

How prepared are we?

Brigadier General Engineer Ali Ahmed Khan, psc, Director General, Fire Service and Civil Defence talks to The Daily Star's Naznin Tithi about the progress made in terms of earthquake preparedness and the future plans for capacity building.



Brig Gen Ali Ahmed Khan

We have proposed that the government increase the number of fire stations. Currently we have only 13 fire stations in Dhaka; we need at least seven more. If that can't be done, we will be helpless during a big disaster.

To what extent is the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence prepared to handle a pre- and post-earthquake situation? Bangladesh is very vulnerable to both natural and man-made disasters. Although we have progressed quite well in terms of tackling disasters like cyclones and floods, in case of tackling man-made disasters like earthquakes we are still lagging behind. Unplanned urbanisation, unregulated building construction, traffic jam, unprotected gas and electric lines -- all these factors are increasing the risks. Although capacity building is a big challenge, we are trying to be as prepared as possible. We have 300 fire stations all over the country, employing around 8000 people. Within two to three years' time, the number will be 550. In an ideal city, you should reach any place of accident from your fire station in 20 minutes. After 20 minutes of an accident, the situation usually gets out of control. If, say, there is a fire in Motijheel, it would get out of control by the time we get there from any of our fire station.

We have proposed that the government increase the number of fire stations. This should be included in the city's master plan. Currently we have only 13 fire stations in Dhaka; we need at least seven more. If that can't be done, we will be helpless during a big disaster.

As part of our pre-disaster preparedness, we have awareness building programmes. The government has provided us with laptops and multimedia facilities which we use while providing trainings on preparedness in rural schools. We even go to parks in the morning and show people what to do during and after an earthquake using multimedia facilities. Sometimes some schools request us for preparedness trainings. We also work in collaboration with some NGOs.

We had shortage of equipment in the past. But we will get quite a good amount of rescue equipment by next year as the government is going to buy us equipment

worth Tk 400 crore. We are getting international assistance as well. The World Bank is giving us equipment support. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) will help us build earthquake resilient headquarters, while Korea will build an emergency operation centre for us. So by next year we will be capable enough to carry out post-earthquake rescue operations.

It would not have been possible for your team to perform the rescue operations during Rana Plaza disaster had the local people not participated in it. In light of that, do you have any plans to involve and train local people in rescue operations?

So far we have trained 30,000 urban volunteers for Dhaka, Sylhet and Chittagong. The government has a plan to train at least 62,000 volunteers, phase by phase. Experts like doctors, engineers and technicians are among the volunteers. They are being selected based on their physical abilities and professional background. We also maintain a database of the volunteers. We have targeted the urban areas because urban areas are more at risk. In case of a

major earthquake, we will also need the help of the armed forces.

Moreover, to make this programme sustainable, we need to keep the volunteers under the city corporations as well as involve the workers of the city corporations in the programme. At present we have 96 wards in Dhaka and in each ward we have five teams. There are 39 people in a team including three professional fire brigade personnel. On an average, there are 200 volunteers per ward, of them 50 to 60 percent are active.

How do you plan to carry out rescue operations in the narrow lanes of Dhaka?

We have made some progress with regard to operating in narrow roads. China has donated to us 150 fire fighting motorcycles. After an earthquake, if the narrow roads get damaged, we will be able to carry out rescue operations. The government will buy us more of these motorcycles. We have built some small improvised four-wheeler trucks with compressed air foam. With this air foam fire can be extinguished with less water. We will also get two-wheeler and four-wheeler water mist fire fighting vehicles,

which is very helpful for fire fighting in narrow roads. In addition, we are locally modifying our vehicles so that we can work in Old Dhaka.

Fire Brigade personnel failed to rescue Jihad, a child who was stuck in a well in Shahjahanpur of Dhaka. But later innovative local youths rescued his dead body. Isn't it time the fire service appointed a team of young inventive engineers?

In Jihad's case, we did not abandon but rather temporarily halt the rescue operation because we needed to find a different technology. We included the names of the local youths who invented the cage to rescue Jihad in our volunteer list. We learn from our mistakes and improve our rescue methods and technologies. We regularly carry out successful rescue operations. In Dhaka almost every day our firefighters rescue people stuck in lifts and douse fires, but you don't get to hear about it. There may be some failures, but one case can't be cited as an example.

In every division we have a workshop where our engineers do research and development work. We have a team of engineers for innovating new tools and techniques but we surely need to expand the team. At present we have an ad-hoc team. We are planning to submit a proposal that the government should establish a fire safety academy near Dhaka.

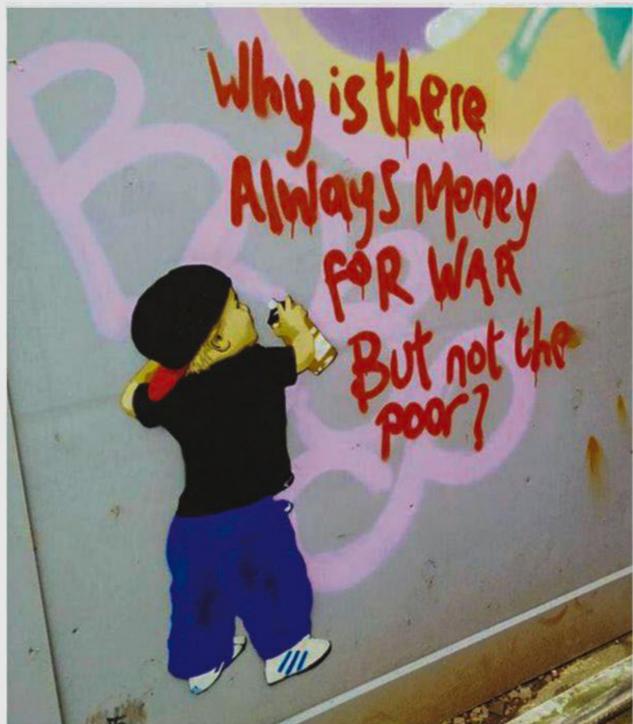
I hope within two years you will notice a lot of improvements. We are providing round-the-clock training. So far we have trained more than two lakh garment workers. We have established Rapid Rescue Squad in 79 locations. They continuously patrol the accident-prone areas. Whenever there is a road crash, the members of this squad take the victims to the nearest hospitals, thereby saving a lot of lives. We are not sitting at our fire stations anymore; we have come out on the streets for providing people with good service.

THERE'S MONEY FOR WAR but not for poverty or peace

ABU AFSARUL HAIDER

GLOBALLY, 800 million people still live in extreme poverty, 57 million children are still denied the right to primary education, gender inequality continues to persist, and economic gaps between rich and poor households are growing. At the three-day summit held from September 25 to 27, 2015 in New York, the largest ever gathering of world leaders, the 193 member states of the UN pledged to work together to help the world's poorest people. They agreed on a set of targets that became known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which include issues from eradicating poverty to preserving the planet. The implementation of the goals is expected to cost somewhere between \$3.5 and \$5 trillion every year until 2030. Experts, however, say the challenge lies in gathering the support and the funds to reach the 17 SDGs of the new agenda.

One can argue SDG funding is not just about money, it is about rich nations' political will and inclusion. There is a ton of money being spent in the wrong places. For the last several years, the Western rich and powerful nations have been preaching 'world peace' but the statistics shows that since 1776 the US has only been at peace for a total of 21 years. America has been at war 93 percent of the time -- 222 out of 239 years. In the history of warfare, the 20th century stands out as the most brutal -- three times as many people have been killed in wars in the last ninety years than in the previous five hundred. Since the end of WWII in 1945 there have been some 250 million wars in which over 50 million people have been killed, tens of millions made homeless, and countless millions injured and bereaved. It is ludicrous that the US



Airforce boasts 'Peace is our profession' and nuclear weapons are named the Peacekeeper.

The issue of Western countries' double standards, including that of the US, demands immediate attention. The US government has a long and unbroken record of working with fascists, dictators, drug lords in every region of the world in its elusive but relentless quest for unchallenged global power. Since WWII, the US has undermined, subverted or violently overthrown some 60 -- mostly democratically-elected and independent -- governments

worldwide and, replaced them with murderous corrupt dictators subservient to US dictates. To serve its interests, the US government and its allies backed and financed dictators like Augusto Pinochet of Chile, François Duvalier and his son Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc") of Haiti, Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, Mobutu Sese Seko of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Arab dictators like Saddam Hussein, Jein al Abedin Bin Ali, Hosni Mubarak and Bashar al-Assad for their geo-strategic benefit, and then plotted to destroy them when they emerged as threats to their

interests. Recently, CNN disclosed that the American use of 'Agent Orange' in the Vietnamese jungles between the 1960s and 1970s has been instrumental in the killing of humans as well as plants and animals, eventually creating a severe ecological imbalance there. In 1970 the special forces of the US used Sarin to kill the rebels of Laos and in 1983 Saddam Hussein attacked Iran with US-supplied arms of mustard, Sarin and Tabun gas. And now, since August 2014, the US has been lashing airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq and has spent more than US\$1 billion in the process. However, it is believed that such air missions hardly prevented the radical Islamist's advances in parts of Syria and in western Iraq. Some analysts have said that the strikes weren't meant to help the country survive its internal struggles, but rather to destroy the Arab countries' infrastructures, taking out oil refineries and food storage silos, hurting the Syrian people in the process instead of the supposed enemy ISIS. They speculate that the US has to recover what it has spent on the air strikes by creating scenarios that would create the effective desire to warrant its manufactured arms and weapons by the countries in need. As Joe Iosbaker, said, "The US doesn't go to war to protect lives, it goes to war for profit," he said.

The arms industry is a serious matter. According to a report just released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), world military expenditures in 2012 totalled \$1.75 trillion. And, the report revealed, as in all recent decades, the world's biggest military spender by far was the US, whose expenditures for war amounted to \$682 billion -- 39 percent of the global total. In 2011, the 100 largest contractors sold \$410 billion in arms and military services. Just 10 of these

companies sold over \$208 billion. These companies have benefited tremendously from the growth in military spending in the US, which by far has the largest military budget in the world. In 2000, the US defence budget was approximately \$312 billion and by 2011, the figure grew to \$712 billion. Arms sales also grew alongside general defence spending growth. SIPRI noted that between 2002 and 2011, arms sales among the top 100 companies grew by 51 percent. The combined military expenditure of the 27 EU member states is €194 billion. Today, 19 percent of the world's poorest people live in fragile and conflict-affected areas, and that figure will leap to 40 percent by 2030 if the current trends continue.

A different study shows that to end extreme poverty worldwide in 20 years, the total cost per year would be about \$175 billion. This represents less than one percent of the combined income of the richest countries in the world. The annual defence spending in the US is about four times as much money as is needed to begin ending extreme poverty in the world.

But unfortunately, there is a huge gap between the world we live in and the world we want. If the world's so-called saviours really want to achieve the goal of eradicating extreme poverty from the world and establish peace then they need to change their mindset, attitude and policies. They need to understand, wars have not brought peace. Extreme poverty in our world could quickly become a thing of the past if only some of their monstrous military's budget could be diverted towards humanitarian goals, building schools and skill development institutions in countries that are struggling.

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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



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only for females