

What happened to recommendations after Nimtoli?

Punish the guilty for the deaths in Chawkbazar fire

THAT ordinary people's life count for very little in the running of the affairs of the state has been proved once again by the recent tragedy. Such a disaster was waiting to happen, and we had in these very columns been pointing out that very possibility to the administration constantly, the latest being only a couple of days ago. It seems we had taken nothing out of the Nimtoli tragedy.

The only redeeming feature in the entire episode that took nearly a hundred lives is the tireless efforts of the first responders led by the Fire Service who, despite the severe odds that the layout of the area posed, worked tirelessly to bring the blaze under control. They were on the spot within five minutes of the fire breaking out. They, along with the local volunteers deserve our unreserved appreciation.

While accidents can happen despite all precautions, we feel that the deaths and destructions can be avoided if adequate safety measures are in place. And we believe that had corrective measures been taken by the relevant agencies and the 17-point recommendations of the enquiry committee of the Nimtoli fire been implemented, such a tragedy might not have been repeated. It is entirely a man made one and the responsibility for it is on those who were responsible for failing to put into effect the suggestions of the said committee. We want to know why the recommendations have not been acted upon, why couldn't the chemical warehouses be relocated in the last nine years?

Assurances and promises and monetary help are of little consolation to those that have lost their dear ones. Many of them were the sole breadwinner of the family. Such verbose promises were made in the past too, but not fulfilled. We are galled to see a sinister effort to downplay the presence of so many chemical warehouses in the area and delink it with the tragedy. It is not important whether the fire originated from anyone of these godowns, some of which are illegal and turnout spurious products. What is of significance is that these inflammable materials helped spread the inferno, from wherever that was initiated, and contributed to the severity of destructions.

Words would mean little if committee recommendations are not implemented. But first of all, everyone who contributed to the tragedy, either by their actions or inactions, must be held to account and made an example of.

Myanmar's attempt to whitewash the Rohingya genocide

The world must not allow it

PRIIME Minister Sheikh Hasina on February 19, in an interview with the Dubai-based *Khaleej Times*, expressed her dismay that Myanmar had failed to create a condition conducive to the Rohingya repatriation. The same day Malaysia's government echoed her statement, with its foreign minister maintaining that his country wanted the perpetrators of the ethnic cleansing operation to be tried at the International Criminal Court.

While Myanmar's government is showing indifference to the fact that nearly a million of its "unwanted" nationals are currently sheltered in Bangladesh, as noted by the prime minister, it is actively pushing to industrialise the Rakhine State, from where the Rohingyas were expelled, by arranging an investment fair. The country is pitching to potential investors its farmland and fishing grounds, stolen from the Rohingyas who had until the exodus lived there for generations.

The media reported earlier how the houses and farmland of the Rohingyas were given to families belonging to the majority Buddhist community. Nothing mentioned above suggests any semblance of willingness on part of the Myanmar authorities to take back the Rohingyas.

These clearly indicate an attempt to whitewash the history of the Rakhine. What's more, the fact that foreign businesses and aid agencies are willing to get involved in Rakhine's new public relations effort is also disturbing. We call on the global human rights bodies and organisation to create a black-list of companies that are willing to invest in Rakhine despite the fact that an apartheid-like situation prevails in the state.

Western nations often cite their limited leverage to influence the Myanmar authorities. What we begin to see now is that far from pressuring the country, many western entities are willing to cash in on the crisis.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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(Not) taking lessons from catastrophes

At least 67 lives have been lost in the devastating inferno in Chawkbazar. The tragedy occurred due to a gas cylinder burst but spread swiftly because the area was full of inflammable materials and chemicals. The incident, similar to the Nimtoli tragedy in 2010, highlights two pressing hazards to public safety.

In the last months, there have been numerous incidents involving gas cylinders. It's time we seriously regulated their private use. The other is the storage of dangerous chemicals that are susceptible to combustion.

After the Nimtoli tragedy, promises were made by the authorities that highly congested areas wouldn't be allowed to store inflammable materials. The Chawkbazar tragedy shows that they failed to live up to their promise.

Ibrahim Ullah, Lakshmpur

No, Chawkbazar fire won't be our 'wakeup call'

Outrage, probe bodies, assurances—wash, rinse, repeat



NAHELA NOWSHIN

ET another tragedy has struck Bangladesh. Suddenly, everyone has woken up to the danger of chemical factories in Old Dhaka which this daily, along with other newspapers, has been crying hoarse over for years since the Nimtoli fire claimed more than 100 lives in 2010. Suddenly, we see ministers rushing to Chawkbazar "concerned" about the menace of chemical warehouses housed in residential buildings, as if eight years wasn't enough to make these factories close shop or relocate elsewhere.

If anyone deserves praise and recognition, it's all those firefighters who, despite all obstacles, fought relentlessly for 14 long hours to contain the fire which had turned the place into a scene straight out of a dystopian novel.

Despite what we'd like to believe, the Chawkbazar fire isn't going to be our "wakeup call". Things will go on business as usual once public outcry dies down in a few days, or weeks, and the probe body (our favourite thing to do is to set up a "probe body" after any untoward incident or accident) makes "recommendations" which will never see the light of day, rest assured. One wonders why the industry ministry is going through the futile exercise of setting up a committee tasked with "assessing the extent of losses and making recommendations to prevent the recurrence of such an incident."

Because after the Nimtoli fire, yet another committee had made recommendations that warehouses be moved to non-residential areas,

and that the Fire Prevention and Extinguishing Rules 2003 and Bangladesh National Building Code be enforced, among other things.

None of that ever happened.

Nothing changed after Nimtoli. And there's simply no reason to believe anything will change now even though the horror that we saw unfold beginning Wednesday night is one of the deadliest fire outbreaks in the country's history.

This is the result—and will continue to be so—of letting power, corruption and an attitude of profit-at-any-cost run amok. This is why disasters like Rana Plaza and the Chawkbazar fire are anything but "shocking". These catastrophes were in the making for a long, long time.

It has now pretty much been



The death toll in the devastating blaze in Chawkbazar rose to at least 67, making it the second deadliest chemical-fuelled fire in the country after the 2010 Nimtoli incident.

established that regardless of the origin of the fire, flammable perfumes and cosmetics that were stored in a warehouse of the second floor of the building caused the fire to spread. And to think that there are more than 25,000 chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka, of which 15,000 are in residential buildings and only two percent have permission from the city corporation, is beyond disturbing. Knowing full well the consequences of a fire outbreak in any of these structures in a tightly-packed place like Old Dhaka where 265 to 1,100 people live per acre, the city authorities have willingly turned a blind eye to these factories—lured to old town by the prospect of cheaper rent—operating illegally for God knows how long. Even though the law categorically bars commercial organisations from occupying residential buildings, how is it that thousands of chemical warehouses have so easily set up shop and continued to conduct business uninterrupted? It is hard to believe that none of the government agencies or ministries had any idea whatsoever about the existence of these illegal businesses. Were the city corporation

and fire service and civil defence department—both of which are supposed to issue licences to chemical factories—oblivious to this fact? Are our government bodies so disempowered in the face of these chemical factories/death traps?

The Chawkbazar fire has put the spotlight squarely on illegal chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka, for obvious reasons. But it shouldn't mask the other violations happening in plain sight. For example, what about the fact that most of the 24,000 structures in the 11 wards of Old Dhaka have been built without Rajuk's approval? A total disregard for proper urban planning coupled with corruption and bribery have made it impossible to ensure building oversight; money can buy building permits and a horde of other things. The mindless construction of buildings one after the other without any regard for the Bangladesh National Building Code or zoning laws and illegal shops and stands have turned this historic town into an ugly concrete jungle with no room to breathe, making it extremely hard for any rescue team or firefighting operation to do its job in case of an emergency.

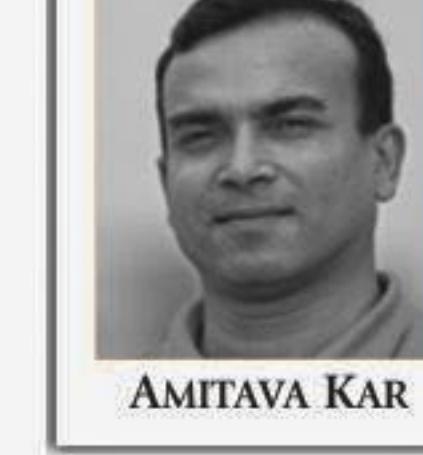
How many buildings in the area, or even in the capital as a whole, adhere to the "Fire Drill and Evacuation Procedure" of the Bangladesh National Building Code which states that "Each and every building shall have an emergency evacuation protocol, first aid firefighting plan, training and responsibilities of the occupants complemented with the provisions provided therein"? Maybe it's wishful thinking but could this have saved more precious lives on that fateful night in Hazi Wahed Mansion, the four-storey building engulfed by the destructive fire in Chawkbazar, had this procedure been in place?

A national habit of making elaborate laws but never enforcing them has proven to be very costly (and these chemical factories and in many cases even the buildings they occupy have violated every law in the book), but there is no reason to believe that the Chawkbazar fire will turn things around and make our stubborn attitude of valuing profit over human lives go away. After some time passes, it'll be business as usual.

Nahela Nowshin is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

A failure of imagination

IN OTHER WORDS



AMITAVA KAR

M OHSSIN Hamid's masterpiece "Exit West" is a sobering reminder of the decisive human failure that we conveniently call "the refugee crisis." Published in 2017, the novel

is making waves in North America and Europe, offering fresh insights into one of the biggest humanitarian disasters in history that has seen millions of people displaced from home.

Hamid has the rare ability to look into old problems from a new perspective. Many of us know him from his 2007 work "The Reluctant Fundamentalist" which was seen as a microcosm of the corrosive distrust between East and West as the "War on Terror" rumbles on. A graduate of Princeton University and

into violence, and two young lovers are forced to join the mass migration of our time. But instead of regular means of communication, they travel through Narnia-like magical doors, combining the real with the surreal.

Why does Mohsin use a fairy-tale like device as a way to move his characters from their war-scarred country to a new place in the West? How can their perilous journey—across seas or deserts, at the mercy of the unforgiving nature, hunger, thirst and unscrupulous smugglers—be condensed into a simple step through magical doors?

In his imagination the doors already exist. Physical distance is collapsing in our world. You can buy an air ticket and go anywhere if you have the right passport. You can Skype or WhatsApp. You can "be" in any place on earth by surfing the Internet. The doors are a magical symbol of this reality.

Besides, he is less interested in

privations and physical hardships than the

represent everything that is familiar and close to the heart.

He says that it can be a mistake to focus too much on how they move around—crossing the Mediterranean on a small boat or suffering awful abuses at the hands of profit-seeking criminals. Those are real and dramatic stories, but the bigger story gets lost when we give too much attention to these images, which is usually the case in the electronic media. The bulk of the migrant refugee story is what made them leave home. What was so bad that they left everything and everyone they loved behind? And then, what happened to them in the new place?

And as we follow the characters through to these very real places, where they meet up with hostility, a nativist reaction, or the occasional kindness, there is a reflection going on about what is a nation, who is the insider and who is the outsider.

Mohsin believes that we are all migrants, and not in the sense that most people in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand came from somewhere else. He goes deeper. He says that if you have lived in the same village or city for your whole life and never moved, you are a migrant in that place. Because the place has changed completely over time. You migrate through time.

In a way this is a story about how human life is transient. Things change. And Hamid thinks, to hold onto things and pretend they don't change, is a mistake. He puts this idea into perspective thus: When I moved back to my home country, I saw so many people who wanted to leave. And having lived in the US and Europe, I encountered so much of how people do not want other people to go there. So, there is a tension between these two trends.

His observation strikes a chord. Today in most countries in the West, the pronounced tendency among the settled populations is to transfer the "issue of refugees" from the area of human rights into that of internal security. If refugees

In many countries, authorities have outsourced the problem to security services. It is more convenient for governments overburdened with social responsibilities that they are either unable or unwilling to perform to the satisfaction of their electorates.

are not treated as humans, then governments don't have to worry about upholding human rights.

In many countries, authorities have outsourced the problem to security services. It is more convenient for governments overburdened with social responsibilities that they are either unable or unwilling to perform to the satisfaction of their electorates. They are building the wall. But by stopping them on the other side of their fortified borders, will they manage to stop the very forces that brought them to their doorsteps?

Mohsin Hamid says that it is a failure of our imagination. In the US, it's Make America Great Again. In Britain, let's go back to the pre-EU era. And, in some other places around the world, he points out, it's like let's go back to a period of 1,000 years ago.

We have to imagine a future that includes all, not just ourselves. Everything we can imagine is real, says Picasso.



PHOTO: AFP

Harvard Law School, Hamid himself has been moving around his entire life—California, Pakistan, London, New York and now Lahore again.

"Exit West" is not the typical migrant story—it imagines individuals behind news headlines. A nameless city plunges

psychology of exile and loss. Forced to leave the places they were born in, families and friends, the characters feel like outsiders in their adopted countries—yearning for roots and a sense of belonging. Home, however oppressive or dangerous it has become,

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