

Chemical blaze kills 67

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The blaze brings to mind the memory of the deadly fire in Nimtoli, just about a kilometre from Chawkbazar. At least 124 people were killed and over 200 others injured in the fire, which originated from a stove in a building that also housed a flammable chemical warehouse.

The fire service is yet to determine the cause of the latest fire. But the industries minister said the it originated from explosion of a cooking gas cylinder. He also claimed chemicals had nothing to do with the inferno.

According to locals, however, the fire broke out after the gas cylinder of a pickup van exploded.

Autopsies found all the victims were burned alive. Of them, 41 have been identified so far while 39 bodies were handed over to their families. The rest of the bodies, burned beyond recognition, would be identified through DNA tests.

The victims are mostly pedestrians, people travelling on rickshaws and cars, residents of the buildings as well as owners and staffers of the shops and warehouses at the buildings.

Fourteen people were buried at Azimpur graveyard, while the rest were taken to their village homes for burial.

The district administration gave Tk 20,000 for burial of each victim. In addition, the government has announced a compensation of Tk 1,00,000 each.

All the injured victims will get free treatment at the DMCH, officials said.

HELPLESS DEATH

Soon after the fire started following a loud bang, it ripped through five buildings, including a community centre. Three of the buildings had highly flammable deodorants, air fresheners, cosmetics and plastic beads, setting off a chain of explosions and a wall of flames down nearby narrow streets clogged with heavy traffic.

The area was jam-packed at the time due to road diversion for the Amar Ekushe programme at the central Shaheed Minar. As a result, vehicles, pedestrians, shop owners and their employees could not move as quickly.

The fire engulfed the area within minutes. Some tried to escape the blaze in vain, witnesses said.

More than 300 firefighters with 39 fire engines finally managed to douse the blaze around 12:20pm yesterday, after around 14 hours of relentless efforts.

Inside the buildings, they discovered dozens of scattered bodies, many of which charred beyond recognition.

Bangladesh Air Force was also called

in to fight the fire. Two of its helicopters sprayed water on the affected buildings in the morning.

Survivors said fireballs rained down and explosions rocked the streets as they ran for their lives.

Many charred bodies were seen lying in alleyways, inside the buildings and on staircases yesterday.

Some of them were charred inside their shops, some just when they started for home shutting their shops, rescuers said.

"We found six bodies at a pharmacy where the shutters were down," said Abdur Rahim Babul, a neighbour.

Three of a family were burned alive in the street on their way to a party, organised just a building away from the burnt Haji Wahed Mansion. At least eight bodies were recovered from a restaurant nearby.

Kawser Ahmed, a final-year BBA student of Dhaka University, used to run a dental clinic with his friends at the Churihatta Road in Chawkbazar. While he was working in the clinic, he and five others, including two dentists, were burnt to death. His one-year-old twins -- a daughter and a son -- were taken to the DMCH by their mother.

"He was supposed to pass out from the university this year. Now everything is over," said his elder brother Ilias Ahmed.

DEVASTATION ALL AROUND

A trail of devastation was everywhere.

The roads and building tops were strewn with squeezed perfume cans which exploded like bombs. During the fire, they looked like firecrackers sent off to the sky, witnesses said.

Damaged bottles of perfumes, air fresheners and hair spray were found scattered here and there. Some of them were even found on the rooftop of neighbouring buildings.

A turbid smell of fire and damaged perfume bottles was everywhere.

Charred remains of cars, motorcycles, and pickups, steel structure of rickshaws, vans were found lying on the road. Most of their tyres were flattened. Car windows were seen moulded in heat.

The walls of the first floor of the Haji Wahed Mansion collapsed on the road. The front portion of restaurants were seen burnt.

Meanwhile, the industries ministry and the Fire Service and Civil Defence formed separate committees to probe the fire.

Police last night filed a case against unidentified traders on charges of causing the death of 67 through negligence.

How the fire began?

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He also stressed the fire "had nothing to do with the chemical business" in the area.

"This is a gas cylinder blast. LP gas, which was being delivered to meet the [utility] gas shortage in the area..." he told reporters.

He added that those who have been blaming the chemical warehouses "have got a very wrong message."

However, Brig Gen Ali Ahmed Khan, director general of the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence, said the cause of the fire was not known yet.

He added that the inflammable perfumes and cosmetics that were in a warehouse on the second floor of the building caused the fire to spread. That was why it took hours to put out the blaze.

There are thousands of chemical warehouses in old Dhaka, most of which are in residential buildings. According to the fire service, only 2 percent of these warehouses have the city corporation's permission.

The minister told reporters that after a gas cylinder exploded, an electric transformer unfortunately caught fire.

"There was a warehouse of perfumes and cosmetics [in the worst affected building] but no chemicals..."

The fire left the five-storey Haji Wahed Mansion almost completely charred.

Several firefighters, however, said they were yet to find any evidence suggesting that a gas cylinder had exploded.

Several locals said the fire might have started following an explosion near a pickup.

Abdul Rahim Babul, a resident of the area, told The Daily Star that he had heard a loud bang while going home around 10:40pm. He thought the sound came from a pickup.

"Within minutes, I saw small perfume bottles flying out of Haji Wahed Mansion... They looked like firecrackers," he said.

The roads in the area and the rooftops were littered with deformed spray cans of mostly deodorants, perfumes, air fresheners and hair sprays.

Throughout yesterday, people involved in the chemical warehouse businesses told reporters not to cite the warehouses as a probable cause of the fire.

"Why do you talk about chemicals being responsible for the fire? Say that it was a cylinder blast that caused the fire," a man told The Daily Star.

The man didn't mention his name,

but said he runs a warehouse.

However, many residents of the area said the businessmen were trying to deflect the attention from the chemicals, fearing an initiative to move the business from the area.

"By renting out flats to chemical businesses, the owners are turning the buildings into bombs," said Mohammad Raju, a resident.

About moving the chemical hub out of Old Dhaka, the minister said the businesses had been there for generations and had developed their trade network.

"We can tell that we will make a decision very soon and move them," he said.

Meanwhile, Security Services Division of the Ministry of Home Affairs formed a five-member committee to probe the fire.

Headed by Additional Secretary Pradip Ranjan Chakraborty, the committee includes DG of fire service, deputy commissioner, representative of Dhaka South City Corporation and deputy police commissioner of Lalbagh Zone.

The committee was asked to submit its report to the ministry by a week.

The industries ministry also formed a 12-member committee with Additional Secretary M Mofizul Haque as its chief to find out the cause of the fire, assess the losses and make recommendations to prevent the recurrence of such incidents, reports UNB.

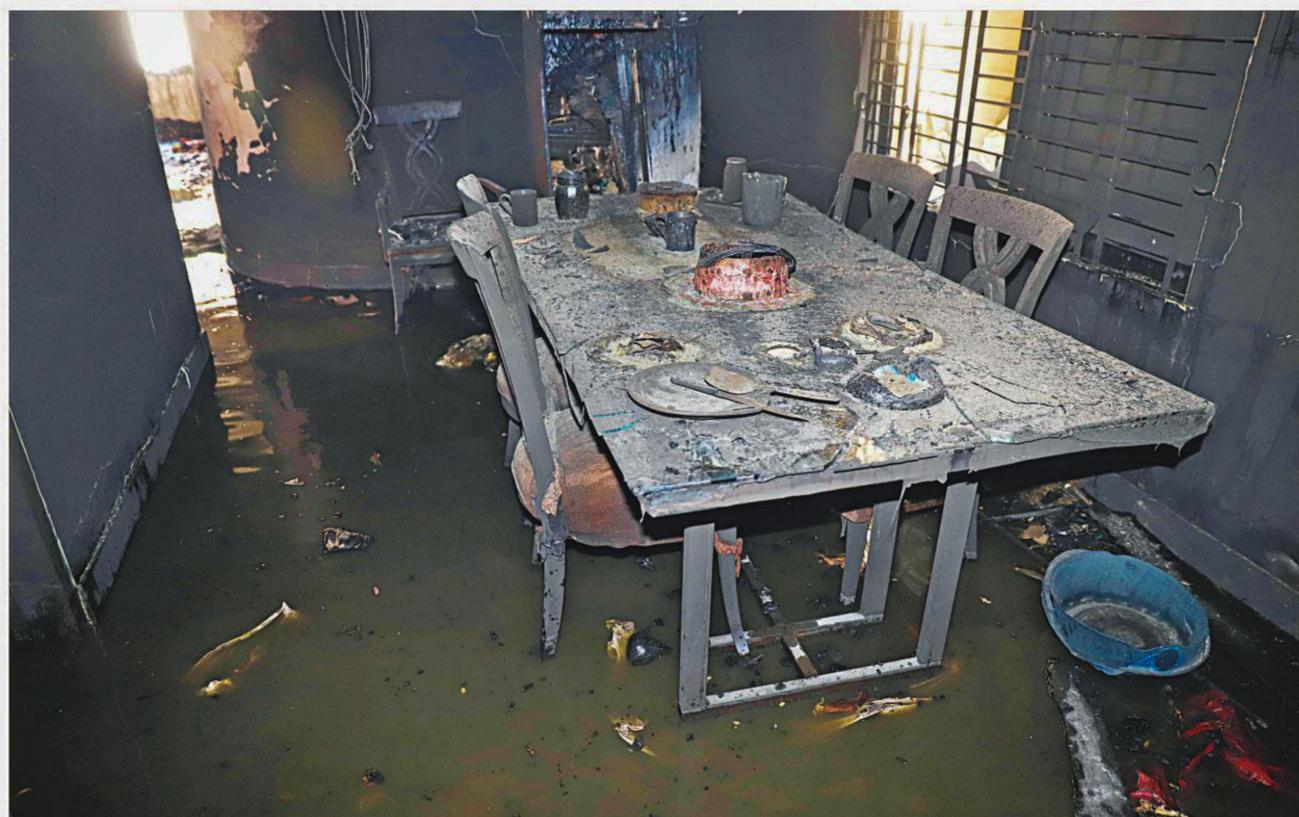
Protests against jail sentences for journos in Turkey

AFP, Istanbul

A group of lawyers yesterday gathered outside Istanbul's main courthouse to protest against an appeal court's upholding the convictions of former journalists and executives from opposition daily Cumhuriyet.

The court on Tuesday confirmed jail sentences against 14 former Cumhuriyet staff including prominent journalists who are charged with "aiding and abetting terror groups without being a member."

They had been free pending the appeals, but after the court verdict eight of them would have to go back to prison and the remaining six -- who were given sentences of more than five years, have the option of appealing further to the Supreme Court.



Charred remains of a dining table on the second floor of a building in Chawkbazar speak volumes. The fire that wreaked havoc in the area devastated many families like the one of this house. The incident brings to mind the Nimtoli fire that killed 124 people in 2010.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

The face of horror

10:15PM, WEDNESDAY: I COULDN'T TAKE HIM HOME

Around 10:15pm on Wednesday, Dipu pulled down the shutters on his family-owned small hosiery shop in the city's Chawkbazar. He then closed the day's accounts with his two brothers Mohammad Ali and Opu, both in their early 30s.

With them was also Ali's son, three-year-old Arafat. An hour earlier, Dipu's parents had come to the shop with Arafat after buying medicines from a nearby shop. They left but Arafat stayed back to accompany his father.

By 10:00pm, the normal chaos around the area had subsided, except for the few vehicles honking their horns in the traffic of the night.

After shutting up the shop, the four began walking home together. Dipu was 50 steps ahead of them, as he had someone to meet.

"Suddenly, I heard a loud bang. As I looked back, I saw huge flames engulfing everything behind me. I couldn't get closer to them," Dipu told The Daily Star.

"Arafat was playing with a ball inside the shop. I asked him to kiss me and he gave me a big kiss. But I couldn't take him [Arafat] home."

The fire at Old Dhaka's market hub Chawkbazar killed Mohammad Ali, Opu and Arafat.

Dipu and his family members identified them at Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday morning.

10:30PM, WEDNESDAY: I COULD HAVE SAVED HIM

Saiful Islam, a businessman involved in making shoes, was having a usual chat with his friend Mosharraf Hossain as their rickshaw got stuck in Churihatta intersection.

They were returning to their home in a nearby area.

"Suddenly I heard a huge explosion and fell down on the road," he said.

Within moments, he saw the fire from a nearby building eating its way towards them, making strange crackling noises and emitting an unbearable heat. Different objects shot out as if from nowhere and started raining down on vehicles and commuters.

"I could manage to stand up and run to safety in a nearby alley. But my friend couldn't," said Saiful. Saiful Islam remains

haunted by the guilt of not saving his friend from the fire which broke out near Churihatta intersection in Chawkbazar. The massive inferno caught him off-guard.

"I feel guilty thinking that I could have saved my friend if I had rescued him and admitted him to a hospital," a sobbing Saiful said.

"But the massive fire, the burning vehicles, took away my sense. I ran for my life."

"We have been friends for 25 years. But I could not do anything..." Saiful said and broke off mid-sentence.

With minor injuries in his head and legs, he came to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

"I saw my friend at the hospital. But he is dead."

12:03PM, THURSDAY: WHERE IS MY FATHER?

Holding her father's photo, Nasrin Akhter cried near the yellow crime scene tape, just beside Chawkbazar's Haji Wahed Mansion.

She had looked for her father Jainal Abedin Bablu in every possible place after the ghastly fire. But nothing could be found.



Nasrin breaks down in tears holding the photo of her missing father.

"My father left home around 10:00pm after getting a call from his friend who invited him for a cup of tea at Haji Ballu road. But he was not reachable since an explosion took place near Wahed Mansion," said the sobbing daughter.

"Where is my father? Did you find him...," Nasrin asked, showing the photo to the fire fighters and other rescuers. But none could give her a hint.

Hailing from the Old Dhaka, Bablu had been living at their house in Asgar Lane with his two sons and a daughter.

Nasrin's aunt, Shirin Akhter who also came with her, said that they looked for

Bablu at Dhaka Medical College Hospital and Sir Salimullah Medical College. But not a trace of him was to be found.

The family suspected Bablu might have gotten trapped inside the fire in front of Wahed Mansion on his way to Haji Ballu road.

According to witnesses, many people were killed on the road in front of Wahed Mansion, where vehicles were stuck in traffic jam and the victims could not escape the fire.

Nasrin said they went to Mugda General Hospital in the evening, but still there was no news of her father.



Raju, one of those killed in the devastating fire, is seen in a family photo.

12:30PM, THURSDAY: BURY ME WITH MY SONS

Md Shahabullah, around 70, stood shell shocked. He was coming to grips with the fact that the lives of his two sons had been cut short in such a way.

His sons Masud Rana, 35, and Mahbubur Rahman Raju, 28, used to run a telecom shop on the ground floor of Haji Wahed Mansion for more than a decade.

Yesterday, firemen recov-



Masud Rana, another victim in the fire, is pictured in a family photo.

ered their bodies from the very same shop.

Surrounded by relatives at

the floor of their living room, Shahabullah cried intermittently.

"Bury me with my sons," he kept saying.

Rana had a four-year-old boy Mohammad while Raju got married about a year ago.

Shahabullah's brother-in-law Mohammad Barkatullah said both brothers were in the shop during the incident.

"When we first heard about the fire, we rushed to the spot but could not reach the shop due to the fire's intensity," he said.

"We tried repeatedly to contact them over phone. The phone rang but no one picked up. After 12:02am, the phone was found switched off."

Raju's father-in-law Munir Ahmed identified the brothers' body at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue.

1:30PM, THURSDAY: WHAT DO I TELL MY NIECE...?

Amidst the eerie wails ringing through the halls of Dhaka Medical College Hospital, a man stood holding a picture. He kept asking passers-by if they had seen the man in the picture.

Around 50 years of age with the folds of his skin just



Abdus Salam looks for his brother Billal at the DMCH. Billal was later found dead.

beginning to appear, Abdus Salam Azad was fighting to hold back his tears as he paced restlessly, moving from the hospital's emergency to the morgue and back again.

The picture he was holding was that of his younger brother Billal Hossain, 44, who had been missing since Wednesday night after the ghastly fire broke out near Churihatta intersection in Chawkbazar.

Billal, who hails from Shariatpur, lived with his family in Shahidnagar in the capital. Coming from a struggling working-class family, he was employed as a tailor for a decorator, which had its offices right next to where the disaster struck.

Azad arrived at the hospital upon hearing that the owner of the decorator and another employee there had died in the fire, but he could not get any trace of his younger brother.

"I searched everywhere, but did not find my brother," he told The Daily Star. He talked to police, media personnel and the locals of the area, but to no avail.

Post midday, he was still looking for an answer to convey to the family. He was wondering how to tell Billal's eight-year-old daughter of whether her father was alive or dead.

Finally, Azad found the body of his brother in the afternoon.

"What do I tell my niece when she asks about her father?"

1:45PM, THURSDAY: I WILL RECOGNISE MY SON IN THE CHARRED REMAINS.

"My son's body is kept with other charred remains. They are not allowing me to check. Please, give me a chance; I will recognise my son in the charred remains," Rubina Yeasmin appealed to the people around her in front of Dhaka Medical College morgue yesterday.

"They told me that my son is missing but I know where my son is. He is inside the chars," she kept saying to her relatives before they led her away. Her son's picture remained clutched firmly in her hand.

Her son Rohan Khan, a third semester BBA student of North South University, and his friend Md Arafat, were passing through Chawkbazar area on a motorbike at the time the fire broke out.

"They were stuck in traffic when the fire broke out. They died on the spot," said Mamun Ahmed, a cousin of Rohan, who lived with his parents in Agamasi Lane in the capital's Old Dhaka.

In the days leading up to his death, Rohan was busy with his sister's wedding, scheduled to be held next month.

He went to the area to talk with a decorator and see the venue for the marriage ceremony.

"Now everything is finished," said Mamun.

The family were yet to find any trace of Rohan's body till yesterday evening. [Wasim Bin Habib, Tuhin Shubhra Adhikary, Rashidul Hasan, Muntakim Saad, Mohammad Jamil Khan, Rafiul Islam and Shaheen Mollah contributed to this report.]