enter into the disaster site without any protective gear.

During the Rana Plaza rescue operation, many problems surfaced one after another- there were no smoke ejector machines or sophisticated equipment such as micro-cameras which can go under the debris to search for survivors. Also there were no scanners that can detect human heat; light weight chipping hammers; flash lights; ground-penetrating radars (GPR); fibre optic cameras and remote visual inspection devices. It is indeed sad that the equipment are not yet enlisted in the recent purchase of Fire Service.

Mahbuba Nasrin, Director at the Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies says that the Rana Plaza tragedy has highlighted that we are still not prepared to face any urban disaster. She says, 'Maybe we are good at saving people from natural disasters since we have been facing such vulnerabilities for years and have adopted an indigenous method to recover. But in the case of an urban disaster, it indicates incapability of human resource and the management skill of professional rescuers.'



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

After three major urban disasters between 2005 and 2013, Bangladesh is yet to take measures to ensure better disaster management.

In 2010, following approval of the Executive Committee of National Economic Council (ECNEC), the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief bought a total of 18,150 light rescue gear of Tk 60 crore which was handed over to the Armed Forces Division, Fire Service and Civil Defence, city corporations and coastguards. But the question remains that even after this, why were the rescuers so ill-equipped during the operation?

Mahbuba Nasrin says, 'We bought a good number of equipment but still cannot generate a volunteer group that can operate all these equipment in times of need.'

A member of fire service says on condition of anonymity that they have bought all required equipment in 2010 and 2011. He says, "But I was surprised when we saw that we did not have sufficient flash lights including much light equipment. Then we found that we have bought different kinds of rescue materials but not adequate supplies which are required in such cases of building collapse.

"After fighting the deadliest collapse in Bangladesh's history, we have learnt how to work under extreme situations. At the same time, we realise that we need some modern gear like heavy equipment's including 'coloured varifocal camera' to detect dead bodies and trapped people in a collapsed building. I admit that we should have bought it before, but we could not do so as the budget at that time was reduced from the main proposal."

He hopes that the planning ministry will pass the plan soon and it will help to take measures after any disaster.

He also informs that, based on priority, the department has already proposed 3,060 equipments, different lights and portable generators ranging from 1,000 to 5000 Watt. He believes that this will help to manage any kind of disaster in the future.

Besides purchasing equipment, Mohammad Mahboob also emphasised on building knowledge about running rescue operation with highly flammable materials so that we can build a huge volunteer group across the country and avoid unwanted accidents during a rescue operation. He says, "Most rescue workers do not know the use of this equipment. Volunteers are very much emotional here. Sometime they do not understand the situation and start using reciprocating saw blades, which is why it was creating sparks and that is how we lost one of our brave volunteers, Mohammad Ejajuddin Ahmed Kaykobad."

In April 2005, after the tragic collapse of nine-storied Spectrum garments factory at Savar, rescue volunteers and the fire service officials combed through the rubble without any proper equipment. The delay in rescue operations claimed 64 lives injuring 80. The incident pushed the then government to set a standard compensation for the workers but the safety measures were overlooked. Eight months later another five-storied Phoenix garments factory collapsed in Tejgaon killing at least 35.

Despite these three collapses, the government agencies still fail to run the rescue operations properly, researchers believe. However the recent rescue of Shahina Begum has shed some hope.

Abdur Rajjak believes that Bangladesh is still not ready to face major disasters. "Rana Plaza is a lesson for us. It should always remind us that we struggled a lot to rescue victims from a single building. So it's not difficult to understand what it'll be in case of an earthquake," he concludes. ■