



Containers of chemicals found stacked in the basement of Haji Wahed Mansion in the city's Chawkbazar yesterday. Inset, sacks of melted plastic beads on the ground floor of the building.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Old Dhaka's ticking TIMEBOMB

Wahed Mansion, the centre of Wednesday's fire, had highly flammable substances; hundreds such warehouses dot the area

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The old town blaze that claimed at least 67 lives could have been even more devastating had the flames come into contact with the huge stockpile of chemicals in the basement of Haji Wahed Mansion.

A team of firefighters yesterday searched the building in Chawkbazar's Churihatta, only to make a terrifying revelation that several hundred barrels and sacks of combustible and flammable substances were stored in the basement.

Major AKM Shakil Newaz, director (operations and maintenance) of fire service, said they found 16 types of chemicals at the basement of the building, the centre of

Wednesday night's inferno.

According to an expert, at least four of those posed extreme risk and the casualty would have been higher if the flames had reached those.

"The fire would have gone beyond our control had the chemicals caught fire. It would have continued until the chemicals were burnt away," Ratan Kumar Debnath, station officer of Lalbagh Fire Service Station, said after visiting the basement.

The finding contradicts the claim of Industries Minister Nurul Majid Mahmud Humayun, who said on Thursday, "There was a warehouse of perfumes and cosmetics [in the

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Wednesday night's inferno.

The agonising wait

Relatives of those 'missing' in Chawkbazar blaze look for their loved ones; at least 18 remains unaccounted for

PORIMOL PALMA, SHAHEEN MOLLAH and
PALASH KHAN

With dazed eyes on a blank face, five-year-old Sanin lay nestled in the arms of her father Suman, who was standing just yards off the Dhaka Medical College morgue yesterday.

The little one's mother had been missing since Wednesday and she must have been wondering where her mother had gone.

What the child did not know was she was waiting with her father to identify the body of her mother, Shila, 25.

Of the total 67 who were burnt to death in the deadly inferno in Chawkbazar, 46 were identified and handed over to relatives, but others were struggling to identify the 21 victims who were burnt almost beyond recognition in the chemical blaze.

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With his father, five-year-old Sanin waits at a CID booth outside Dhaka Medical College morgue yesterday to provide DNA samples to help identify her mother missing since the Chawkbazar blaze.

PHOTO: STAR

Govt can't shrug off responsibility

Says Obaidul Quader about old town tragedy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader yesterday said the government cannot avoid its responsibility for the Chawkbazar tragedy.

"If anything happens in the country, the government can't shrug off the responsibility as it's in power... this is a fact," he said while replying to a reporter's question outside the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

On Wednesday night, a devastating fire ripped through several buildings in old Dhaka's Chawkbazar area. At least 67 people were killed in the incident.

The tragedy brings to mind the Nimtoli inferno that killed 124 in 2010. It had sparked a public outcry, demanding relocation of chemical warehouses and stores from the area, but little has been done in the last nine years.

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Chemicals
fed the fire

*Probe body says; cause
still unknown*

RAFIUL ISLAM and
WASIM BIN HABIB

Two days after the devastating fire in the city's Chawkbazar, the actual cause of the blaze still remains unclear.

But one thing is sure, chemicals and flammable objects had fed the flames that almost gutted Haji Wahed Mansion and partly damaged three other adjoining buildings on Wednesday night, causing the fire to last longer, said exerts and members of a probe committee.

Some local landlords and traders who claimed to have witnessed the raging fire insisted that the blast of a cylinder ignited the flames.

However, they gave varied versions.

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MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

Collective failure

All five affected buildings built in violation of building and fire safety codes; yet no one faced action

LOTTO ITALIANO

The devastating fire in Chawkbazar is the outcome of a collective failure of the authorities concerned.

After the Nimtoli fire that claimed 124 lives in 2010, a probe committee formed by the authorities recommended moving the chemical warehouses out of Old Dhaka to prevent future tragedies. But the recommendations have mostly remained on paper.

Relocation of the warehouses from residential buildings in old town remains a far cry to this day.

One of the reasons why Wednesday's fire in Chawkbazar's Churihatta was so difficult to put out was the presence of inflammable goods kept in the four-storey Haji Wahed Mansion, firefighters said.

Besides, the building was constructed without permission from the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha.

The flats of the building were used illegally for commercial purposes, namely storing flammable and inflammable

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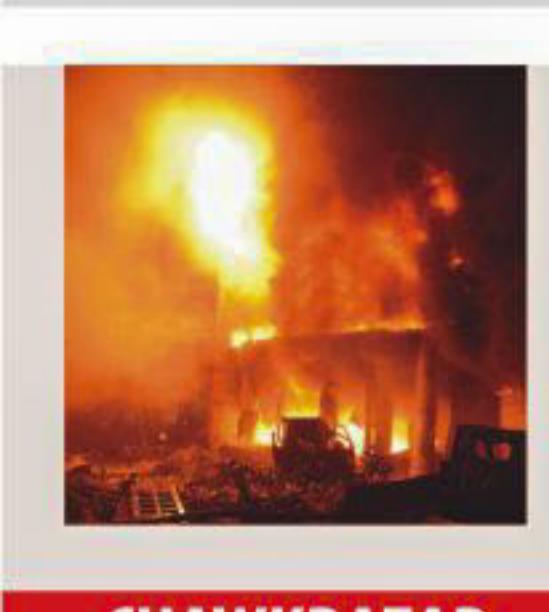
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**CHAWKBAZAR
TRAGEDY**

Death toll

67

Identified bodies
handed over

46

Under treatment

9

Missing

18

DNA samples collected

16

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