

BHASANTEK SLUM FIRE Many victims still under the open sky

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Many dwellers of the Bhasantek slum -- that burnt to ashes early on Thursday -- have been living under the open sky with no food, water, power, and sanitation facilities for the last three days.

Victims of the fire said they need immediate shelter, clothes, food, pots and pans, as they have lost all their belongings in the fire.

While visiting the area, this correspondent found many slum dwellers in tears, sitting scattered in the area with their children. Many of them were searching for their belongings in the debris.

In the early hours of Thursday, around 600 shanties at the Bhasantek slum in Dhaka's Mirpur area -- known as "Abul's slum" and "Jahangir's slum" -- burnt down, leaving around 3,000 people homeless.

"I owned 22 shanties at a cost of Tk 7 lakh which I borrowed. My investment of 18 years has vanished in the fire. Now where would we go with our children?" wailed Sufia Begum, who along with her husband Abul Hossain built the first shanty in the area 18 years ago.

Over a hundred slum dwellers and their children are sheltered in a makeshift tent, while most others have been staying under

the open sky.

Some of the victims said they have been given blankets and food.

"I received five blankets for six members of my family, and got space in this tent. But we can't sleep here due to mosquitoes. We searched for rented shanties, but didn't get any. We need immediate shelter," said Rahima Begum.

Contacted, Dhaka's deputy commissioner Abu Saleh Mohammad Ferdous told The Daily Star, "We enlisted around 700 families who faced losses. Every family has been given 20 kilogrammes of rice, cooked and dry food, and blankets as primary aid."

However, he did not mention anything about providing shelter to the victims.

Earlier on February 19, authorities had conducted an eviction drive in a nearby slum, "Kazal'er Tek". Many of the evicted slum dwellers took shelter in the Bhasantek slum.

Slum dwellers suspect that someone "might have set fire" to the slum, while Fire Service and Civil Defence officials said the "fire could have initiated from electric short-circuit or a mosquito coil".

"We will start investigation soon to find the reason of fire, and calculate the losses," Noor Islam, deputy director of Fire Service and Civil Defence in Dhaka told The Daily Star yesterday.

Implement decisions taken after Nimtoli tragedy: green activists

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Twenty environmental organisations yesterday demanded that all 17 decisions, which were taken by the government after the 2010 Nimtoli fire incident, be implemented.

The demand came at a rally led by Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (Bapa) in front of Bangladesh National Museum in the capital, nine days into the devastating fire at Chawkbazar that left at least 70 people dead.

"Among the 17 recommendations, six are related to ban on import, storage and use of 29 most dangerous chemicals in residential areas and ensuring its proper transportation, storing and use," said Iqbal Habib, joint secretary of Bapa, reading out a written statement.

But in the last nine years, there was serious negligence in implementing those by the authorities concerned, that put certain areas under severe risk, he said.

Other important recommendations include keeping residential areas free from electrical hazards, setting up fire hydrants, raising awareness and preparing volunteers to ensure public safety, he said.

"As none of the government directives after the 2010 Nimtoli fire were implemented, we had to face the incident of Chawkbazar," said Nazim Uddin, a resident of Old Dhaka.

Demanding relocation of chemical warehouses and factories and low-quality gas cylinders from Old Dhaka, resident of the area Sohag Mohajon said he could have been a victim of the blaze on February 20, as he had passed the spot just an hour before the incident.

He said there are lots of shoe factories in different alleys of the old town, which use flammable chemicals.

Environment activist Dr Mahub Hossain said these kinds of incidents are happening due to corruption.

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

'Walking library' POLAN SARKER passes away

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Polan Sarker, revered for his life-long endeavour to educate people by walking around his locality and lending books, passed away at the age of 98 yesterday.

He breathed his last at home in Bagha Upazila's Bausa village at 12:30pm. He was suffering from health complications caused by old age for the last few days, said his son Haider Ali.

Born as Harez Uddin in Natore's Bagatipara upazila on September 10, 1921, Polan Sarker was a self-made man with a passion for learning.

After his father's death, Polan and his mother moved to Rajshahi to live with her parents. He could not continue formal education after class six. But his eagerness to learn did not wane.

He became involved with theatre artistes in the area, reading scripts for folk plays and participating in them. He developed a habit of buying books from local libraries, gradually becoming a voracious reader.

Soon Polan became skilled enough in Bangla to be hired for writing legal

deeds, business agreements, and keeping meeting minutes.

At one point, he was the chairperson of a local high school committee, where he used to give and lend books to students. This is when he realised his true calling -- in not just gaining knowledge, but also disseminating it.

After he was diagnosed with diabetes in his 80s, he was told to walk at least three kilometres a day. He used this as an opportunity to walk to villagers' homes and lend them his own books.

He continued to hand-deliver the books for almost three decades.

In 2008, he built a library on his own land with assistance from Rajshahi Zilla Parishad. The library now has five book distribution points at different villages.

Inspired by his initiative, some youths of his village joined him and created a movement for reading books.

Polan Sarker was awarded the prestigious Ekushey Padak in 2011 for his dedication to social welfare.

The news of his death shrouded his village in grief.



Children enjoy their time with Sisimpur characters Halum, Tuki and Ikri on the last Shishu Prohor (children's hour) of this year's book fair.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Extended days, extended hopes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Book lovers grabbed the opportunity to spend an extra day at Ekushey book fair yesterday, first day of the weekend extension.

Rain had marred the joy of literary enthusiasts for a couple of days, as many had missed their chance to attend the fair.

But people from different walks of life came to the fair with their family and loved ones yesterday as there was no sign of rain and the sky was clear and sunny.

"I could not manage time to come to the fair due to an official matter. But finally, I've managed to show up," said Nitu Zaman, a private job holder, who visited the fair with her husband.

Thanking the Bangla Academy authority for extending the fair, she said, "This extension has helped those who could not attend the fair in February due to unavoidable circumstances."

Bangla Academy took the decision

to extend the month-long fair till March 2 on February 28, the official concluding day of the fair, considering low turnout on the last days of February due to rain.

As it was a Friday, the fair opened at



11am and the children's corner was abuzz with little ones. They enjoyed their time with Sisimpur characters Halum, Ikri and Tuktuki.

"This is my last chance this year to bring my kids to the fair, so I want them to enjoy to the fullest," said Nadia

Rahman, a mother of two.

The turnout was comparatively low for a weekend but publishers remained hopeful for more sales.

"The extension has definitely helped us increase sales. Although the crowd is not as big as we expected, we're not losing hope," said Md Ismail, manager of Ankur Prakashani.

Some publishers alleged that if the decision to extend the fair was taken couple of days earlier, then more people would be aware of the extension.

"The authorities took the decision at the eleventh hour; it would be better if they had decided earlier," said Faruk Hossain, in-charge of Anyadhara publication.

Besides, although vehicle movement was restricted on the TSC to Doyel Chatter route throughout February, it was open for traffic yesterday.

Meanwhile, 86 new books hit the fair yesterday.

Math Olympiad 2019 begins with festivity

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The 17th Bangladesh Mathematical Olympiad, the biggest math competition in the country, began at St Joseph Higher Secondary School in Dhaka yesterday with a lot of enthusiasm and excitement.

A total of 1,226 students from different schools and colleges across the country are participating in the two-day competition under four groups -- primary, junior, secondary and higher secondary.

Of the participants, from class three to 12, 85 will be awarded in different categories. The awards will be handed over in a ceremony at the same venue today.

Earlier last month, more than 1,400 students were selected for the final competition through a total of 12 regional competitions. This year, for the first time, the

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DEATH, INJURIES IN LINE OF DUTY

Law enforcers demand enhanced compensation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan has praised the bravery and courageous role of police, saying that they are working to keep the country's law and order situation stable.

The government is working to make the force advanced and modern, said the minister, while speaking at a programme on the occasion of Police Memorial Day 2019, at Mirpur Police Staff College in Dhaka yesterday.

Since 2017, law enforcers have been observing the day on March 1 to honour policemen who laid down their lives while performing their duties.

Around 158 policemen died in 2018 while maintaining law and

order, combating crime and arresting criminals.

The home minister handed over Tk 50,000, a certificate, a crest and complimentary gifts to the family members of each police personnel killed while on duty in 2018. While accepting the gifts, the family members became emotional.

Asaduzzaman said that family members of the deceased police officials requested for job and ration facilities.

"We have noted their demands and would sincerely look into it. If they are eligible, they would definitely get jobs," said the minister.

Inspector General of Police (IGP) Mohammad Javed Patwary presided over the ceremony.

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'Nobody wants a monarchy here'

Dr Kamal says govt can't run country for long with 'falsehood'

AGENCIES, Dhaka

Stating that the government is in trouble, Jatiya Oikyafront convener Dr Kamal Hossain yesterday warned that it will not be able to run the country for long with "falsehood".

"This government is in trouble as it's running the country staying in power without (a proper) election. It's now making various promises which are very difficult to fulfill," he said.

Speaking at a discussion at the Jatiya Press Club, Dr Kamal further said, "What happened on the night of December 29? Was it a free, fair and neutral election? What was it actually? I would like to say it's difficult to run a country of 16 crore people based on falsehood and wrong information. It can't be done."

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-rob) arranged the discussion, marking the historic first flag hoisting day, reports UNB.

On March 2, 1971, then Vice President of Dhaka University Central Students Union (Ducus) ASM Abdur Rob first hoisted the country's flag adorned with the map of an independent Bangladesh, at a student gathering at Dhaka University.

Dr Kamal, also the president of Gonoforum, said there is no disagreement among the people over some basic issues and they all believe that they are the owners of the country. "Nobody wants a monarchy here and nobody wants to see any king or queen here. Bangalee is such a nation which will never accept any king or queen in the country."

He said people now feel some sort of helplessness, as the government is not showing respect to them as the owners of the country. "But no one should feel helpless when there are 17

crore people who can play the role of owners of the country. Those who think they have become the country's owners dividing people are making a mistake."

The Oikyafront chief said the country's people ousted the autocratic rulers, including HM Ershad, through their united efforts in the past. "We'll also get united now and bring the country under our occupation through a democratic and constitutional process."

Mentioning that the country was liberated based on unity of the people, he said people's ownership of the country will also be restored now based on unison among them.

Speaking at the programme, JSD president Abdur Rob recalled the memory of hoisting the country's flag for the first time on March 2, 1971.

Describing the current government

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Md Mahub ur Rahman, deputy CEO of HSBC Bangladesh, and eminent art historian Pranab Ranjan Ray inaugurate watercolour exhibition "Soaked in Paper" at Galleri Kaya in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED