



## Impunity lies at root

No one ever punished for role in any major fire incident; over 2 lakh disasters killed at least 1,970 people since 2004

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA and WASIM BIN HABIB

Fire tragedies are frequent in Bangladesh and often cause high casualties, but no one has ever been punished for their role in any fire incidents.

Between 2004 and 2018, at least 1,970 people have been killed in more than 2 lakh fire incidents across the country, according to fire service data.

After almost every fire incident, especially the major ones, police filed cases or general diaries. In some cases, survivors have also lodged complaints. But the cases saw little progress and the victims never got justice.

Take the 2010 Nimtoli blaze that claimed least 124 lives.

The fire originated from a stove in a building, which housed a combustible chemical depot on its ground floor. When the flames came in contact with the chemicals, it engulfed eight residential buildings and some 20 shops in a matter of minutes.

A relative of a victim sued the building owner, but the investigation has not moved an inch in the last nine years. No one has been arrested either.

"There is no record in this police station about the case," said Saidur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Bangshal Police. SEE PAGE 2 COL 1



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina consoles a relative of a Chawkbazar fire victim being treated at the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday.

PHOTO: BSS

## Reluctance of owners to blame

PM says about failure to shift chemical warehouses

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday regretted that chemical warehouses could not be relocated from Old Dhaka due to owners' reluctance.

"The government wanted to construct ultramodern storehouses with all facilities in Keraniganj for preserving chemicals. As the owners were not ready to go there, the project couldn't be implemented...this is the most regretful matter," she told reporters after visiting the victims of Chawkbazar fire at Dhaka Medical College Hospital in the morning.

The PM said following the devastating fire at Nimtoli in Old Dhaka in 2010, the government had taken up a project to construct warehouses in Keraniganj.

"We had prepared a project and selected a place in Keraniganj...we had discussions with all stakeholders to relocate the chemical warehouses so that incidents like in Nimtoli do not reoccur."

She regretted that many owners showed reluctance to shift to a new place. "It is SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

## No chemical warehouse found nearby

Says initial probe by industries ministry

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

As the call for relocating the warehouses of chemicals and inflammable goods from Old Dhaka gets louder, an industries ministry probe committee claimed that there was no chemical factory or warehouse at the scene of Wednesday's devastating fire in Chawkbazar.

However, a team of firefighters on Friday found several hundred barrels and sacks of combustible and flammable substances stored in the basement of the four-storey Haji Wahed Mansion, the worst affected building.

Pictures of the huge stockpile of chemicals, including several inflammable ones, were published in many newspapers, including The Daily Star.

Notwithstanding this, the industries ministry's primary probe report on Thursday said there was no chemical warehouse or factory anywhere near the scene.

The report, signed by Additional Secretary Mohammad Mofizul Haque of the industries ministry, mentioned that there was a warehouse of cosmetics products on the first floor of the building.

It also mentioned that doctors said there was no sign of chemical burns on the patients. The charred bodies were burnt by "dry flame". SEE PAGE 10 COL 1

## Old towners say enough is enough

Mobilise against chemical storing in their neighbourhood; 2 ex-industries ministers trade blame over warehouse relocation



MAHBUBUR RAHMAN KHAN and MOUJUD AHMED SUJAN

The grief for the loss of at least 67 lives in the chemical-fuelled Chawkbazar blaze is giving way to the fury against chemical factories and warehouses in Old Dhaka with the demand for their removal from the area getting louder.

Locals in the old town also demand a smooth supply of pipeline gas and an immediate end to the use of risky gas cylinders in their neighbourhoods.

"Chemical warehouses and gas cylinders must be removed soon. Keeping fire extinguishers at every business establishment should be made mandatory," read leaflets seen on the walls of buildings near the site.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Nasir Uddin, who lost his only son in the fire, said, "I never wanted chemical warehouses in this area. But many locals rent out houses to businessmen for setting up chemical warehouses to make extra money." SEE PAGE 2 COL 5

Star LIVE QR code to watch video. TO USE QR CODE ON YOUR SMARTPHONE, INSTALL FREE QR READER SOFTWARE FROM GOOGLE PLAYSTORE OR APPLE STORE. TURN ON THE SOFTWARE AND HOLD THE PHONE CAMERA OVER THE QR CODE TO GET THE VIDEO LINK.

## First blast took place at Wahed Mansion

Suggests CCTV footage

RAFIUL ISLAM and MUNTAKIM SAAD

The first explosion that led to Wednesday's devastating fire in Chawkbazar area might have taken place at Haji Wahed Mansion, suggested footage of at least two separate CCTV's installed nearby.

Hundreds of perfume containers started raining down on the people stuck on the roads as the fire was racing through other buildings. Repeated explosions occurred for the next few minutes, the clips show.

The Daily Star has learned that the first floor of the building housed two storerooms -- one for perfume cans and another for electric equipment.

The second floor housed a storeroom of perfumes along with three residential flats while combustible and flammable substances were found in the basement. SEE PAGE 2 COL 5

## NIMTOLI TO CHAWKBAZAR Monument built, no lessons learnt

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

After an inferno claimed 124 lives in Old Dhaka's Nimtoli in 2010, a monument was built at that place. The structure, named "Nimtoli Tragedy", bears many inscriptions. One of them says it was built to raise awareness on fire and the dangers of storing chemicals in residential buildings.

The move yielded little results before the fire in Chawkbazar on Wednesday killed another 67. The sites of the chemical-fed disasters are just a kilometre apart from each other.

And even after such loss of lives, Old Dhaka remains crammed with chemical warehouses and other risky factories, much to the agony of the victim families and other locals.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Mamun Mia, who lost his seven-year-old son in the Nimtoli incident, said, "We did not get justice in the last nine years. We don't even know who owned the chemical warehouse responsible for the fire. And now, this [Chawkbazar incident] has happened." SEE PAGE 2 COL 5



"Who will take the responsibility?" asked the frustrated man.

"On every third June [the anniversary of the Nimtoli Tragedy], we hold a programme and call for the relocation of chemical warehouses from old Dhaka. The media covers the programme and that's all".

He said the authorities had removed such warehouses from Nimtoli after the disaster but risky plastic factories were still there. "You will find chemical warehouses in other parts of Old Dhaka."

According to a survey by the Fire Service and Civil Defence at the end of 2017, a total of 360 factories and chemical stores were found in wards 24 and 35 of Dhaka South City Corporation.

Both the wards are in Old Dhaka. It indicates that the total number of such factories and stores in the densely populated old town -- stretching over 1,050 acres -- would be much higher.

Yesterday, these correspondents visited Siddiq Bazar, Agamasi Lane, Armanitola, Mitford, and Bangshal areas and found that SEE PAGE 2 COL 5



Bags of chemical substances stockpiled in the basement of Haji Wahed Mansion in the capital's Chawkbazar are being removed from the building by Dhaka South City Corporation yesterday.

PHOTO: TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

## Blaze takes all of family but one



PORIMOL PALMA and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

Their family was a happy one -- mother and father with their two healthy children.

On Wednesday night, the brutal fire that blazed through Chawkbazar reduced their perfect family of four to just one, while the rest looked on from behind a photo frame that managed to survive the hellish flames.

The only member that now survives is Rameem.

Now orphaned, Rameem, 12, suffers alone with burns on his face, hands and legs. A student of class-V at the Birshreshtha Munshi Abdur Rouf Public School and College, the only question Rameem now asks is "Where are my parents and brother?" even though he knows they have been resting at the Azimpur graveyard since Friday.

Rameem is now haunted by fresh memories of how his other family members were burnt to death when the four were on a rickshaw just in front of a community centre located at Churihatta area in Old Town. They were there to attend a programme. SEE PAGE 2 COL 5

The Daily Star CELEBRATING 28 YEARS OF JOURNALISM WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

The final segment of our five-segment special supplement series, titled THE LIFESTYLE PARENTHESIS, is out today. Make sure you get your copy of this supplement free of charge from your hawkler.