



Locals gather in front of Wahed Mansion after Juma prayers yesterday. From top left, a woman, who lost her two brothers and a nephew in the deadly blaze on Wednesday night, wails in front of the building. Locals offer prayers for the victims after the Juma prayers at Churihatta Shahi Jame Masjid. Bottom, tears roll down the face of a daughter at Dhaka Medical College morgue as her father Faisal Sarwar has been missing since the ghastly fire. Burnt containers of perfumes stored on the first floor of Wahed Mansion. Charred wrecks of vehicles are piled up for disposal. The Dhaka South City Corporation, with the help of fire service, is carrying out a cleaning drive.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN, PALASH KHAN



The agonising wait

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Abu Saleh Mohammad Ferdous, Dhaka's deputy commissioner, said there were 21 unidentified bodies and 18 people were named as missing.

Meanwhile, speaking to The Daily Star around 1:00pm, Suman, an employee of a workshop in Chawkbazar, said his wife Shila went out to bring some medicines for Sanin moments before the fire.

"But she never returned."

Suman feared his wife might not be lucky.

None of those inside Haider Medico, where Shila went to buy the medicines, survived, he claimed.

Since yesterday morning, Suman has been carrying Sanin around in his arms and running up and down through the DMC morgue and the information desk set up yards away.

"I want to see her just once," Suman cried while talking to these correspondents.

'DON'T COME HOME WITHOUT SAZZAD'

Similar to Suman's story, Anwar Hossain Manju, 41, who was at the DMC morgue all day yesterday and

identified some four people killed in the blaze, had yet failed to trace his brother Sazzad Hossain Dulu, 46.

Dulu owned the pharmacy Haider Medico, a business that had been in operation since 1990. He was at the store that night. But ever since the fire, no one had been able to reach him. Manju was certain that Dulu was no more.

"Why can I not find him among the bodies?" Manju cried, adding, "My mother asked me not to go home [Shunaimuri in Noakhali] without Sazzad."

Another of Manju's brothers, Shahjahan Firoze, returned from Italy to Bangladesh on information of his brother's death.

"I asked my brother to come home only to console my mother," he said.

MORGUES OVERCROWDED

Rohan, 22, a BBA student of North South University, had gone to a restaurant in Chawkbazar, along with his friends, from their residence in old town's Agamasi Lane on that dreadful night.

"I phoned him around 10:15pm. Rohan said he was eating at a restaurant with his friends," said Rubi

Begum, his mother. After an hour, she heard news of the inferno on TV which prompted her to immediately call Rohan.

But he did not receive the call.

"I was tensed. I went to the spot of the blaze, but police prevented me from going further. I rushed to Dhaka Medical College along with relatives. I searched for him the whole day yesterday [Thursday]. I also searched for him today [yesterday], but I don't see my son," Rubi Begum said amid tears.

The Criminal Investigation Department collected Rubi's DNA samples in front of the DMC morgue yesterday to cross-match with her son's.

"Give me my son's ashes. I will take it home," Rubi said to one of the morgue workers.

Like Rubi, many relatives have been going from hospital to hospital, unsure of where they would come across news of their loved one.

Of the 21 corpses, which were rushed to the DMC morgue early Thursday, four were transferred to the DMC emergency department mortuary on Thursday midnight, while others were transferred to the mortuaries of Sir

Salimullah Medical College, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College, National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases and Kurmitola General Hospital.

The transfers were made as three of the five fridges of DMC have been out of order for several months, while the two functioning ones were occupied by eight bodies, morgue sources said.

The transfers, however, made it difficult for relatives of the deceased to find the bodies as they had to visit different hospitals.

Sir Salimullah Medical College morgue workers said there were dozens of people going to the morgue to trace their loved ones, but the bodies were so badly burnt that it was difficult to recognise.

CID COLLECTING DNA SAMPLES

Against such a backdrop, the CID has taken DNA samples of the bodies and is collecting the DNA samples of the relatives of the missing persons. The work began at the DMC around 11:00am yesterday, said Nusrat Yasmeen, assistant DNA analyst, Forensic DNA Laboratory of CID.

The CID has collected the DNA samples from relatives of 16 missing

people and will match those with the unidentified bodies.

"CID has a modern DNA laboratory. All DNA tests related to this case will be conducted in this lab," she told reporters yesterday afternoon.

"The bodies are so burnt that it will take time to conduct their DNA profiling..." Nusrat said, adding it would take one to six months.

She also said although they preferred to collect DNA samples of the parents of the deceased, which were better for the tests, they had mainly collected samples from the siblings who had come to provide it. Samples of siblings don't help very much, she added.

"If the parents of the deceased are not alive, their children should provide samples for DNA tests. Besides, their spouses can provide samples. If they are not alive, siblings can provide samples," Nusrat said.

She said they would also collect DNA samples today. If the collection in front of the DMC morgue is not completed by then, the CID laboratory at Malibagh in the city will be open for collection of DNA from the victim's relatives.

Chemicals

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Some "witnesses" said explosion of a pick-up's CNG cylinder caused the fire while some others pointed out that the blast of an LPG cylinder at a restaurant next to Wahed Mansion triggered the fire.

According to another version, the blast of a car's CNG cylinder sparked the blaze around 10:30pm.

But experts viewed otherwise. While visiting the spot yesterday, they didn't find any evidence of cylinder explosion in the wreckage.

Also, morgue sources at Dhaka Medical College (DMC) said none of the victim's bodies bore injury marks from splinters.

Shamsul Alam, chief inspector at Department of Explosives, "We have so far not found any sign of blast of a cylinder."

It seemed that vehicles on the road were reduced to skeleton due to the fire. If it was an explosion, the vehicles would have been ripped apart, he added.

A fire service official said when an LPG cylinder is exploded in a residential building, its doors and windows get shattered, part of walls collapse, and even bodies of residents are torn apart if they stay closer.

"Such an explosion of a cylinder leaves marks of splinters on the walls. But nothing like that happened in the two restaurants," he said preferring anonymity for the sake of the investigation.

Visiting the restaurant named Rajmahal, this newspaper yesterday found three LPG cylinders remained intact.

Two cars and two pick-ups were among the vehicles burnt in the fire. Such vehicles usually use gas cylinders, but The Daily Star saw that the CNG cylinder of a car was intact.

According to fire service officials, the other car was run on fuel.

The tyres of all the four vehicles were burned to ashes, but the rims of the wheels were found squeezed in heat.

None of the pick-ups was found to have any cylinder.

Fire service officials said they didn't find any part of exploded cylinder.

Babu Gopal, owner of a pick-up which is blamed by some local traders for triggering the fire, said his vehicle was run on diesel and was gutted in the fire when the driver was on his way to a filling station to refill it.

"Neither my pick-up had a CNG cylinder installed nor my driver was carrying any LPG cylinder," he said.

Lt Col SM Jufiquar Rahman, director (training, planning and development) of Fire Service and Civil Defence, said each of the perfume cans exploded like a bomb and triggered the fire.

"Whenever we doused flames at a place and moved to another area, blaze occurred once again in the previous place because of the cans," he said.

Jufiquar, member of a probe committee formed by Dhaka South City Corporation, also said they had to face difficulties to contain fire because of this.

Additional Secretary Pradip Ranjan Chakraborty, chief of the probe body formed by the home ministry, yesterday the committee would investigate the overall issues, identify the reasons behind the fire, and make recommendations.

"We will go to different persons and try to find out the reasons. We are here for this," he told reporters after visiting the spot yesterday.

Ibrahim Khan, deputy commissioner (Lalbagh Division) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said they were yet to know the cause of the fire.

In the last two days, people involved in chemical business and homeowners told many reporters not to cite warehouses as a probable cause of the fire and requested them to report that blast of a gas cylinder triggered the blaze.

However, many locals said the businessmen were trying to divert the attention from the chemicals, fearing an initiative might be taken to relocate the storehouses from the area.

Noakhali mourns

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commissioner of Noakhali, confirmed that a total of 13 victims hailed from the district.

They are: Kamal Hossain from Muzahidpur village; Mosharaf Hossain and Hari from Begumganj upazila; Ali Hossain, Helal Hossain, Siddique Ullah, and Nasiruddin from Nateshwar; Anwar Hossain Manju from Daulatpur; Shadatullah Hira from Mirzanagar; Masud Rana from Goshkamta; Mahbubur Rahman and Ayesha Khatun from Changao; Abdur Rahim from Wasekpur; and Zasimuddin from Char Elahi, Companiganj.

Meanwhile, officer-in-charge of Sonaimuri Police Station Abdus Samad said they heard over 30 people killed in the Chawkbazar tragedy hailed from the upazila.

"But so far we received nine identified bodies who hailed from Sonaimuri," he added.

Two other victims were identified from Patuakhali's Mirzaganj upazila.

The two -- Kazi Anamul Haq Ovi and Mojibor Rahman Hawlader -- were buried in the upazila, said Masumur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Mirzaganj Police Station.

Anamul had passed Bachelor of Business Administration from Dhaka City College last year and had been looking for job while Mojibor used to work at a plastic workshop.

Both bodies reached their houses separately by ambulances from Dhaka. Relatives and locals of the victims gathered during their burial.

[Our Noakhali and Patuakhali correspondents contributed to this report.]

Timebomb

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worst affected building] but no chemicals..."

Wahed Mansion had been standing on a ticking timebomb like many other buildings in Old Dhaka. They store flammable substances enough to cause disaster similar to Chawkbazar and Nimgoli.

According to a survey by the Fire Service and Civil Defence at the end of 2017, a total of 360 factories and stores of chemicals were found in the areas under ward 24 and 35 of Dhaka South City Corporation. Both the wards fall under Old Dhaka.

It means the number of such factories and stores in entire old town would be much higher.

Most chemical warehouses and stores are located in Mitford, Armanitola, Kayettuli, Agamasi Lane, Islambagh, Bangshal, Shaheednagar, Chawkbazar, Iman ganj and Babubazar areas, locals said.

A top official of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, after a visit to the site of the fire on Thursday, unofficially said there are around 500 such facto-

ries and warehouses in the old town.

Many locals, however, believe the figure is much higher.

According to Bangladesh Environment Conservation Rules 1997, no industry can operate in and around a residential area using hazardous chemicals or goods.

A good number of traders and even some locals, despite knowing all the risks, have always tried in every way to prevent the factories or warehouses from being removed for their business interest, sometimes managing the authorities.

There were even incidents of attacks on journalists who visited the area to report on the hoarding of chemicals.

A HOUSE OR A WAREHOUSE?

A team of firefighters led by Ratan Kumar entered the basement after breaking the locks and found several hundred barrels and sacks containing the substances.

Ratan said they entered the building as a part of their search to find out whether there is anyone. "But, we found a huge warehouse of dye materials and chemicals," he said.

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The Daily Star has learnt names of 12 of the 16 substances and sent the list to Prof Abu Bin Hasan Susan, a professor of the department of chemistry at Dhaka University.

He said eight out of those are either combustible or flammable. "These are all chemicals -- mainly dye," he added.

Among those, four chemicals -- Oil Orange, Metal Powder, Pigment T Red and Silver White -- are highly flammable or combustible, according to the professor.

He did not comment on two substances.

When a correspondent of The Daily Star visited the building, the black gate led him to the dark basement. He found no ventilator or window but a single entrance with hundreds of chemical drums and sacks stored there.

Ratan Kumar said the owner set up the warehouse without following any rules or regulation. "Had the fire spread to the basement, smoke would have come out through the single entrance making it impossible for us to enter."

Contacted, Amar Chan Banik, additional inspector general of the department, claimed that the inspectors regularly visited the factories, but failed to give any more details about his department's conduct.

NATIONAL FIRE CODE Although the National Fire Code became a law in 2006, not a single case has been filed for its violation, said Maksud Helali, professor of Department of Mechanical Engineering at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology.

"There is no implementation of the law. There is also a lack of awareness. We do not abide by the law. Especially, the

CHEMICALS STORED ON OTHER FLOORS

Abdul Wahed, a former commissioner of ward-64 of undivided Dhaka City Corporation, constructed the building 18 to 20 years ago, locals said.

Of his two sons, Hasan lives on the third floor of the four-storey building with his family. Two other tenants live on the floor, which also accommodates a storeroom of perfume and lotion.

Wahed's other son Sohel's family lives on the second floor.

Hasan was in Chattogram during the fire while his family members could come out safely, his driver Monir Hossain said.

The first floor of the building houses two storerooms -- one for perfume cans and another for electric equipment. The second floor houses a storeroom of perfumes along with three residential flats.

Tofazzal Hossain, tenant on the second floor, said he complained to Hasan about water crisis a month ago.

"But, instead of solving it, he asked me to leave the flat saying he would get

more money if he rent it