



Mohammad Nasir Uddin, father of one of the victims killed in Wednesday's fire, stares at the photo of his son on a banner in the capital's Chawkbazar yesterday.

PHOTO:  
ANISUR RAHMAN

## Reluctance of owners to blame

FROM PAGE 1  
unfortunate that still there are chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka despite repeated drives against it."  
Hasina urged all people concerned to extend their all-out cooperation in relocating chemical storehouses.  
Regarding the announcement of a mourning day, the PM said she would discuss the matter with the cabinet secretary tomorrow.  
Hasina said the government has taken all possible measures for the

treatment of the fire victims as the country now has the most modern medical care facilities for such victims.  
She put emphasis on restructuring the lanes and by-lanes of Old Dhaka so that fire engines could go there during any fire.  
"Let's make sure that ponds and canals are not filled up...these have to be preserved for future use."  
The PM criticised a section of TV journalists for causing obstructions to firefighters in carrying out their

duties.  
"They [TV reporters] were asking questions one after another. I don't know whether that was the perfect time for asking questions. How do you [reporters] expect answers from them [firefighters]? Was that the time for asking questions?"  
Hasina requested the people who usually gather during such incidents not to create obstacles to the works of firefighters. "You could bring some water or sand while coming to the scene of an incident...that would be of

little help to all."  
She thanked all, including firefighters, doctors and other people concerned, for acting promptly during the fire incident.  
Arriving at the DMCH around 10:30am, Hasina went to the ICU of the Burn and Plastic Surgery Institute to see the conditions of the nine injured people.  
She also consoled their family members, saying that the government would do everything for their proper treatment.

## Blaze takes all of family but one

FROM PAGE 1  
Rameem was sitting on the rickshaw between his father Rashedul Islam Mithu and mother Sonia Islam, while his younger brother Sahir was on his father's lap.  
As Rameem is now at his aunt's home in Lalbagh, he was lonely even amongst people.  
Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, he recalled when he last saw his family. "Suddenly, I saw a wave of fire. I jumped towards the back. I could just see my father and brother, not my mother. I wanted to pick them up [away] from the fire. The fire again threw me away and some people picked me up."  
Rameem was then taken to a nearby clinic and from there to Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn And Plastic Surgery. After primary treatment, doctors suggested that he be taken home.  
Three days after the chemical blaze, which killed at least 67 and caused burn injuries to over a dozen, Rameem finds himself orphaned and alone -- his family gone, his grandparents too had died long ago and his uncle, his only blood relative, suffers from mental illness.  
Rokhsana Begum, 55, used to live at Rameem's residence. Since the tragedy, she went to her daughter's residence nearby with him.  
"Managing Rameem has been challenging. He is always crying and asking about his parents and brother. How would I console him?" Rokhsana asked.  
Rameem is a very bright student and his parents would take good care of his education, Rokhsana said. "His mother used to take him to school every day and a maternal aunt and uncle would help him with his studies as his father, an employee of a sanitary product shop at Hatirpool, did not earn enough to provide for private tuition."  
"Rameem's mother dreamed to have Rameem highly educated. Would the dream get lost because his parents are



Twelve-year-old Rameem, right, is seen in a family photo. The other three -- his parents and younger brother -- were killed in the Chawkbazar inferno on Wednesday night. The four were on a rickshaw in the area when the fire broke out.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

no longer alive?" she asked, immediately adding how they would manage the fund for his schooling was a concern now.  
The death of Rameem's parents caused immense pain to his father Rashed's friends, as they are worried about their friend's lonely son.  
Jamal Hossain, Chanchal Hossain, Noor Islam and Nasir Suman yesterday went to the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) to consult doctors about Rameem's condition.  
"Rashed was one of the 15 childhood friends in our area. We always hung out together. He is gone today. The matter of most concern is his son Rameem. How will he live now?" said Jamal.  
While this was the case of how one family was shattered, and this tragic story can be applied to almost every single life that the Chawkbazar fire took away.  
Similar to the Nimtoli fire in 2010, also in Old Dhaka, that claimed 124 lives, the authorities and even the

businesses were again not alert enough to ensure the safety of the localities.  
Zafar Ahmed, 45, a trader in Old Town, was also burnt to death Wednesday night when he went to have tea at Chunirhatta. He has four sons and a daughter between five and 18. His eldest son Raju used to work with him while the others would attend school.  
"We were almost completely dependent on my father's income. How would we run our family now?" Raju asked in tears as he went to the DMC morgue to find whatever remains of his father.  
It is unfortunate to realise that until the authorities take strong safety measures in Old Dhaka, where warehouses containing chemicals and other flammables are present in large quantities, tragedies that come with cries and questions like that of Raju and Rameem will continue. It was the presence of these warehouses that contributed greatly to the spread of fire in both Chawkbazar on Wednesday

and Nimtoli in 2010.  
Raju, who had been looking for his father since the recent fire, claimed to have identified his father's body at Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College mortuary yesterday.  
Meanwhile, HM Salauddin Monzu, senior assistant commissioner and executive magistrate of Dhaka, said the body of one Anwar Hossain Monju was identified yesterday and the district administration handed it over to his relatives.  
Another Anwar Hossain of Old Dhaka claimed he identified his brother Ahsan Ullah's body at Mitford Hospital mortuary yesterday after cross checking with the CCTV footage captured at a shop where he had gone to deliver bags on the day of the fire.  
Asked, Salauddin Monzu said the forensic medicine department was investigating the matters of two relatives who claimed they could identify their relatives' dead bodies. If they find it to be accurate, the bodies will be handed over, he added.  
Meanwhile, Nusrat Yasmeen, assistant DNA analyst of the CID, said they have collected DNA samples of all the 20 unidentified bodies and of their 34 relatives. In many cases, siblings of the dead gave samples, but the CID prefers DNA samples from parents or children of the unidentified bodies.  
"The CID's forensic lab will be open for the Chawkbazar victims. I request the parents or children, who had been missing their relatives, to provide DNA samples at the CID lab in Malibagh from Sunday," she told The Daily Star yesterday.  
Dr Samanta Lal Sen, chief national coordinator for Plastic Surgery and All Burn Projects, said nine people with burn injuries from the Chawkbazar blaze were still under treatment at the burn unit of DMCH. Of them, the situations of five patients are critical, he added.

encouraged them from filing cases.  
"Say, one station master files a case tomorrow. But by the time the trial will begin, he will be shifted elsewhere. So, he will have to travel for the case hearings. This discourages the fire service from suing the culprits," he said.  
He said he could not recall if anyone has ever been punished over fire incidents. But in a number of cases, mobile courts fined and tried some people during drives.  
Ali Ahmed Khan, the incumbent DG of fire service, said many fire incidents were man-made disasters, but the conviction rate was very poor.  
"Everyone finds out the loophole of the law and eventually get away with it. Most cases are forgotten with time, which is very unfortunate," he said.

## Impunity lies at root

FROM PAGE 1  
Station, who took charge two years ago.  
Back in 2015, the then OC Abdul Kuddus Fakir said they investigated the incident based on a general diary. "But the suspect could not be arrested."  
Experts say that this culture of impunity is the heart of the problem.  
"Fire incidents would have certainly come down if the people responsible had been punished for their negligence," said Iqbal Habib, an urban expert.  
"To my knowledge, no one has ever been tried for any fire incident," he told The Daily Star yesterday.  
The 2014 fire at Bangladesh Steel and Engineering Corporation (BSEC) building at the capital's Karwan Bazar is another example. No one was killed, but the fire caused serious damage to the

building.  
Police only filed a general diary after the incident. The same goes for the Bashundhara City Shopping Mall fire in 2016.  
Contacted, Mazharul Islam, officer-in-charge of Tejgaon Police Station where both general diaries were lodged, said there was no progress in the investigation.  
"This proves there is no rule of law in this case," said Prof Dr Maksud Helali, who teaches mechanical engineering at Buet.  
Apart from the police, Rajuk and City Corporation can file cases over fire incidents.  
"But I cannot remember if anyone has ever been accused of violating fire codes," said Maksud, who was involved in the

formulation of the National Fire Code.  
Violation of the code carries up to seven years in jail.  
The cases over the Tampaco factory fire in Tongi have no mentionable progress either.  
Mokbul Hossain, the factory owner, was sent to jail over the deaths of 39 workers in 2016. He is now out on bail.  
"The cases are under investigation. We did not submit any report before the court yet," said Kamal Hossain, the OC of Tongi Police Station.  
The cases over the Tazreen Fashions fire, which killed at least 113 workers in 2012, are an exception. The two cases are now under trial in a Dhaka court.  
Abu Nayeem Md Shahidullah (ret'd), former director general of fire service, said lengthy and complex legal process dis-

covered them from filing cases.  
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## Old towners

FROM PAGE 1  
A long-time resident of Churihatta in Chawkbazar, Nasir added, "I have never seen any government take action against the chemical warehouses."  
Pointing to the 2010 Nimtoli fire that claimed about 124 lives, another resident, Faruk Ahmed, said, "The government had started to take action. I don't understand why that stopped..."  
Expressing similar views, former industries minister Dilip Barua said after the Nimtoli tragedy, the government decided to relocate chemical factories and warehouses from the densely-populated old town but the decision was never fully implemented.  
Visiting fire-ravaged Churihatta as part of a 14-party alliance delegation, he also slammed immediate-past industries minister Amir Hossain Amu for "not executing the decision."  
"It would have probably been easier to shift the chemical warehouses from Old Dhaka had the man who was our industries minister taken it seriously," said the Samyabadi Dal leader.  
Dilip was the industries minister from 2009 till 2013 and during his term the country's deadliest ever chemical-fuelled fire incident took place in Nimtoli in Old Dhaka.  
Awami League leader Amu was the industries minister from 2014 till the new cabinet was formed last month.  
Dilip said when he was the industries minister, all stakeholders including the Chemical Merchant Association and Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), agreed to the decision to shift the warehouses outside Dhaka.  
"That was our commitment. But the whole process did not advance due to some discrete issues," he said.  
"The stakeholders could not compel the government. The building owners are also to be blamed as they kept the issue hidden to make extra bucks."  
Asked about the allegations, Amu suggested asking Barua what he had done as an industries minister to relocate chemical warehouses.  
"He [Dilip] was the industries minister when the Nimtoli incident took place. What initiative he had taken at the time? You should ask him this question before asking me about his allegations."  
Around 1:15pm yesterday, more than

100 people took to the streets and placed their demands when Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Mohammad Saeed Khokon visited the spot to initiate removing chemicals from Wahed Mansion.  
During a search at the building on Friday, fire service officials found several hundred barrels and sacks of chemicals stored in the basement.  
Four of the chemicals are highly flammable or combustible and the casualty would have been higher if the flames had reached those, said Prof Abu Bin Hasan Susan of chemistry department at Dhaka University.  
In the presence of the mayor yesterday, the clearing of chemicals from the building began around 1:30pm.  
Quoting police, Khokon told reporters that the fire originated from the blast of a private car's gas cylinder.  
"I have come to know from police that the fire was caused by a private car's gas cylinder explosion," he said, adding, "There was another car carrying gas cylinders which too exploded. It was like a chain blast."  
However, CCTV footage obtained by The Daily Star suggests the explosion first occurred at Wahed Mansion, centre of Wednesday night's inferno.  
The first floor of the building housed a storeroom of perfume cans. On the second floor, there was a storeroom of perfumes alongside three residential flats.  
**ACTION FOR STORING CHEMICALS**  
Warehouse owners will face legal action if they store any flammable substances in the old part of the city from now on, the mayor warned.  
He urged locals to stay alert so that no one can store any chemical substances there. "We will search each and every house," he told reporters.  
"If anyone violates the instruction, please inform the city corporation, nearby police stations or deputy commissioners immediately."  
He asked all to use the hotline number -- 9556015 -- to contact the authorities in this regard.  
Meanwhile, Dhaka Power Distribution Company Ltd completed reinstalling electric poles and wires yesterday. About 180-metre wire was burnt and three polls were damaged on Wednesday.

## Monument built

FROM PAGE 1  
many businessmen were openly selling chemicals on narrow lanes.  
The Nimtoli fire had started from a stove in a building that housed a flammable chemical depot on the ground floor. When the flames came in contact with the chemicals, it engulfed eight residential buildings and some 20 shops within minutes, according to firefighters.  
After the incident, different authorities took some steps to remove the chemical warehouses from Old Dhaka. The move came after a case was filed and the High Court issued directives in this regard.  
However, things got back to square one.  
Fifty-five-year old Mohammad Sadeq, who lost his son and daughter in the 2010 disaster, said, "Chemical warehouses are still in Old Dhaka because many house owners are greedy."  
"They prefer renting their spaces to warehouses than to families as it brings them more money," he said.  
Many others in the area said some "influence people" always try to prevent

the relocation of chemical stores for the sake of huge profits.  
Contacted, Shafiqul Islam Milon, joint secretary of Bangladesh Chemical and Perfumery Merchant Association, however, claimed that they don't preserve any flammable chemicals in the warehouses.  
"The authority gave us a list of 29 flammable chemicals and asked us not to store them in densely populated areas like Old Dhaka. So we keep some of the chemicals in our showrooms and preserve the rest in areas outside Dhaka, including in Savar and Gazipur," he said.  
Sadeq now runs a decorator store at one of the buildings that were once ravaged by the Nimtoli fire. He did not seem convinced by the claims made by those like Milon.  
"We are tired of calling upon the government to free Old Dhaka of chemical warehouses. Is it even hearing us?" he asked.

## First blast

FROM PAGE 1  
The CCTV clips appear to contradict the claims of the local chemical traders and landlords that the fire originated due to explosions of a cylinder of a private car or a pick-up van. They also seem to run counter to what the industries minister and Dhaka South City Corporation mayor claimed.  
In the first footage near Churihatta Jame Mosque shows that a black private car was stuck at the intersection adjacent to the mosque while another white car was coming slowly from the opposite direction when the first explosion took place at 10:32pm.  
Within moments, a huge number of perfume cans started flying and pouring down on the roads with people seen running to escape the raging blaze.  
The footage also showed that no blast took place in the cars.  
The 30-minute footage recorded from 10:22pm to 10:52pm has no sound.  
In the second footage, which looked out into the kitchen of Rajmahal restaurant in Old Dhaka's Churihatta, the restaurant employees were seen cooking and working around 10:30pm.  
Just as the clock struck 10:32pm, a massive explosion occurred that caused some parts of the Haji Wahed Mansion's wall to fall on the road over vehicles and people.  
A fire engulfed the area within seconds. Bricks and perfume cans from Wahed Mansion were pouring on the road as the blaze kept growing. Some people who were caught in the forage were seen running for their lives while some others took shelter in adjacent shops. The front portion of the restaurant was also damaged.  
At least 67 people died in the fire and many others were injured.  
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.  
Some "witnesses" said explosion of a pick-up's CNG cylinder caused the fire while some others claimed 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.  
Talking to The Daily Star on Friday, Shamsul Alam, chief inspector at Department of Explosives, said that they have so far not found any sign of a cylinder blast.  
They didn't find any evidence of cylinder explosions in the wreckage, he said.  
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.  
Morgue sources at Dhaka Medical College said none of the bodies had marks of splinter injury on them.  
In the last three days, people involved in the chemical business and homeowners told many reporters not to cite warehouses as the probable cause of the fire and requested them to report that the 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 warehouses from the area.