



Relatives and acquaintances of those who died and were injured in a stampede gather on the premises of Mymensingh Medical College Hospital after they were taken to the hospital; right, sandals scattered on the ground after the incident that left at least 27 dead.

PHOTO: STAR

27 killed in stampede

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at the scene.

Some alleged that the workers of the factory had swooped on them with truncheons, worsening the situation during the incident.

"As they [the workers] beat us inside the gate, people started running. Many fell on the ground at that time," said Ambia Begum, 50, who had managed to get out of the compound unhurt.

Shamim's family refuted the allegation.

However, a murder case was filed and Shamim, his son and six factory employees were arrested.

"No incident of beating occurred. Some of our employees shouted at the zakat seekers just to control the situation but we did not even misbehave

with the poor people," said Shamim's son Mohammad Hedayet, a director of the factory.

"We had distributed 640 cards among the people of a local Bihari camp yesterday [Thursday] but some 1,500 people gathered and stormed the compound," said Hedayet.

They had a budget of distributing 1,000 saris and lungis among the poor this year, he added.

Abdur Rashid, senior assistant superintendent of police of Mymensingh, told The Daily Star, "They [the factory authorities] did not inform us about distributing zakat to such a huge number of people. They did not ask for any help from us either."

Before his arrest, Shamim said he had been distributing zakat for the last

35 years and such incident had never occurred.

Asked why they did not seek police help, Shamim said they never had the necessity.

Farhad Hossain, a physician at Mymensingh Medical College Hospital (MMCH), said the reasons for the deaths were stampede and suffocation.

The dead were identified as Sakhina, 40, and her daughter Lamia, 5; Johra Begum, 40; Nazma Begum, 50; Fatema Begum, 42; Hamida Begum, 45; Fatema Begum, 42; Rezia Begum, 40; Sofia Begum, 60; Khodeja Begum, 50; Siddiq Mia, 12; Samu Begum, 60; Hazera Begum, 50; Fazila Begum, 75; Meghna Basak, 35; Sudha Rani Sarker, 55; Rina Rani, 60; Jamila Khatun, 65; Morium Begum, 50;

Rupali, 40; Rahima Begum, 55; Sahara Begum, 40; Samola Begum, 30; Rubiya Akhtar, 12; Nazma Akhtar, 60; Khodeja Akther, 50, and her granddaughter Bristi, 12.

The bodies were handed over to the families, said Kamrul Islam, officer-in-charge of Mymensingh Kotwali Police Station.

Among the over 50 injured, two people were still admitted to the medical college in critical conditions.

As the holy month of Ramadan nears the end, the well-off distribute zakat, an act of charity. Often, they help the poor with clothes or money.

Last year, two people were killed in a stampede when the hundreds gathered to collect zakat clothes at a company's office on Katpatti Road in Barisal.

PROBE AND COMPENSATION

A three-member probe body, led by Additional Deputy Inspector General of Police Shafiqul Islam, was formed yesterday to investigate the incident.

The committee was asked to submit its report in three working days.

Mymensingh district administration also formed a three-member committee led by Additional District Magistrate Mollica Khatun. It would submit its report within the same time.

The religious affairs ministry and district administration separately announced to give Tk 10,000 to each of the victim's families, said ANM Faizul Haque, upazila nirbahi officer of Mymensingh sadar upazila.

'ASK FOR POLICE HELP'

Police headquarters yesterday issued a

statement asking people to seek their help in distributing zakat or for any "uncontrolled" large gatherings.

The statement made on behalf of Inspector General of Police (IGP) AKM Shahidul Haque said the superintendents of police of districts or the officers-in-charge of police stations should be informed at least a day ahead of such events.

The statement warned of legal actions if there was a lack of security in any such unannounced gatherings.

President Abdul Hamid, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury expressed profound shock at the deaths.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia also expressed her sympathy and urged the government to compensate the families.

Modi, Sharif agree

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violence in the southwestern Baluchistan province and northwestern tribal regions.

New Delhi denies the charge, saying Pakistan should present solid evidence to back up its claim.

Meanwhile, India wants Pakistan to punish those who carried out deadly attacks in the heart of Mumbai in 2008 that left 166 people dead. Relations have deteriorated since April, when a Pakistani court freed Zaki-ur-Rehman

from both sides, that would be even better."

Modi's government has adopted a tough posture on Pakistan, insisting that it show greater progress in prosecuting members of the Pakistan-based group charged with carrying out the Mumbai attacks in which 166 people were killed.

In April, when a Pakistani court freed on bail Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, accused of plotting the attacks, the move drew swift condemnation from India,

BNP caught in fresh crisis

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the BNP chief used the meeting as a means to gag criticism against the way the party is being run.

One of them said he had expected that they would discuss the country's political situation and ways to overcome the organisational crisis. But those issues were not the focus of the meeting.

"It would have been better had the meeting not been held."

The BNP, which ran the country twice, has become almost dysfunctional, for which some senior leaders point fingers at the leadership. In private and sometimes in public they vent their disappointment.

Recently, a leaked telephone conversation of three senior BNP leaders on YouTube offers glimpses into their frustration at the current BNP leadership.

A number of leaders also question whether the BNP is now deviating from the ideology of its founder, Ziaur Rahman.

In this backdrop, Khaleda Zia at Monday's meeting asked the party's senior leaders to make comments carefully. She also said if anybody even thinks of splitting the party, he might leave, according to meeting sources.

After Khaleda's warning, none of the senior leaders felt comfortable to discuss anything. Leaders of some professional bodies, however, spoke in support of the BNP chief.

The BNP has been passing through the

worst phase in its history. After boycotting the January 5 parliamentary election in 2014, the party waged violent protests to resist the polls.

The polls boycott left the party outside parliament for the first time since restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991.

The party chief again announced a nonstop countrywide blockade from January 6 this year. Alongside the blockade, the BNP-led political combine also enforced mindless hartal for around three months.

The agitations turned violent again, marked with bomb and arson attacks.

But the opposition combine failed to force the Sheikh Hasina-led government to announce an early parliamentary election under a non-party caretaker government.

The agitation waged before and after the polls has brought on nightmare for the party's leaders. Almost all of the senior leaders are facing criminal cases in connection with street violence and arson attacks on public transports.

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, detained on January 5 this year, is yet to be granted bail.

The situation at the grassroots level is more appalling. Many are still behind bars, and those who are outside cannot move freely for fear of arrest or harassment by law enforcement agencies, let alone carry out political activities.

Frustrated, several thousand grassroots leaders and activists have already joined the ruling Awami League over the last three months.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced in parliament that the government would form special tribunal under the Anti-Terrorism Act 2009 for trial of Khaleda and her party men accused of the arson attacks carried out during the opposition movement between January and March this year.

Yet, the BNP high-command has not taken any steps to stand by the grassroots level leaders and activists.

Khaleda, however, at Monday's meeting told senior leaders -- members of the national standing committee, vice-chairmen, and her advisers -- that she would recast the party recognising the roles of dedicated leaders. She also asked all to be with the grassroots.

A senior BNP leader said the party chief told them that she would sit with the senior leaders on her return from Umrah in Saudi Arabia.

Khaleda, who was scheduled to leave Dhaka on Wednesday, has, however, postponed the visit as the Saudi embassy in London did not issue a visa to Tarique Rahman, her elder son and senior vice-president of BNP.

Citing the postponement of her visit, the senior BNP leader said: "Now, I do not know when she will sit again with the party's senior leaders."

Eid won't bring

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When they reached the house of Mohammad Shamim, owner of a chewing tobacco brand "Nurani Jorda", they joined hundreds of other zakat seekers there.

After a night-long wait, someone opened the narrow main gate of the house from inside around 5:00am yesterday. The clothes were supposed to be distributed from inside the house.

But suddenly, all of them tried to get in at once, triggering a stampede that killed Samu, Sakhina, Lamia and at least 24 others.

"I have lost all of them for some clothes," said Abdul Barek, sobbing uncontrollably.

Samu used to work as a maid at a private clinic in Mymensingh while Barek works at a saw-mill. Barek has become irregular in his work because of his old age. He now fears for the future of his family.

Joynal Abedin, a resident at the camp where Samu used to live, said, the entire area was mourning the deaths of the three.

Mohammad Kashim, another local, said poor people had been collecting zakat clothes from Shamim's house for the last 30 years but nothing like this had ever happened.

Aysha Khatun, the victims' neighbour, said she had also gone to Shamim's house Thursday night but returned seeing the huge crowd.

which warned that relations were deteriorating.

Clashes on the border in disputed Kashmir have also intensified during Modi's first year in office. On the eve of Friday's talks, an Indian border guard was shot dead by a Pakistani sniper in northern Kashmir, Indian officials said.

Sharif was elected in Pakistan in 2013 on the back of promises to rebuild relations with India, but has come under pressure to toughen his stance from hardliners at home, particularly within the army.

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Keeping low growth

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density while half of its labour force remains dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Bangladesh's exceptionally high population density makes it a 'special case' among developing countries and places it at great risk of reaching saturation in terms of its ability to absorb further population growth," read the study.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Population Fund (Unfpa) said the demographic structure, particularly concerning young people between 15 and 24, will cause the population to reach 220 million by 2050, even if the replacement level fertility is met today.

Replacement level fertility is the total fertility rate at which a population exactly replaces itself from one generation to the next, without migration.

The government and the development partners noted that adolescent girls with high rates of child marriage are contributing to the sharp rise in population.

Most recent statistics show that about 66 percent women in Bangladesh got married before they reached 18, the legal age for marriage. Besides, 33 percent girls start childbearing before turning 20.

Adolescent fertility in Bangladesh is still one of the highest in the world, with 126 births per 1,000 women between the ages of 15-19. On a global average, the figure is about 50.26 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19.

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The DIS study pointed out that an estimated 26,000 people have been losing their land every year due to flooding and erosion. After losing land, they would either migrate to towns, cities and chars or to areas of land formed by flooding. Further increase in population would only intensify the pressure on land.

It said landlessness has increased from 20 percent in 1968 to an estimated 40 percent now. Another 39 percent of rural households have less than half an acre of land.

"These trends have made the family-based mode of production increasingly unviable. This in turn has implications for future population change because children are more likely to be a liability than an asset for the landless or urban poor households," added the report.

While caste is no longer an important basis for social organisation, the distribution of wealth and income has become increasingly unequal since the 1990s.

The study found that although poverty has declined by most measures in recent decades, income inequality has worsened over the last two decades.

per 1,000 women aged 15-19.

Sources say the allegation that Ashraf was inactive in the party or that he often did not go to the ministry is nothing new. He kept the job for more than six years despite these allegations.

They believe that neither this nor his absence from Tuesday's Ecne meeting was the main reason behind his removal. The decision was already made but the Tuesday's incident only quickened it.

Talking to reporters in Sylhet yesterday, Finance Minister AMA Muhib himself admitted this to reporters in Sylhet: "Several of us knew beforehand that there would be a change in Syed Ashraf's portfolio."

Muhib also hinted of further reshuffle in the cabinet.

Asked to clarify, he said, "I have no idea... there will be a slight recast. But it's difficult to say exactly what will happen."

At the beginning of the Ecne meeting, the finance minister made an outburst over Ashraf's absence and the PM promptly announced her decision to remove Ashraf from the ministry.

A source close to Ashraf said Ashraf skipped the Ecne meeting as he was against the project involving Tk 6,076 crore, under which every lawmaker would get Tk 20 crore for development work in their constituencies.

cies in the next five years.

The project was placed before the cabinet without consulting him, the source added.

Ashraf's removal, however, surprised many party leaders.

Some AL leaders believe that the PM wants to make the party stronger. Therefore, she relieved Ashraf of the ministry job so he can give more time to party leaders and activists. According to them, the decision has been mutual.

Oabdul Quader, road transport and bridges minister and also an AL presidium member, yesterday said Ashraf might have been removed so that he could devote his time to party activities.

"Maybe the prime minister felt Syed Ashraf is under too much pressure to discharge his duties as minister and party general secretary and making him minister without portfolio would allow him to give more time for the party," he told reporters while visiting Babu Bazar bridge.

Senior Awami League leader Suranjit Sengupta said Ashraf's removal was for the sake of the party and the country's democracy.

"Syed Ashraf is a veteran and tested politician and a politician like him does not care whether he is in charge of any ministry or not," he added.

Yesterday, Ashraf spent the whole day at his official residence on Bailey Road and met visitors there.



PHOTO: STAR