

FUTURE OF THE DCC MARKET

In the wee hours of January 3, a devastating fire engulfed the DCC market in Gulshan-1. It took firefighters 16 hours to douse the flames which led to the partial collapse of the market. It has been nearly a month since the fire that destroyed almost half of the 600 shops of the once thriving marketplace. The Daily Star looks into the uncertainty revolving the future of the market and those whose livelihoods depend on it.

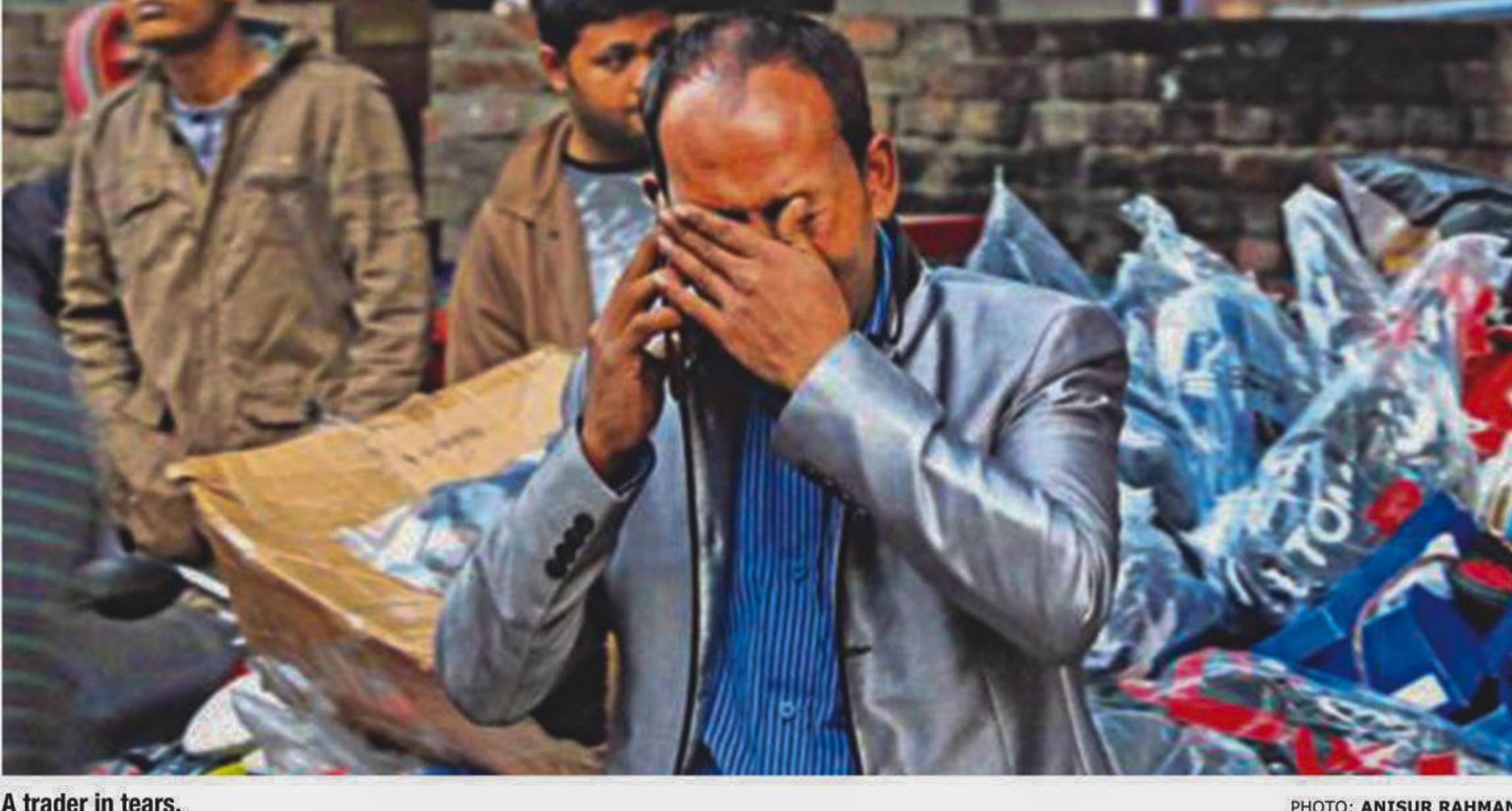


PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

A trader in tears.

Gripped by uncertainty

NAHELA NOWSHIN

WHILE business has partly resumed and a semblance of normalcy has been restored shop owners and traders remain fearful about their future. Although Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) has begun to set up temporary shops (around 100 have already been installed out of a total of 291), the biggest worry for shop owners and traders is the uncertainty they are faced with regarding DNCC's long-term plans for the market.

Sher Mohammad, Chairman, DNCC Kitchen Market Traders' Association, told us that shop owners and traders know nothing about the DNCC's work plan regarding a permanent solution. They fear jeopardising or losing their businesses if they are left out of negotiations about DCC market's future plans.

Apparently, the decades-old market had no firefighting equipment on site. A report in this newspaper found that, authorities were previously alerted about the lack of safety equipment. A team of experts from BUET had inspected the site a few years ago as part of an initiative undertaken after the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013. As a result of their findings, the team had suggested retrofitting the DCC market—a task supposed to have been carried out by the DNCC—but no action was taken.

DNCC Mayor Annisul Huq later said that the DNCC had put up billboards declaring the DCC market as risky but they were torn down every time.

The DCC market fire is one of innumerable such incidents that we have seen lately. But in this particular case there's more than meets the eye. A glimpse into the market's recent history would give legitimacy to shop owners' fears of not being included in the consultation process and their widely held belief that this fire was no accident; that it was not

caused by the transformer blast on the south side of the market, as reported, but that it was a deliberate act of sabotage spurred on by self-serving interests.

Apart from the obvious issues of the lack of basic safety equipment on the premises and the dilapidated condition of the market, at the heart of the problem is a longstanding legal dispute between shop owners and the city corporation that began in 2006. The then city corporation led by Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka struck a deal with Amin Associates Overseas Ltd of the Metro Group, without consulting shop owners, to construct a 20-

MAIN DEMANDS OF SHOP OWNERS

- No new allotment fee
- Retain original position of shops
- Kitchen market must not be moved underground

storey trade centre. Traders and shop owners filed several cases as a result and the project never took off due to the legal quagmire.

Given that people wielding financial and political clout have had their eyes set on the market for long and there is a precedence of traders and shop owners being left out of negotiations, it is no wonder that those affected are not only suspicious about the origin of the fire but also anxious about their future.

But it seems that their concerns will not be allayed anytime soon. Due to the complex nature of this case, there is no clear-cut permanent solution, as explained by DNCC Mayor Mr. Annisul Huq himself. "Around 20 to 30 crores have been invested in the market as a result of a deal struck by a former mayor. DNCC needs to legally clear its files before construction can begin. There are also issues regarding time

constraints and shop owners need to have internal discussions of

their own about the relocation of shops. Keep in mind that establishment of a new market is extremely complicated. It could take years. The situation is very uncertain. But all parties are going to come together in a participatory dialogue to reach a decision," he said.

In light of looming uncertainty and so many moving parts to the issue, the future of traders seems anything but promising. Past city corporation authorities are largely to blame for the present crisis—from signing a backroom deal to failing to maintain the market in good condition which has only gotten worse over the years. If they had nothing to hide—and if it wasn't a case of corporate ambitions being prioritised over public interests—then why were shop owners left out of the loop when the city corporation struck a deal with Metro Group almost a decade ago?

But now, after the outbreak of the devastating fire that incurred monumental losses amounting to Tk 200 crores, all that the shop owners and traders want is assurance from the government that their future is safe and sound; that their interests be given precedence in the considerations about the market's future trajectory.

Shop owners are not completely against a high-rise complex taking the market's place but they are adamant on retaining the prime location of their shops, and have categorically refused to pay a new allotment fee. But as the Mayor's comments suggest, even the DNCC is unsure of the next course of action, and only time will tell if the shop owners' demands will see the light of day.

When the thorny issue of compensation came up, members of the Association told us that they are yet to receive any financial assistance from the government. And the DNCC has no plans to compensate them anytime soon either. According to

Mr. Annisul Huq, "Compensation is not a feasible option since there are many unanswered questions. What if this sets a precedent and everyone burns their shops down in hopes of compensation?" But the Mayor's statement is somewhat contradictory in terms of the ground reality of the DCC market. It is the shop owners who, in this case, suspect that the fire was a premeditated act designed to make way for the multi-storey project stalled for far too long.

The importance of the DCC market cannot be emphasised enough. Throughout the years, the market has emerged as a lifeline for ordinary people, from businessmen looking to buy wholesale products to housewives purchasing cosmetic goods and grocery. No other market offers quality products at reasonable prices in a wealthy a neighbourhood as Gulshan. A member of the Traders' Association we spoke to revealed that the daily income of shops ranged from an impressive Tk 1 lakh to an astounding Tk 20 lakh.

It is, therefore, all the more tough to believe that the once bustling marketplace, which was indispensable to the livelihood of sellers and buyers, should go down in flames in the blink of an eye. If the DCC fire was in fact an accident, then we wonder, have Rana Plaza and Tazreen taught us nothing? Whatever the case—whether this was an act of sabotage or not—the fact matter is that of the three parties involved—the city corporation, Metro Group, and shop owners and traders—it is the latter that have borne the brunt of the catastrophic fire. Sadly, their fate rests in the hands of the very entities whose actions (and inaction) have brought them to this crossroads today and only time will tell if the authorities prioritise the interests of those who have the most to lose.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

Losing a unique marketplace

UPASHANA SALAM

THE Gulshan-1 DCC market has been so popular since its inception because apart from satisfying every basic shopping need of consumers, the market has acted as a focal point for nearby localities, serving as a neighbourhood market for people living in Gulshan-1, Gulshan Avenue and Niketon.

With talks of replacing the structure, there are concerns that the market will lose its charm that made it unique. "Government markets like New Market and the DCC markets have a characteristic of their own that offers consumers much more than just the wares for sale," says Iqbal Habib, architect and member secretary of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA). "These are not merely shopping centres but also tend to localised needs of their neighbourhoods. The current structure of the Gulshan-1 market, for example, has a large space in front of it where cars can be parked, there is enough room to browse and shop. This is something that will be missing if the proposed plan to share the market under a public-private partnership

developers, it thus accounts for no sense of responsibility or accountability on part of the developers or the shop owners. The goal is to only make the most profits but at the cost of pricing and convenience."

The DCC markets don't solely cater to the elite segment of society; their client base is diverse and thus, if the structure is removed without a proper plan to replace it, it could create a vacuum in the supply chain of that area. "There are arguments that the DCC market was situated in a risky building and thus needs to be replaced with something safer. While I cannot disagree with that statement, we need to ascertain that the structure that replaces the market is much safer than the replacement examples we have seen thus far. It needs to have universal accessibility. Can we honestly say that the Kemal Ataturk market is not an unsafe structure? Can it be guaranteed that the centre replacing DCC market will not be hazardous or vulnerable to fires and other disasters? We need to get the answers to these practical questions before transforming it into a new, 'modern' shopping centre."

Habib concedes that the structure



A scene of the ravaging fire.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

is actually realised."

Habib cites the example of the market at Kemal Ataturk Avenue in Banani, which was leased out to the private sector when Sadeque Hossain Khoka was mayor from 2002 to 2011. The structure was replaced with a shopping centre which, Habib says, does not offer consumers the same comfort or convenience that the original market did. "The shopping centre is practically situated on a footpath with little ventilation, very little space, and no facilities for physically challenged people," he adds.

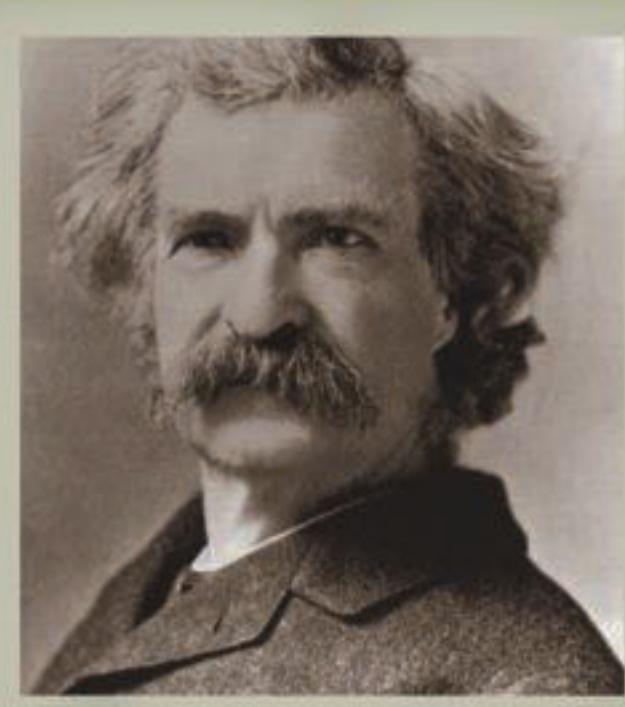
Habib also argues that in most cases, despite claims of a 50-50 partnership with the private sector, ultimately the government gets an insignificant share, thereby allowing the developers to make important decisions regarding the structure. "This has been seen in the case of the Banani market. This leads to non-conformity to regulations and little control of government agencies. The building codes and standards are not maintained or implemented. When a public structure is leased out to the private sector, with a heavy share of ownership given to the

would most likely need to be rebuilt as even retrofitting can no longer be considered an option. But before embarking on an ambitious project, it is important to offer an alternative to the existing businesses. A comprehensive plan is required which would require the participation of all stakeholders involved, he suggests.

"The shop owners who have been doing business at the DCC market legally are all enlisted. The government first needs to ensure that they are properly rehabilitated. Public participation is of utmost importance in this regard, and thus, in order to make the new structure a success, the government needs to involve business owners as well as consumer representatives who can give a clear picture of what they seek from the new structure. If the proposed plan is implemented unopposed and without change, it would definitely affect the state, the shop owners and the public. The only ones benefiting would be the developers," he concludes.

The writer is a member of the Editorial team, *The Daily Star*.

QUOTEABLE Quote



MARK TWAIN

AMERICAN WRITER, HUMORIST, ENTREPRENEUR, PUBLISHER AND LECTURER

Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Deep cuts
- 7 Ready for business
- 11 Acid's opposite
- 12 Flaring star
- 13 1986 Robin Williams movie
- 15 Detail map
- 16 Turner of film
- 18 Really impresses
- 21 Ladder step
- 22 Rightaway
- 24 Termination
- 25 Lynx or lion
- 26 Pickle buy
- 27 Mail delivery
- 29 Extra amount
- 30 Lively folk dance
- 31 Coral isles
- 32 Enticed
- 34 2016 Ben Affleck movie
- 40 Declare
- 41 Bakery treat
- 42 Hot, in a way
- 43 Car-washing cloth
- 44 Neon or helium
- 45 Stab
- 46 Order
- 47 Sneeze
- 48 Ozone
- 49 Order
- 50 Leg
- 51 Libra
- 52 Radish
- 53 Stern
- 54 Farmhand
- 55 Oval
- 56 Parrot
- 57 Rician
- 58 Leave
- 59 Evenup
- 60 Area
- 61 Drummers
- 62 Stab
- 63 Ozone
- 64 Koala
- 65 Order
- 66 Eager
- 67 Nasty
- 68 Stoic

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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E	V	E	N	U	P	A	R	E	A
D	R	U	M	M	R	U	M	R	S
L	E	G	S	T	A	B	D	U	R

BEETLE BAILEY



by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES



by Kirkman & Scott

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