



People gather in front of Haji Wahed Mansion in the capital's Chawkbazar yesterday after law enforcers relaxed security measures around the building which was ravaged in a devastating fire nine days ago. PHOTO: STAR

Old Dhaka at grave fire risk

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divided into four zones -- Lalbagh, Hazaribagh, Sadarghat and Siddique Bazar.
Of those, Sadarghat had highest 379 warehouses followed by Lalbagh that had 87.
On several occasions, the fire service warned residents and businessmen of the danger and even launched eviction drives with the help of mobile courts.
"But we were forced to suspend the drive in the face of opposition from local businessmen," Ali Ahmed said.
After the 2010 Nimtoli incident, the deadliest ever fire disaster in the country that killed at least 124 people, the fire department did not issue any licence for setting up chemical factory or warehouse in the area.
And after the survey last year, the department came up with a set of recommendations, including immediate relocation of the chemical stores and shop from residential areas to a safer place.
But little has changed. During recent visits to Chawkbazar, Urdu

Road, Agamasi Lane, Shaheednagar, Siddique Bazar and Islambagh, The Daily Star found chemical warehouses in many residential buildings.
Some buildings have small rubber factories while some have plastic. In some buildings, traders have set up shoe factories. Residents live in highly crowded area amid a constant rumble from the factories.
The latest fire incident in Chwkbazar that killed at least 70 people is being blamed on flammable chemicals stored on different floors of a number of affected buildings.
Poor building structures, narrow roads, the near-absence of fire safety measures and a lack of natural source of water in this part of the town make it difficult for firefighters to control the flames, the survey found.
"Things have been like this for generations. On many occasions, there have been calls for their relocation, but many traders do not want to relocate their family business," said Takibur Rahim, a resident of Islambagh.

Ismail Hossain, a trader who sells plastic granules, said, "Many types of factories were built in the area... If the government provides all the facilities, we will shift our business."
Apart from the loss of life and properties, other risks of having chemical warehouses in residential buildings include spill, contamination, infectious diseases and environmental hazard.
Iqbal Habib, an urban expert, said fire incidents have struck the old town people time and again, but they seemed to have accepted it as their fate.
"And that's the problem," he said.
Khondker Neaz Rahman, another urban planner, said in any well-managed city, three things are required: creating community-based volunteers, providing them with logistics and equipment and having fire hydrants in place.
"When a fire breaks out, the first responders are the community people. So their capacity should be strengthened," he added.

2,500-year-old crop seeds discovered

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Jahangirnagar University's Archaeology department, told The Daily Star recently.
Zami led a team of archaeologists that found the seeds through an excavation carried out between February 3 and 23. The team included 30 students from the JU department and officials from the government's archaeological department.
Digging 4.3 metres into the ground, the team collected nearly 10,000 crop seeds, including that of rice, corn, beans, chickpeas, lentil, muug daal and cotton, he said.
"Analysing those crops, it's possible to know many crucial information, including the climatic condition of that period. It will also reveal information about human migration through Bangladesh and give a clear concept about ancient Bangladeshi civilisation," he said.
The team also found artifact like pieces of earthen Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) which dates back to around 2,500 years.
"So we get a relative date of those crops that used to be cultivated in those areas at least 2500 years ago. We could get older evidence if we excavated further," said Zami, who did his post graduation on Environmental Archeology from London School of Archeology.
The archaeologist thinks the most

significant discovery of the excavation was finding some samples of *Oryza Sativa Aus* rice, one of the three wild rice varieties of Asia, which researchers believe could have its origin in Bengal and Assam.
There are two other wild rice varieties -- *Oryza Sativa Japoica* which originated in China nearly 12,000 years ago and *Oryza Sativa Indica* nearly 10,000 years ago in the Ganges plain of northern India. All the rice varieties available now came from those three wild varieties.
But researchers are still not certain about the origin of 'Aus' wild rice variety.
"Analysing the morphology of the rice we got in Bogura, we can primarily say that it is 'Aus' rice variety," Zami said, adding, "However, a lot of research -- profiling of the DNA and isotope of samples -- is needed to be absolutely sure about it."
The research can prove that Pundru civilization (in Bogura) is older than what was thought earlier (around 2000 years). It may also prove that there was an agro-based village civilisation in that area before urban settlement replaced it.
Zami said he would soon take the samples to a laboratory in the UK for testing.
After analysis of the DNA and isotope of the samples, it would be possible to get an idea about the crop pattern, agriculture method, food habit

and many other indicators of the civilisation of the ancient Bengal, he said.
It will also give a clear idea about the environment and climatic condition of that period, he said, adding that analysis of the crop would also help reveal the route of human migration through Bengal.
"Because people stopped migration when they started living in a certain place and domesticated the wild crop. It helped civilisation to evolve," he said.
Asked, eminent archaeologist Prof Sufi Mustafizur Rahman of Jahangirnagar University, said archeological evidence like palace, temple and mosque usually gives a glimpse of the history relating to kings and emperors. It does not give any idea about the common people, their agricultural practices, culture and how their civilisation evolved.
"But research on crop seeds, pollens from the ancient period gives us that opportunity to know the history of environment. It helps us determine when and from where people came and also the climate of a particular period," he said.
"This research is also important as it will help claim intellectual property right upon any certain crop if we could prove that that particular crop originated from our land," added Sufi Mustafizur Rahman, who has long been working on the archeological sites at Wari Bataeshwar and Bikrampur.



Digging trenches in Bogura's Mahasthangarh, archeologists have recently found around 10,000 crop seeds and pieces of earthen northern black polished ware, inset, which they think might be around 2,500 years old. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Bangladesh not a 'one-party state'

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photographer Shahidul Alam.
"Shahidul was not arrested for giving an interview to Al Jazeera, he was arrested for spreading misinformation that incited violence," Rizvi said.
"Freedom of speech has nothing to do with it," he said, adding that freedom of speech prevails in Bangladesh.
He also mentioned that the minority communities in the country are now able to enjoy freedom of speech and are living safely in the country.
On August 5 last year, law enforcers picked up Shahidul, also the founder of Drik Gallery and Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, from his home in Dhanmondi during a widespread demonstration for safe roads.
The arrest was made after Shahidul,

also a social activist, gave an interview to Al Jazeera English where he criticised the government's role amid the protests.
He was sent to jail on charges of "spreading propaganda and false information against the government".
On November 20, Shahidul was released from jail after he secured permanent bail from the High Court.
In reply to a question on the Rohingya crisis, Rizvi said the government of Bangladesh wants to ensure voluntary repatriation of the Rohingya refugees when the conditions in Myanmar are conducive for a dignified return.
Referring to the government's plan on relocating the refugees to an island, he said the island has been developed to provide the refugees with better facilities and living conditions compared to the camps they are currently

living in.
He added that the international organisations may visit the island and inspect the government's arrangements for the refugees' relocation.
In response to another question on whether Bangladesh wants Myanmar's de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi to be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court for genocide of Rohingyas in Myanmar, Rizvi said anyone who is involved in genocide should be prosecuted.
A panel of three experts -- Bangladesh's High Commissioner to the UK and Ireland Saida Muna Tasneem, South Asia analyst at Essex University and former Amnesty International official Abbas Faiz, and Swedish Bangladeshi journalist Tasneem Khalil -- also joined the programme.

Five more killed

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anti-narcotics drive started in May last year.
In a similar incident with Teknaf police, two suspected robbers -- Nazir Ahmed, 30, Gias Uddin, 35 -- were killed around 4:00am yesterday.
Pradip Kumar Das, officer-in-charge of Teknaf Police Station, claimed they conducted a drive in Howaikang area of the upazila on information that a group of robbers was attempting to carry out the robbery in Nayapara Battali area.
Sensing police presence, the suspected robbers opened fire, forcing them to retaliate, he added.
Police claimed they recovered three firearms, 6,000 yaba tablets and nine bullets from the spot.
On the other hand, family members of Gias alleged that police arrested him a few days ago. Asked, the OC denied the allegation.
In Munshiganj's Sirajdikhan upazila, a suspected robber -- Selim, 42, of Sonakanda in Dhaka's Keraniganj -- was killed in a similar incident that police say was a "gunfight".
Asaduzzaman, additional superintendent of Munshiganj police, claimed the incident happened around 11:00am yesterday when police and a group of robber engaged in a "gunfight".

Hezbollah says British ban is an insult to Lebanon

AFP, Beirut
Lebanon's Hezbollah movement yesterday condemned Britain's decision to outlaw its political wing, describing the move as an "insult" to the Lebanese people.
Britain said Monday it would seek to make membership of the Shia movement or inviting support for it a crime.
The decision follows outrage last year over the display of the Hezbollah flag, which features a Kalashnikov assault rifle, at pro-Palestinian demonstrations in London.
"The British government has insulted the sentiments and the will of the Lebanese people by adopting this decision," the group said in a statement.
"The Lebanese consider Hezbollah to be a big political and popular force and they have granted it wide representation in parliament and government," it said.
Beyond Lebanon, the group warned Britain the move would "invite hostility from the people of the region," and would harm its role in the Middle East.
Hezbollah was established in 1982 during Lebanon's civil war and is now a major political party in the country, holding three cabinet posts.
But British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said in a statement on Monday any distinction between its military and political wings "does not exist".
"This (decision) does not change our ongoing commitment to Lebanon, with whom we have a broad and strong relationship," he added.
Lebanon's Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil said senior British officials had

agreed the issue should not "impact on bilateral relationships between Lebanon and Britain".
Bassil, whose Free Patriotic Movement party is allied with Hezbollah in government, added it "will not have direct negative consequences on Lebanon because we are already used to this situation with other countries".
The move earned swift praise from the United States and Israel.
Russia vows to continue support for Venezuela
AFP, Moscow
Russia will maintain its support for Venezuela's government, including with aid supplies, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday.
"Russia will continue to assist the Venezuelan authorities in resolving social and economic problems, including through the provision of legitimate humanitarian aid," Lavrov said at a joint press conference with Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodriguez.
At the start of talks with Rodriguez in Moscow, Lavrov expressed Russia's "support and solidarity" for Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro in the country's political standoff.
"We are very closely cooperating and coordinating all our steps on the international arena," Lavrov said.

London mayor urges Brexit delay to break divorce deal deadlock

AFP, London
London Mayor Sadiq Khan has urged Prime Minister Theresa May to delay Britain's departure from the European Union, warning time has run out to rework her withdrawal agreement.
"It's clear that we can't reach a meaningful deal that's agreed by parliament by March 29," Khan, from Britain's main opposition Labour Party, told AFP on Thursday.
"I'm hoping the prime minister sees sense and either extends the notice period for Article 50, or withdraws Article 50."
Article 50 is the EU law that Britain invoked in 2017 triggering a two-year countdown to Brexit that ends at 11pm (2300 GMT) on March 29.
The country is currently on course to leave without an agreement after MPs in January overwhelmingly rejected a divorce deal May struck with the EU late last year.
The embattled leader is now seeking changes to the pact which she hopes will be enough to get it through parliament by March 12.
In her revised strategy unveiled this week, May has vowed that if her deal is rejected, lawmakers will vote in the following days on whether to leave without a deal or delay Brexit briefly.
But European leaders have warned any postponement would come with conditions.
Khan, a leading advocate for a second referendum on EU membership, argued Thursday that freezing the process by unilaterally withdrawing Article 50 was the most feasible way forward.
"Let's do it... stop the clock," he said. "The deal the prime minister negotiated, even if she's able to improve it, is a bad deal... parliament's in gridlock."
"In those circumstances I think the British public should be allowed to... have a say," the mayor added.
"Why are these Brexiters so scared of giving the British public a say?" Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn this week said the party would support holding a second referendum after its own Brexit plan was rejected by MPs.

North Korea, US

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programmes lifted, and this was a bridge too far.
But in a rare late-night press briefing, the North Korean foreign minister said Pyongyang had only wanted some of the measures eased, and that its proposal to close "all the nuclear production facilities" at its Yongbyon complex was its best and final offer.
Despite the stalemate, the North's official KCNA news agency reported yesterday that the two leaders had had a "constructive and candid exchange."
Relations between the two countries -- on opposite sides of the technically still-unfinished Korean War -- had been "characterised by mistrust and antagonism" for decades, it said.
Despite "inevitable hardships and difficulties" on the way to forging a new relationship, KNCA described the Hanoi summit as "successful" and said Kim had promised Trump another encounter.
Trump yesterday said his talks with Kim had been "substantive," adding, "We know what they want and they know what we must have."
Meanwhile, South Korean President Moon Jae-in said yesterday South Korea will cooperate with the US and North Korea to help their stalled talks reach a complete settlement, reported Reuters.
"I believe this is part of a process to reach a higher level of agreement. Now our role has become even more important," Moon said in a speech while commemorating a national holiday.
"My administration will closely communicate and cooperate with the United States and North Korea so as to help their talks reach a complete settlement by any means," he said.
China called for North Korean sanctions relief to be discussed at the UN Security Council after US President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un ended a summit without a deal.
Beijing is the North's main trade partner and sole major ally, but it has backed a raft of UN sanctions following Pyongyang's repeated nuclear and missile tests in recent years, reported AFP.
Both North Korea and the US note that lifting sanctions is an important part of the denuclearisation process, said Chinese foreign ministry spokes-

man Lu Kang.
"They should be considered simultaneously and resolved together, I think this is a common denominator that should be seized," Lu said at a regular press briefing.
Noting "the positive developments on the peninsula, especially the steps taken by North Korea on denuclearisation," Lu said the UN Security Council should "start discussions on the reversible clauses of the resolutions."
The council should "adjust the sanctions in accordance with the principle of simultaneous reciprocity," he said.
Brick kilns
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kilns to support their families, according to media reports.
Anwar Hossain, a worker of M/S Humayun Bricks who took part in the rescue effort that day, said, "Children often come to work at brick kilns due to poverty. They need to run their families with the earnings."
Masuk Altaf Chowdhury, a child rights activist and also the convener of Cumilla Press Club, said, "Although child labour is prohibited by the law, many brick kiln owners employ children. Awareness should be raised among the owners and the administration must have an active role to put an end to the trend."
Bangladesh's Children Act identifies anyone under the age of 18 as children and the Labour Law 2006 does not permit any children under the age of 14 years to work.
When contacted, Md Shahnewaz, director of Ahmed Bricks, refused to take any responsibility.
"We do not hire labourers directly. We give contracts to workers' leaders locally known as 'Majhi' who sometimes hire underage boys. We are abiding by the rules of the government," he told this paper.
Cumilla Deputy Commissioner Abul Fazal Mir said, "We have strengthened monitoring to end child labour in the district. Legal action will be taken against anyone found appointing children as labourers."
The district administration ran a drive on January 13 through mobile courts and slapped fines of a few lakhs on brick kiln owners on charges of engaging children.

DNCC

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Deputy Office Secretary Barrister Biplob Barua were present at the Gono Bhaban.
Besides, Dhaka North City AL General Secretary Sadek Khan, MP, Abdus Salam Murshedi, MP, FBCCI President Shafiqul Islam Mohiuddin and BGMEA President Siddiqui Rahman also were present.