



People hold a giant banner reading "Self-determination is not a crime" during a protest against the trial of former Catalan separatist leaders in Barcelona yesterday. Twelve Catalan separatist politicians and activists face years behind bars if they are convicted of rebellion or other charges for pushing an independence referendum in October 2017, in defiance of a court ban, and a brief declaration of independence.

PHOTO: AFP

Heroes born out of blaze

FROM PAGE 16

There were four attendants in the ICU. Time was running out and something had to be done fast.

Noor immediately called Dr ABM Muksudul Alam, principal of the college and head of the anaesthesia department, who rushed to the scene.

They then scouted out the way to evacuate the patients. By then, the air outside the ICU unit was thick with smoke, further complicating any rescue effort.

The ventilators' batteries continued to flicker. So far, two batteries had reached their last legs, while five others could continue for a bit longer.

More phone calls were made as the urgency of the situation became more pronounced.

Finally, when help was still not arriving, around 20 minutes later, a decision was taken. They would break into the store room nearby and take whatever they could salvage.

In a stroke of luck, one of the many minor miracles that would take place that day, they found five cylinders of oxygen, ambu bags and other necessary things.

By this time, a ward boy and a few students of the college had also gathered at the unit. The rescue mission was about to begin.

Connecting the patients to ambu bags, which was feverishly being pumped by attendants or students, each patient, along with their bed strapped to different machines, was taken towards the exit.

The task required prodigious strength and conviction. Rasel, a ward boy, was given credit by Noor for pulling it off. Noor also mentioned two nurses -- Daisy and Nupur -- were said to have offered tremendous support.

Soon, the patients were carried out one by one.

Elsewhere, students, honorary doctors and interns were helping people exit the children and gynaec wards. Legends were born during this phase. Doctors and patients later spoke of doctors who helped, as if they were folk heroes of fables of the past.

There were tales of those who stayed back, despite being so close to the fire, out of sheer conviction and dedication to their role as savers of life.

But it wasn't just the doctors. General people, police and fire officials, and students of the nearby Sher-e-Bangla Agriculture University all came together to help.

But as the patients, their relatives

and all hospital staffers, began to be evacuated, another problem arose: there was only one entry and exit point to the hospital. How could a stampede be avoided?

IT'S A MIRACLE

KM Mamun Morshed, assistant director of the hospital, still cannot explain how the evacuation went about so smoothly.

"This structure was designed to be a 350-bed one. Now it is 850-bed. There is only one entry point as the structure was not developed according to the increase in beds.

"There is also no space left to do. So evacuating around 3,000-3,500 had to be evacuated using one exit, without any casualty, is a big deal," he said.

He credited a fire drill which had taken place around five to six months ago for their preparation. "At the time of the drill, we had laughed at why we were doing this," he said.

But now he understood. He was still in awe of the discipline with which the evacuation was conducted.

"The risks were tremendous. There was an oxygen plant right next to where the fire was. Although the ICU was safe, if too much heat reached the oxygen plant, there would be an explosion," he recalled, his voice still a little shaky at the thought of a possible disaster of epic proportions.

Again, he reiterated that he could not explain how everything had been done so smoothly. "God had directly helped us."

He praised all those involved for ensuring no casualties. He also reserved special praise for the Dhaka Mahanagar Ambulance Shomobai Malik Samity.

"We had two ambulances initially but afterwards few more reached the spot."

The situation changed when the ambulance association was called using the 999 emergency hotline.

Once the incident was verified, 80-90 private ambulances were dispatched to the area. Within an hour, 120 more had arrived.

The ambulances provided the service free of cost. During a meeting with the inspector general of police last year, ambulance owners were told that they would have to provide ambulances during national emergencies. And so they delivered.

President of the association Alamgir Hossain said, "Around 8:30pm, the fire came under control but we worked till midnight carrying patients."

Dr Uttam Kumar Barua, the director

of the hospital, said the ambulances shuttled 800 times in total. This was made more exceptional because the fire had broken out during rush hour on a Thursday, one of the busiest times in the city.

But the efforts of the volunteers and officials made everything possible.

FIGHTING THE FLAMES

Mohammad Shohag Mia, a student of the medical college, used a hand mike, to ensure the discipline of the ambulances.

When asked how he got there, he said, "Right after the incident, there was a Facebook page for all doctors and medical students where the matter was posted.

"We then sent out a message that there would be deluge of patients going to certain hospitals so that they should be prepared.

The many volunteers did not only help with the evacuation process but much more.

The first call to the fire service had reached the Mohammadpur unit. Two units from there made their way to the hospital but found no source of water.

Finally, a water source was found. It was at a pond at a nearby university.

By then, two more units from Kallyanpur had joined the fight. Students rushed to lug the pipes towards the hospital so the blaze could be put out.

Meanwhile, fire fighters were busy making an important decision.

Anwar Hossain, deputy assistant director, Fire Service and Civil Defence, said, "We first had to decide whether to fight the fire or evacuate the people.

Fighting the fire, however, would mean the spread of smoke. So we decided to evacuate first.

He then spoke of the role of the patients, attendants and students in the evacuation process.

Afterwards, the fight against the flame began.

Anwar mentioned again about the fire drill. "That is when we decided the primary shelter point during a fire would be the field in front of the hospital. Knowing that we could proceed," he said.

Eighteen units worked together to control the blaze which was finally put out two and a half hours later.

It was finally done. The patients were evacuated. The blaze was put out.

Heroes were born in the smoke and fire of February 14. A rare precedent was set by doctors, nurses, hospital staffs, fire-fighters and volunteers.

Kashmiris.

Sanjeev Verma, the divisional commissioner of Jammu, said that the curfew will remain until further orders to maintain law and order. An army column staged a flag march.

In New Delhi, leaders of political parties met and said they stood behind the government in its resolve to tackle terrorism.

The all-party meeting put up a strong and united front against Pakistan-sponsored terrorism and adopted a unanimous resolution expressing the resolve to fight the menace.

The attack comes at a difficult time for Pakistan, as it struggles to attract foreign investment and avert a payments crisis, with foreign currency reserves swiftly diminishing.

On Friday, it summoned India's deputy envoy in Islamabad to reject the accusations against the country.

Others held flowers as they walked behind the coffins in the towns of Jalandhar, Varanasi and Moga, television showed.

Tens of thousands of troops, paramilitary police and state police are deployed across scenic Kashmir to quell the nearly 30-year revolt there, India's only Muslim-majority region.

In Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir, authorities imposed a curfew for a second day after mobs attacked vehicles and pelted stones at the homes of

privileges to Pakistan in what it said was the first step to isolate Pakistan for not acting against Islamist militants operating from its soil.

As the bodies of the policemen who died in the car bomb reached their homes in small towns across India, crowds waving the Indian flag gathered in the streets to honour them and demand revenge.

"The country understands the anger simmering within the soldiers," he said at a political rally in western Maharashtra state.

Modi's Hindu nationalist ruling group faces a tough general election in April-May.

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US backs India's

FROM PAGE 16

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has faced calls for retribution from Indians on social media as well as hardline groups demonstrating in the streets, said on Saturday he had given a free hand to the military to respond to acts of violence.

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