

New Year's Day blaze kills two, razes shanties in Philippines

AFP, Manila

A fire raced through a crowded slum in the Philippine capital on New Year's Day, killing at least two people and gutting hundreds of shanties, officials said.

The blaze, believed to have been caused by firecrackers during New Year revelry, erupted in a warren of makeshift structures that housed informal settlers in Quezon City, a suburb of Manila.

Firemen donning yellow helmets struggled to put out huge balls of flames as panicked residents scrambled to save their possessions and pet animals.

"The place is all just narrow alleys, so no fire trucks could reach the source of the blaze. The houses were all made of light materials and as soon as the fire started it spread in all directions," senior fireman Albert Flores told AFP.

Two residents were found dead, with rescue officials searching the area for more possible bodies, Flores said.

Three other people were injured, including a fireman who lost three fingers when a burning gas cylinder exploded near him, he added.

Terrified residents who fled the scene with all that they could salvage congregated at a city basketball court, hoping for aid from local officials.

Media reports said that the fire may have been started by fireworks during New Year celebrations, which result in numerous injuries and fatalities every year.

Fires are all too common in the many shantytowns that dot the Philippine capital where many of the poor are forced to reside.

India launches scheme to monitor toilet use

BBC ONLINE

India is checking whether thousands of newly built toilets are being used.

Half a million latrines have been built in homes under a cleanliness drive begun by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in October. But many people still prefer to defecate outside.

Sanitation inspectors will go door-to-door to survey household lavatory use, noting the results on mobile phones and tablets, a government statement said.

Earlier surveys merely monitored the construction of toilets, it adds.

In its news release, the ministry of drinking water and sanitation said it "will launch a nationwide real time monitoring of use of toilets."

"Earlier, the monitoring was done only about the construction of toilets, but now the actual use of toilets will be ascertained on a sustained basis."

Launching the Clean India Campaign (Swachh Bharat Abhiyan) on 2 October, Mr Modi promised to build half a million toilets within 100 days.

The government says it has built 503,142 household latrines since then.

However, studies in the past have suggested that many people in rural India, despite having working toilets at home, continue to go out into the open believing it is more sanitary to defecate far from home.

Ecosystem-based

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besides creating a mass awareness about judicious use of both surface and underground water for reducing the pressure on groundwater table in the dry area.

The observation came at a daylong regional stakeholder consultation workshop styled "Participation of Project Document on Ecosystem-based Approaches (EBA) to Adaptation in the Drought-prone Barind Tract Area" held at Nanking Darbar Hall in Rajshahi city.

Department of Environment (DoE) organised the workshop in association with United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS).

In the technical session, Superintendent Engineer of Barind Multipurpose Development Authority Dr Abul Kasem and Engineer Motaleb Hossain Sarker, director (Ecology Division) of CEGIS, presented keynote papers.

Additional Commissioner of Rajshahi division Munir Hossain and Deputy Commissioner Mezbahuddin Chowdhury addressed the opening session as chief and special guests respectively with Ali Reza Mozid, director of DoE, Rajshahi division, in the chair.

New Year, new books

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turned every school ground into a veritable carnival.

Students of primary and secondary grades thus began the New Year with new textbooks in their hands, overcoming the fear of violence that every hartal entails.

It was sheer happiness writ large on their faces on getting the textbooks. Some held those up in the air with joy while some were flipping through the pages. The refreshing smell of new books hung in the air all around the schools.

This was just a glimpse of how the first day of the new academic session and the much-awaited "Textbook Festival Day" went all over the country yesterday as the government started distributing over 32.63 crore copies of textbooks to more than 4.44 crore students from class-I to class-IX.

The textbook distribution will continue for the next seven days. So the schools that are yet to start admitting new students will have to hand the new books over to their pupils within this period.

Of the total books, around 11.55 crore are for primary-level students, 14.82 crore for secondary-level students, 3.09 crore for Dakhil (secondary level of madrasa) and Dakhil vocational students, and 1.79 crore for ebtedai (primary level of madrasa) students.

In the wake of recurring textbook crisis in previous years, the government in 2009 had taken the decision of free book distribution at both primary and secondary levels. Starting from the next year, the government so far has distributed around 155.83 crore copies.

In 2010 the government had distributed around 19 crore copies of books to 2.76 crore students whereas the number has risen to 4.44 crore students this year.

Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid and Primary and Mass Education Minister Mostafizur Rahman officially inaugurated the festival by releasing balloons at Motijheel Government Boys School in the capital at around 10:30am. They also handed over books to the students.

Students along with their parents started coming to the school from 8:00am when the playground was still enveloped in mist. More than a thousand students from six institutions attended the festival.

The students played drums and

waved placards and balloons, cheering all through the inauguration. Parents and teachers too joined the ceremony.

"I woke up early and came here with my father. I am very excited," said Ismat Ava, a class-V student of Motijheel Government Girls School.

Biva, a class-IX student of the same school, said she initially thought she'd not attend the festival due to the hartal. "But I really could not stay home," she said.

Aryan, a class-VII student of Motijheel Government Boys School, had more reasons to be elated. "I am very happy to get the new books from a minister," he said.

A little kid from Aryan's school said he'd persevere to do well in the exams.

Parents were also happy. "Since the students are getting the books right on time, teachers should start teaching right away so that the syllabus can be completed," said Kamal Ahmed, a parent.

In his speech, the education minister said they had delivered all books to the schools in time despite many obstacles.

Nahid also mentioned that the dropout rate had been reduced significantly thanks to the distribution of free textbooks.

The primary and mass education minister said the anti-liberation forces tried to foil the textbook festival with their hartal. "But amid hartal, the textbook festival is on all over the country and the students' presence dashed the hope of those who tried to enforce it," Mostafizur said.

Elsewhere in the country, the distribution was held under supervision of people's representatives, government officials and school authorities.

Reports from our correspondents in Munshiganj, Sherpur and Pirojpur districts draw a similar picture of festivity and cheerfulness during the free book distribution programmes.

However, students in some places, especially in Feni and Tangail, said they did not get all the primary and pre-primary textbooks yesterday.

In Jhalakathi, students and parents alleged that teachers of Purbo Rajapur M Hossen Registered Primary School took Tk 25 from each student before giving the textbooks.

Taslina Nasrin, head teacher of the school, denied the allegation saying they took the money for organising a sports event.

JP urges talks

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"We've heard the government is going to hike the prices. If it is done, we will take to the streets coming out of parliament," he said.

Lambasting the Awami League and BNP, the former military ruler said there had been no democratic practices in the country for the last 20 years after a two-party democratic system was introduced.

"People are panicked due to the criminal activities of the two parties. We will have to free the country from confrontational politics of the BNP and AL and restore peace and security among people."

Criticising the present administration, Ershad said the incidents of killing, forced disappearance and abduction have become an everyday affair in the last one year of the incumbent government.

"There is no good governance in the country as corruption, tender manipulation, nepotism and criminal activities are happening everywhere," he alleged.

The chief of the main opposition

party called upon the government to realise Tk 14,000 crore laundered abroad in the last one year. He also urged the government to give subsidy in the power and gas sectors, instead of increasing prices of those.

Ershad referred to various development activities carried out during his tenure, and claimed his government was legitimate as per the constitution.

He also declared an 18-point demand that includes establishing provincial government, restoring good governance, freeing the judiciary and administration from politicisation, rooting out corruption and reforming the electoral system.

At the programme, Opposition Leader Raushan Ershad also called upon all parties to hold dialogue to resolve the political standoff over holding an inclusive election. She opined that the BNP could have formed the government if they had joined the January 5 election.

She also said people of the minority community were being deprived of their rights. "If Jatiya Party comes to power, it will ensure their rights."

Ministry cancels

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have indulged in corruption in collecting toll.

However, a senior RHD official told The Daily Star that the contract was awarded following procurement laws as per which the lowest bidder must be selected if it fulfilled all other criteria.

RHD invited the tender on September 17 last year. A total of eight companies had bid for the operation and management of toll collection at Meghna and Meghna-Gumti bridges on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway.

An evaluation committee, led by

Additional Chief Engineer of RHD Sharful Anam Khan, recommended the MEX-INFRATECH for the job as it was the lowest bidder.

Chief Engineer Feroz Iqbal awarded the contract on December 17 and MEX-INFRATECH was scheduled to start working from yesterday.

But other bidders questioned the unusually low rate and filed a complaint with the ministry.

MM Builders and Engineers had been collecting toll at the bridges for the last five years.

Baby stolen from RMCH

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Khaleda Akhtar confessed that she stole the baby with the help of Nargis and other hospital staff as she was desperate for a child after the death of her two and a half years old son two years ago.

Later, she took the baby to Sokhina's house to hide her.

The baby was handed over to her parents Torikul Islam, a farmer, and Rubina Begum of Sursunipara of Godagari upazila during a press conference at Shah Makhdum Police

Station last night.

Rajshahi Metropolitan Police Commissioner M Shamsuddin said that on information a Rajpara police team recovered the baby from the house of Sokhina.

He added the police would investigate whether anyone else was involved in the theft.

Posing as a hospital staffer, an unidentified young woman in a veil took the newborn from her grandmother and immediately left the hospital on Monday.

'We will win this war'

Poroshenko tells Ukrainians

AFP, Kiev

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko promised to defeat the "cruel-hearted foe" trying to break his former Soviet republic apart, in a traditional New Year's message.

The pro-Western leader delivered the midnight television address surrounded by soldiers and volunteers who handed out food during protests last winter that ousted an unpopular Russia-backed president.

"A cruel-hearted foe has encroached on our lives, territory, freedom and independence," said Poroshenko, without mentioning Russia or President Vladimir Putin by name.

"We will definitely win this patriotic war because for us, it is just. Truth is on our side. God is with us."

The 49-year-old chocolate baron won a snap election in May on a promise to stamp out the pro-Russian mutiny that erupted in Ukraine's industrial east in April and has since claimed more than 4,700 lives.

A truce brokered by Russian and European envoys in September has been repeatedly broken and new talks aimed at consolidating that agreement broke up without progress last week.

Relations between Kiev and Moscow -- accused by both Poroshenko and NATO of supporting the rebel uprising -- are now more hostile than at any point since the 1991 breakup of the USSR.

Poroshenko's name was notably missing from the dozens of New Year congratulatory messages that Putin sent out to world leaders on Wednesday.

Obama rings in New Year with family

AFP, Kanoche

President Barack Obama -- still on vacation in Hawaii -- spent New Year's eve with loved ones at home, the White House said.

"The president plans to stay at home tonight and ring in the New Year with family and friends," the White House said in a brief statement released late Wednesday.

The White House shortly after midnight tweeted a picture of the president planting a kiss on the cheek of a beaming First Lady Michelle Obama, beneath a garland of mistletoe.

"Happy New Year!" read the photo caption.

Obama has been on holiday in Hawaii, his birth state, for a two-week break. He returns to Washington on Sunday.

Hartal largely

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activities, report our correspondents.

Jamaat on Tuesday called the nationwide dawn-to-dusk hartals for Wednesday and yesterday, protesting the death sentence of its leader ATM Azharul Islam for war crimes.

The strike on Wednesday was observed peacefully as well.

In the capital, a local bus was set ablaze after hartal supporters threw a petrol bomb at it around 9:45am yesterday and fled, said Rafiqul Islam, officer-in-charge of Darus Salam Police Station.

Locals brought the fire under control and no one was injured, he added.

A lesser number of private vehicles plied the capital's streets yesterday compared to Wednesday. Additional policemen were deployed at important points to prevent attacks.

In Narayanganj, Jamaat activists torched a bus and vandalised another one near Okto Office area around 11:00am.

The pickets fled as soon as police went to the spot, said Asad-Uz-Zaman, officer-in-charge of Fatullah Police Station.

In Rajshahi, five people were hurt after Jamaat-Shibir men exploded six crude bombs in Moni Chatter area around 10:30am, reports our Rajshahi correspondent.

The bombs exploded when police tried to disperse the Jamaat-Shibir men who were demonstrating blocking a road, said Iftekhar Alam, assistant commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police.

Police also fired around 100 rubber bullets, tear gas shells and sound grenades, our correspondent added.

Hartal supporters also blocked another road in front of Shaheed AHM Kamruzzaman Central Park in the city in the morning.

Later, police cleared the road dispersing the protesters. Five Shibir activists were detained from the spot, said Alam.

Save forests through

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The incident had provided an excellent opportunity to strengthen national oil spill preparedness and response capacity, they said, adding that the government and the UN would work together to safeguard the forest in future.

The team on Wednesday shared its findings through a press conference.

Held at the newspaper office, yesterday's discussion was attended by Emilia Wahlstrom, chief of the response team; Per-Anders Berthlin, Stephane le Floch, Loek KeramBrun, Hruka Izaki and experts from Bangladesh Reza Khan, Badrul Imam, Maminul Haque Sarkar, and other high officials from the UN.

Emilia Wahlstrom said it was hard to determine the actual impact of the oil spill through a rapid assessment that they conducted for five to six days. But the impact could be more serious than what was visible.

"Samples collected from the Sundarbans have been sent abroad. We will finalise the report once we get it."

Badrul Imam, petro chemical expert and a member of the team, said the UN gathered some top experts across the

world to conduct the study. Hopefully, the team would bring out a factual report.

Urging the government to protect the world's largest mangrove forest, Reza Khan, eminent wildlife expert and head of Dubai Zoo, said the government should be more careful in future before allowing any vessel to ply through the rivers of the Sundarbans.

"We need to protect the forest at any cost," he mentioned.

Top officials of the UN, who participated in the discussion, said the UN will work closely with the government to implement the recommendations made by the experts in the final report.

Prothom Alo Editor Matiur Rahman, who moderated the discussion, thanked all foreign experts for joining the oil spill response mission during Christmas.

The Southern Star-7 sank in the Shela River with 3.58 lakh litres of furnace oil on December 9. The 25-member team went to the Sundarbans on 22 December to assess the impact of the oil spill and develop an action plan for recovery. They returned on 28 December.

Directive withheld

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stakeholders, including the university authorities, with negative comments pouring in on the social networking sites.

The vice chancellors of some public universities said they should have been consulted before taking the decision.

"Whatever decision is taken, it has to be done unanimously," said a VC, wishing anonymity.

Some officials of the ministry said the minister was not "properly briefed" when he signed the files in this regard.

"He [the minister] came to know about the matter after some media published the news. And he ordered to suspend the directive immediately," said a top official, requesting not to be named.

Soon after the matter came in the media, high officials of the ministry started passing the buck.

The ministry high-ups, including the minister and the secretary, knew about it all along and they are the ones who signed the directive and had it sent to the universities, said another ministry official.

"As the matter came in the media and drew widespread criticisms, they are now putting the blame on the others," he said.

An official of the ministry's university section said, "We were asked to circulate the order and we simply did that."

There has been a sharp division among the ministry and universities, especially the public ones, over the admission process for quite a long time. The government wants to remove the entry test system as it thinks the existing system puts a huge pressure on the admission seekers and their parents.

The students lose precious time and spend a large amount of money for university coaching and travelling to different areas for taking the tests.

On the other hand, the university authorities believe that it would not be possible to enrol deserving students without the test.

In 2010, the government decided in principle to introduce "cluster system" for public university admission, but could not implement it due to opposition from some of the universities.

Man shot dead in a city

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been staying there for quite some now, Hamid was traveling back and forth between Dhaka and Chittagong.

Speaking to reporters at the DMCH, Tofail said they were chatting in his when two unidentified men entered the room around 7:00pm and asked who Hamid was.

As Hamid revealed his identity and asked why they were looking for him, one of the men held a gun to his head and shot him point-blank, said Tofail.

Tofail claimed that he did not know the two young men who had shot Hamid.

Inspector Mozammel Haque of DMCH Police Camp said Hamid was shot right on his head.

Tofail also claimed that he was familiar with Hamid but they checked in the hotel on different dates.

Motijheel police picked up Tofail

for interrogation. They seized two passports -- that belong neither to Tofail nor to Hamid -- from Hamid's room where he checked in on December 26 last year.

Helal Uddin, sub-inspector of Motijheel Police Station, told this correspondent last night that Hamid used to visit Tofail at the hotel very often.

Tofail is the owner of a ship named Bay of Bengal. Both Hamid and Tofail come from Sandweep in Chittagong and their family members reside there.

Police are interrogating Tofail to know why they [Tofail and Hamid] were residing in the hotel and whether they have had any feud with anybody.

After examining the evidence collected from Hamid and Tofail's rooms, police suspect that the killing took place following a feud over sending migrant workers abroad.

HK 'graffiti' teenager released on bail

AFP, Hong Kong

A Hong Kong teenager who was arrested and sent to a children's home after she drew a flower on a wall famous for pro-democracy messages has been released on bail, authorities said Thursday.

The announcement came after the 14-year-old girl's lawyers accused authorities of "disproportionate" measures against teenage protesters seeking fully free leadership elections.

The girl was arrested last week for chalking a flower on the "Lennon Wall" and sent to a children's home Monday for three weeks as a court considers whether to remove her from her father's care.

The application before the court alleged that she is being neglected by her family but the girl's lawyers

strongly rejected the charge citing a lack of evidence.

"She previously had to be in a children's home but there is now no need (for her) to stay there," a police spokeswoman told AFP on Thursday, without elaborating further.

The police spokeswoman said that the girl has been released on bail before her case is heard again on January 19.

Her bail conditions include a nightly 10 pm curfew unless she goes out with her father, sister or a social worker, according to local media reports.

The girl's lawyer, Patricia Ho, said earlier that the decision to place minors in children's homes was usually only undertaken in extreme cases and was an attempt by authorities to "impose a climate of fear".

Blast hits Nigeria church, several injured

AFP, Kano

Several people were injured outside an evangelist church in northeast Nigeria yesterday when a suicide bomber set off his explosive vest amid the country's ongoing battle against an Islamist insurgency.

"There was an explosion outside the ECWA church this morning. A suicide bomber who was restrained from

getting into the church blew himself up," said Abubakar Yakubu, who heads the Nigeria Red Cross in Gombe.

"Luckily no one was killed but some people were mildly injured."

A witness said the man arrived during the service at the Evangelist Church of West Africa in Gombe and refused to park his motorcycle outside a security barrier set up by volunteers.