



A pigeon couple sitting in a vent-hole of Haji Wahed Mansion apparently unaffected by the tragedy and the charred ruins. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Decades to build, minutes to lose

With their shops burned to ashes, some Chawkbazar traders see bleak days ahead

PORIMOL PALMA and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

After coming to Dhaka from Noakhali when he was only 10 years old, Abdul Mannan engaged himself in many an odd job -- from working at restaurants to construction sites -- to save money for himself. He was able to save Tk 10 lakhs, with which he opened up a stationary shop 16 years ago.

Abdul's hard work was turned to ashes within moments when a fire swept through Old Dhaka's Chawkbazar area on Wednesday.

"I am safe because I was undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital that time [when the fire occurred]. But my shop is no more," said the owner of Mannan Store at Churihatta in Old Town.

Tanvir Ahmed Tusher, 23, a staffer at Mannan Store, said he and his colleague Javed were lucky to have survived as they were in the store the very moment the fire took place.

"Suddenly we heard a bang and then saw a wave of fire. Without thinking further, we ran for our lives. When we realised that the shop was open, we

wanted to go back to close it, but by that time the fire already burned it down," he told The Daily Star at Churihatta yesterday.

The shop was found completely burnt after fire fighters had partially doused the flame.

According to locals, around 20 shops were destroyed in the inferno on February 20 that killed at least 67 people and caused injuries to over a dozen.

Families lost members, some more than one. In some cases, children were left orphaned.

A Supreme Court lawyer yesterday filed a writ petition with the High Court seeking its directives upon the government to compensate Tk 30 lakh to each family of victims who died or suffered injuries in the Chawkbazar fire. It also sought the HC order to find those responsible for the blaze and punish them.

Those who violated the rules to keep chemicals in residential apartments may face punishment. However, SEE PAGE II COL 5

National

FROM PAGE 1
parliament Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury moved the motion in the House and prayed for the eternal salvation of the departed souls.

She also expressed her sympathy to the bereaved family members of the victims and wished early recovery to the injured.

The fire was originated from a gas cylinder blast and instantly fuelled-up by chemicals that were stored in nearby buildings.

One such chemical warehouse was situated on the basement of the Haji Wahed Mansion.

After receiving strict directions, the authorities shifted the chemical storage of the Mansion to Keraniganj.

Ibrahim Khan, deputy commissioner of Lalbagh police, said the drive to remove chemicals from the old town would continue in association with Dhaka South City Corporation and other authorities.

Electricity connection in the area had been disrupted because of the inferno since Wednesday. Yesterday, it was restored.

A probe committee, formed by Ministry of Home Affairs, visited the spot yesterday and collected evidence.

Pradip Ranjan Chakrabarty, additional secretary for Security Services Division under the home ministry, said they gathered information from primary and secondary sources and would prepare a report based on those findings.

Urging everybody to stop playing blame game, former information minister Hasanul Haq Inu said immediate actions should be taken to relocate the chemical warehouses from the old town.

Inu termed the Chawkbazar fire a "humanitarian disaster" and "failure of urban planning and management in the city."

He said, "The government, administration and businessmen cannot shrug their responsibilities of the fire."

Elsewhere, father of Tanjil Hasan Rohan -- Mohammad Hasan -- was seen searching Rohan with his photograph in hand yesterday, the way he spent his days since the blaze broke out.

Tanjil went to the spot with his friends on the fateful night but never returned, Hasan said.

"I have not found my son," he shed tears.

Many of the bodies charred beyond recognition.

Using

FROM PAGE 16
chocolate -- until they were satisfied. In three trials, the volunteers were recorded eating with no distractions, using a smartphone or reading a magazine.

On average, the volunteers ate 535 calories without the distraction of a smartphone but 591 when using a mobile.

Those in the sample who were classed as overweight ate 616 calories while using their phones. When in possession of their mobiles, the volunteers also consumed 10 percent more fatty foods. They also ate more when reading a magazine.

"Smartphone use during a meal increased calorie and fat intake," said Márcio Gilberto Zangeronimo, a lead author of the study -- carried out at the Federal University of Lavras in Brazil and University Medical Center Utrecht in the Netherlands.

He added: "Tablets and smartphones have become the main 'distracters' during meals, even early in childhood, so it is important to pay attention to how this may impact food choices."

At primary stage, perennially

FROM PAGE 1
In the last one year, nine incidents of fire in plastic factories or warehouses in Old Dhaka were reported, said Ratan Kumar Debnath, station officer of Lalbagh Fire Service Station.

A large number of houses in the old town are used as plastic factories and warehouses. Fire intensifies when it comes into contact with plastic, causing higher damages and casualties, he told The Daily Star yesterday.

At present, there are about 1,200 plastic factories in the old town, most of which are unauthorised, according to industry insiders.

Abdul Mannan, joint secretary of Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), told this newspaper yesterday that they could not start the work due to complications related to land acquisition.

Land owners of the project site in Sirajdikhan vehemently opposed the government plan. Even the project director was assaulted by them when he went there to conduct a survey.

However, after a long negotiation involving the deputy commissioner's office in Munshiganj, leaders of the

association of plastic industries and project officials, the owners on February 18 agreed to hand over their land, he said.

"All these problems have been resolved and we will float tender and select contractors within the shortest possible time," he said, adding, "We hope to start relocation of the plastic industries within a year."

The Ecneq passed BSCIC Printing Industries Estate project costing Tk 138.70 crore in January 2016 and it was scheduled to be completed within December 2018.

But the project to be implemented beside the Plastic Industry Estate in Sirajdikhan witnessed only 15 percent progress till October last year, officials said.

"Implementation of the project has been delayed for the same reason -- acquisition of land. The problem, however, has been resolved," Abdul Mannan said.

Another BSCIC official said apart from the printing industries in Old Dhaka, those in other parts of the capital will also be relocated.

After the Chawkbazar fire, the most

discussed issue in the country is the relocation of chemical industries and warehouses from Old Dhaka as there are some 4,000 such establishments in the area, making the total area vulnerable to fire.

But the implementation of the project has not started yet though the Ecneq approved it in October last year.

The Tk 201.80 crore project to be implemented on 50 acres of land in Keraniganj upazila is scheduled to be completed in June 2021, officials said.

A big chunk of the time -- from June 2011 to 2017 -- was spent on forming committees, holding meetings, selecting the project site, fixing its size and reaching an agreement with the industry owners, according to the project documents.

In 2017, the authorities selected Dakkhin Brahmankritto of Keraniganj from three possible sites and extended the project area from 20 to 50 acres.

Shafiqul Islam Milon, joint secretary of Bangladesh Chemical and Perfumery Merchant Association, on Saturday said they were ready to relocate their businesses but the government could not give them land yet.

Project Director Saiful Alam told

this newspaper on Friday, "We will now go for land acquisition and to do so, we will give the money to the deputy commissioner's office in Dhaka soon. Then we will start the construction and hope the work will be completed before the scheduled time."

He added that they would not face any hurdle in acquiring land as it has already been settled.

As per the plan, there will be 936 industrial plots there.

Asked where the other chemical industries and warehouses will go, Saiful yesterday said, "After the Chawkbazar incident, the government high-ups asked us to find out two more places to relocate those."

The project to shift light electronics industries in Old Dhaka witnessed relatively good progress.

Till October last year, the Tk 213 crore project to be implemented on 50 acres of land in Tongibari upazila of Munshiganj saw 26 percent progress, officials said.

The land acquisition for the project was completed last year and the tender will be floated soon, a BSCIC official said.

Hijack bid foiled; suspect shot dead

FROM PAGE 1
Several passengers claimed that one crew member was shot while another was injured during the evacuation. Officials, however, claimed that nobody was injured.

General Officer Commanding Maj Gen SM Matiuur Rahman of 24th Infantry Division during a briefing after the commando operation, which was launched around 7:20pm, said the "so-called hijacker" wanted to talk to the prime minister and his wife.

Air Vice-Marshal Mofidul Haque, who was negotiating with the suspect from the control tower, said the suspect introduced himself as Mahadi, a Bangladeshi citizen in his mid 20s, during the conversation.

Later, the civil aviation ministry sources told this newspaper that the suspect, a Dubai expatriate Bangladeshi named Majidul Haq Mahadi, came to Dhaka on November 20 last year and was a passenger on the Dubai-bound flight.

"He [the suspect] did not intend to do any harm to any passengers ... We kept him busy talking over the phone," said Mofidul at the press briefing.

"The suspect had held the cabin crew hostage. At one stage of the negotiation, our air force members managed to bring them out."

However, the ISPR release later said the alleged hijacker was able to hold a crew member hostage.

During the briefing, Maj Gen Matiuur said a para-commando unit of the army, who was on another duty at BNS Issa Khan, was called in around

6:00pm.

"They launched an eight-minute operation in which the armed man was shot."

The commandos were led by Lt Col Imrul, who was also at the helm of the operation that ended the Holy Artisan siege in 2016, he added.

"The commandos first asked him to surrender but he was aggressive. As he refused to give himself up and intended to attack, the commandos went for action and he got injured in the ensuing shootout."

The ISPR release said the bullet-hit man was brought out and taken to an on-duty doctor, who declared him dead.

"The only demand he [the suspect] had made during the conversation was that he wanted to talk with the honourable prime minister and his wife," Matiuur said.

The official said they could not know what he wanted to say to the prime minister. "There was no scope to talk to him any further as we sought to end the incident within the shortest possible time."

He added that they were worried that the suspect could harm the crew member onboard. "Our pilot initially thought him [the suspect] to be a foreigner but he was basically a Bangladeshi ... He had a pistol. We did not find anything else in the plane."

There was no damage to the aircraft and it was declared safe for takeoff after scrutiny, he added.

The airport was opened at 8:00pm, said Mofidul.

It remains a mystery how a passenger

got onboard a plane with a weapon despite at least two tiers of body checking.

"We will investigate how he boarded the plane with a firearm," said Air Vice-Marshal M Naim Hassan, chairman of Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh while briefing reporters at his office in Dhaka.

He said they had heard that the suspect had a jacket on with wires sticking out of it.

A probe committee will be formed to find out how it happened and whether anyone was negligent in discharging duty, he added.

Later at night, State Minister for Civil Aviation Ministry Md Mahub Ali at a TV talk-show at a private television channel said he came to know that the hijacker was carrying a "toy gun".

Besides, Commissioner of Chittagong Metropolitan Police Md Mahubor Rahman said it was a "fake pistol". Asked whether he saw it, the officer only said, "You can quote me on this. It's a fake pistol."

The civil aviation ministry in an updated press release in the early hours of today said it has formed a five-member investigation committee.

As of 10:00pm, several Chattogram-bound flights were stuck at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

WHAT PASSENGERS SAID
Mohammad Reza, a passenger of the flight, said he heard a gunshot inside the plane 20 minutes after it took off from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

"We heard a gun fire in business class," he said.

Soon afterwards, a cabin crew mem-

ber, who was bleeding, was seen running towards the rear end of the plane applying pressure on the wound on his arm, he added.

"At that time the flight was bumpy ... passengers were shouting and yelling and the children were crying," said Dr Sharmin, another passenger.

A passenger named Md Russell got hurt in one of his heels when he jumped to the ground from an emergency exit. He was seen crying at the airport unattended at 8:00pm.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited Chattogram to open the construction work of two big projects and returned to Dhaka later in the day.

Replying to queries, officials said the hijacking bid had nothing to do with the prime minister's tour.

1977 HIJACK
On September 28, 1977, a hijacked Japan Airlines aircraft with 156 people, including 14 crew members, on board landed at the Tejgaon Airport.

Five armed members of the Japanese Red Army led by Osamu Maruoka had hijacked the Paris to Tokyo DC-8 aircraft soon after it took off from Bombay after a short stopover.

After a 105-hour-long hostage drama the hijackers released 130 passengers and left Dhaka with 26 passengers. They later landed in Algiers, the capital of Algeria and the released the rest 26 passengers on November 1.

Shariful Islam, Mostafa Yousuf, Mohammad Suman, Rafiul Islam, Muntakim Saad, and Rashidul Islam contributed to this report.

Rohingyas eating up Bangladesh forests

Says foreign minister

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen has said over 1.2 million Rohingyas of Myanmar, who fled Rakhine and are sheltered in Bangladesh, are unfortunately eating up much of Bangladesh's forests and creating an environmental disaster.

Bangladesh has already been considered as a role model in the management of natural disasters and has achieved a "commendable success" in mitigating and adapting with climate change-related challenges, he said.

Addressing the annual thematic meeting of the Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) at Hotel Intercontinental Dhaka, Momen said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who was awarded the Champion of the Earth for her farsighted initiatives to address the challenges of climate change, established two climate funds and initiated dredging of rivers and green afforestation.

"But the lone effort of Bangladesh is not enough. The government is open to any initiative at the regional and global level, including BIMSTEC, Saarc, Delta Coalition, Climate Vulnerable Forum and the Indian Ocean Rim Association," he said, adding, "Bangladesh is a champion in promoting climate issues at the global level."

The minister added that displacement due to either slow or sudden onset disasters is a global problem.

As natural disasters are occurring more frequently with higher ferocity and intensity, and causing forcible displacement of people across nations as well as it is a global issue, he said it is imperative to design and develop corrective actions globally to lessen its devastating impacts.

More than 150 participants, including those from the PDD's Steering Group, regional and international organisations and UN agencies, attended the day-long event.

The theme of the event is "Striving together for addressing displacement due to slow and sudden-onset disasters". Bangladesh, as the current chair of the PDD, hosted the event in collaboration with International Organisation for Migration.

Discussions said the world sees a high frequency and intensity of disasters -- both natural and man-made -- SEE PAGE II COL 3

Saudi Arabia

FROM PAGE 16
they knew anything of Khashoggi's disappearance, the kingdom finally acknowledged that Saudi agents killed him inside the consulate, but described it as a rogue operation.

Princess Rima faces hostile US lawmakers who have threatened tough action against Saudi Arabia over the brutal killing amid claims that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman -- the kingdom's de-facto ruler -- was personally responsible.

The Saudi government has denied he had anything to do with the murder

of Khashoggi, a royal insider-turned-critic who was a columnist with the Washington Post.

"The appointment of a new envoy signifies an attempt by Riyadh to try and re-set relations with Washington and draw a line under the Khashoggi affair, however unlikely that may be in practice, at least with Congress," Kristian Ullrichsen, a fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute in the United States, told AFP.

Princess Rima, the daughter of a former long-time ambassador to the US, has been a leading advocate of

female empowerment in the kingdom, which has faced intense criticism over the recent jailing of women activists -- and subsequent claims of sexual abuse and torture of some of them in detention.

The princess previously worked at the kingdom's General Sports Authority, where she led a campaign to increase women's participation in sports.

"Princess Rima becomes the first female ambassador in Saudi history and the first female with a rank of minister -- a strong signal to the inte-

gration of women into the government and workforce," Ali Shihabi, founder of the pro-Saudi think-tank Arabia Foundation, said on Twitter.

Prince Khalid, a son of the king who served as ambassador since 2017, had been expected to leave Washington for some time -- particularly after the global outcry over Khashoggi tarnished the kingdom's reputation.

His new appointment as deputy defence minister comes as a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia remains bogged down in a four-year conflict in neighbouring Yemen.

2-hour outage spreads panic in Chattogram

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Chattogram and some of its neighbouring upazilas yesterday faced over two hours of power outage due to some technical glitches in the national grid.

"The outage began at 10:00pm and stayed for a little more than two hours," Prabir Kumar, chief engineer of Power Development Board in Chattogram told The Daily Star over phone last night.

"Locals went into a state of panic since the outage took place just hours after the Biman flight 'hijacking' attempt. However, there were no other problems," he added.