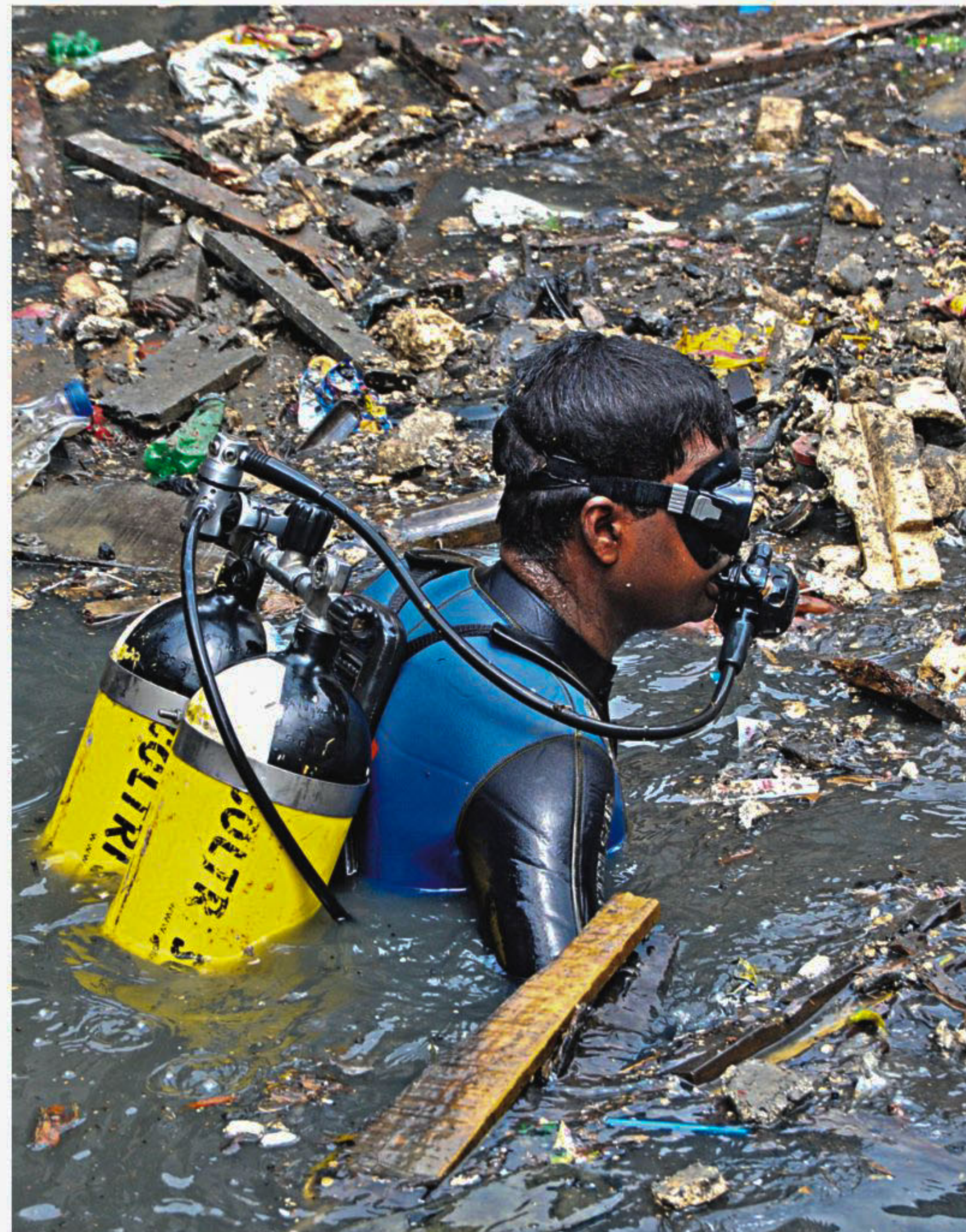


SPOTLIGHT

April 24, 2013. Bangladesh faced a national crisis when an eight-story building called Rana Plaza housing several garment factories collapsed to the ground, leaving a huge pile of rubble and thousands of lives trapped underneath. It was the deadliest building collapse in modern human history that shook the nation to its core. Just minutes after the collapse, the first rescuers who rushed to the spot, were the valiant men of the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence (BFSCD). And after twenty days of round the clock, systematic rescue, these men were the last to leave the site rescuing two thousand and five hundred trapped people from one of the world's biggest and most complex ruined structures.

During any disaster, whether fire, accidents of any kind road, railway or water transport, emergency rescue, the first people we call are the fire fighters of BFSCD. With five hundred and forty nine stations all over the country, these men have been providing all kinds of emergency service to the people whenever they are summoned. Besides, their community awareness programmes including fire fighting, rescue and evacuation drills have been making Bangladeshis a nation skilled in life saving activities and raising a constant army of dedicated volunteers.



In 1982, BFSCD was formed unifying three separate departments such as Fire Service Department, Civil Defence Department and Rescue Department under Roads and Highways Division. From a skeleton division mainly focused

on fire fighting, today this organisation can boast of an army of highly trained and experienced fire fighters, rescue experts, divers and a convoy of some of the most modern equipment and vehicles. In addition, their innovations, expertise to

# FIRST TO ARRIVE, LAST TO LEAVE

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

PHOTO COURTESY: MEDIA WING, BANGLADESH FIRE SERVICE AND CIVIL DEFENCE



mobilise and utilise local resources have enabled them to efficiently tackle many of the deadliest and most difficult crises.

At present, this organisation has been procuring a wide range of modern fire fighting and rescue equipment. Snorkel fire trucks to rescue trapped people in the high altitude, chemical tenders to reduce fire originated from highly explosive chemicals often used in the industries, cold cut systems to dig through any obstacle without causing any flame, using water mist instead of water to control fire, heat resistant clothing and their own well equipped ambulance services have increased their professionalism and capacity.

However, in Dhaka, a city overpopulated with 7 million people and criss-crossed by a network of narrow lanes and slums, all these cutting edge technologies sometimes prove to be futile.

On June 3, 2010, when a fire sparked from the explosion of an electrical transformer reached the nearby illegal chemical warehouses, several residential buildings of old Dhaka's Nimtoli area set ablaze violently. Due to narrow lanes and huge crowd of onlookers surrounding the site, heavy fire fighting and rescue vehicles faced extreme difficulty to reach the spot in time. The consequence was horrific. One hundred and twenty six people were burnt to death and Bangladesh observed a national mourning day on June 5, 2010.

"That tragic incident was an enormous lesson for us. Soon after that, we innovated a way to tackle such situations. We raised a troop of advanced party to clear the crowd and to do the primary and immediate fire fighting. Heavy motor cycles have been procured and we have equipped those with tanks of water mist

and water cannon," says Muhammad Mamun, senior staff officer of BFSCD.

"During any such case like the Nimtoli tragedy, we send this advanced party on motorbikes, who quickly reach the spot, make way for our heavy vehicles and also start the fire fighting with their own equipment," he adds.

Nonetheless, another main challenge that they face to rescue trapped people is the flawed construction design. According to Mamun, "In the Tazreen Fashions incident we faced the worst consequence of flawed construction design. When every building's fire escape is supposed to take the escaping people out of the building compound, that factory's fire escape ended in front of the factory gate which was locked and there was no one with the key to open it."

"As a result, many people died simply from panic, suffocation and from being

trampled on by their co-workers," he adds.

Then, to rescue people from such an adverse situation, the division has raised a troop of specialised force of rescuers and divers who have been dispersed all over the country. These special rescuers have been trained to penetrate through blazing fire with their heat resistant clothing and climb through high walls, barbed wires and any physical obstacles to free trapped people.

The divers are some of the most experienced and tested rescuers of BFSCD. During any water-related accidents, they have to dive under harsh conditions and rescue bodies from deep, troubled waters of Bangladesh's mighty rivers. Md Siddiqur Rahman, a veteran diver working for 18 years says, "To rescue people we are trained to dive anywhere; sea, river or even under the