PANKAJ KARMAKAR

Despite strong criticism from different quarters, the Election Commission is all set to register the much talked about Bangladesh Nationalist Front (BNF) as a political party, claiming it has met the registration criteria.

Besides, the commission has given

approval to another political party, Bangladesh Sangskritik Mukti Jote, and its registration certificate will be handed over within a day or two, said EC officials.

To meet registration requirements, a political party must have offices, including a headquarter, in at least 21 districts and 100 upazilas or metropolitan thanas, with at least

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