

Make sure no innocent harassed

PM tells Rab men

UNB, Dhaka

Stressing the importance of upholding human rights in enforcing laws, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked the Rab members to be careful so that people are not unnecessarily harassed while taking actions against criminals.

"Actions will have to be taken against those who are truly involved in offences. But I request [you] to give special attention so that no innocent person is subjected to harassment," she said.

The PM gave the directive while addressing a function marking the 15th founding anniversary of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) at its headquarters in the capital.

Sheikh Hasina asked the Rab mem-

bers to be always careful about upholding human rights during enforcement of laws so that people can lead their normal life. "You'll have to keep human rights in mind while enforcing any law," she said.

The PM also directed the elite force members to take proper action against the criminals, no matter who they are.

Terming drug abuse a big problem in society, she reaffirmed her government's firm stance to continue the ongoing drive against drugs in the country.

Sheikh Hasina asked the authorities concerned to continue public awareness programmes alongside the anti-drug drive so that the young generation does not engage in drug abuse.

"The drive will continue against all

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina lays the foundation stones for Rab-10, 13 and 14 battalion complexes during the 15th founding anniversary of the elite force at its headquarters in the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

A city where spectre of fire looms

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AKM Shakil Newaz, the director of operations at the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence headquarters.

"None of the buildings built before 2006 have the things necessary for fire protection because the Bangladesh National Building Code [BNBC] was yet to come into effect," he added.

The BNBC was drafted in 1993 and published in the form of a government gazette, but was not enforced as a legally binding document until a decade and a half later.

The factors examined were quite simple and gauged a building's basic fire-safety measures -- does the building have firefighting equipment? Is it heavily populated? Does it have emergency exits? Does the establishment practise evacuation drills? Was there any chance of an electrical fire? Is there an underground water reservoir?

"All high-rise constructions that took place after 2006 needed to get a fire safety clearance from the Fire Service department. They will not be able to build any building over six storeys without having the plans inspected by someone from this department," said Major Shakil.

However, this still excludes the majority of the city.

This is what people in the 22-storeyed FR Tower -- which was constructed before the 2006 cut-off mark -- were quick to find out.

There was not a single fire-protected

staircase in the entire building.

"The building had only one staircase," said Kazi Saad Nur, whose wife Zarin Tasnim works on the 12th floor of the building.

"She called me and told me she cannot come down, so she went up to the 15th floor. But after that her phone was found switched off and I was unable to reach her," he said.

Zarin was yet to be found as of filing this report.

The staircase, which was already overcome with smoke, was, however, not the only one in the building.

There was another -- a barely one-foot wide staircase snaking out of the back of the building. This staircase had become a doubly precarious undertaking during the fire.

The risks were such that the Fire Department actually sent two letters in 2017 and 2018 to the building authorities which highlighted the lack of fire safety measures in the building.

"The staircase was filled with smoke and my brother, who was stuck on the 9th floor, was unable to use it to escape. He and his colleagues used a hacksaw to cut open the iron grilles on the toilet window and jumped to the next building," said Nalifa Mehelin, another relative of a victim who was trapped in the fire.

The lack of safety measures in buildings has become alarmingly common.

THE CITY THAT BURNS

On March 2, 2019, just ten days after an inferno took over Churihatta in

Chawkbazaar, a fire broke out again in the area. This time it was a scrap metal shop where a gas cylinder had exploded, turning the shop white-hot, and leaving three staffers with as much as 30 percent burns.

On the very same day a fire broke out in a slum in Tejgaon Industrial area, gutting 50 homes. This newspaper reported that the fire stemmed from a pile of rubble left behind by government workers, following an eviction drive.

Three days later, a fire broke out in a tyre warehouse in Old Dhaka's Nawabpur area. Media reported that it took firefighters two hours to bring the flames under control.

Before the fumes from that had died down, there was a fire in a slum in Nakhla para -- one big enough for the fire service to need eight units to bring it under control. Following this, there was another fire in another scrap goods warehouse in Lalbagh.

All of this was a month's work.

But more importantly, these were only the ones that were reported -- in fact a *Star Weekend* analysis showed that only one percent of fire incidents are ever reported in the media.

Calculating from the statistics of the last three years published by the Fire Service Department, there are on average 43 fire incidents every single day that need to be tackled by firefighters.

Additionally, an article published in 2004 by Institute of Engineers,

Bangladesh, titled "Fire Hazard Categorization and Risk Assessment for Dhaka City in GIS Framework", found that Tejgaon Industrial Area, Fulbaria and Postogola were the most hazardous areas in the city to live in, having more than 30 fire incidents annually.

The next-worst areas were found to be Jatrabari, Sadarghat, Shakhari bazar, Waizghat, Simpson Road, New Market and Mirpur-1.

Risk zones are many.

In 2001, a BUET graduate student studying the area of Mohammadpur found that shopping centres and filling stations have more frequent fire incidents.

On top of the pile of tinder -- which are high-rises without basic safety measures -- there are 867 chemical warehouses spread throughout the city which too are operating without fire safety clearances, according to statistics provided by the department.

In 2012, students from BUET's URP assessed 153 chemical warehouses on Armanitola road for fire risk. All the chemical warehouses studied showed that the amount of chemicals stored exceeded the amount allowed by BNBC.

In most of the warehouses the amount stored was between 2,500 kilograms and 5,500 kilograms, with the highest going to 10,000 kilograms.

Worse yet, they found that of the warehouses, 17 percent had chemicals that would ignite almost immediately -- similar to what had been observed in

Chawkbazaar.

Only a quarter of the warehouses were storing non-flammable materials.

This fire risk did not seem to cause a dent in the psyche of the businessmen there -- very few of the warehouses had fire extinguishers and none of them had fire alarms or any fire-protected staircases.

A quarter had staircases which also served as storage units. Shockingly, half of the warehouses had homes and hospitals in the same building.

"The people who are in the business of importing and storing chemicals do not have knowledge of the chemical properties of those substances at all. Most chemical shop and storage owners do not even accept that they are dealing with chemicals," said Nushrat Jahan, one of the authors of the paper titled "Fire Hazard Risk Assessment of Mixed Use Chemical Storage Facilities: A Case Study of Chemical Warehouses in Old Dhaka", which was published in *Journal of Bangladesh Institute of Planners*.

The author, currently a Planning PhD student at the University of Toronto, also added that all of this boils down to creating awareness.

There is a treasure trove of risk assessments conducted by urban planners over the years all nailing down the same conclusion -- the city needs to be protected.

A thesis published in 2008 by the Department of Urban Planning (URP) at BUET narrowed in on what was then

ward 72 (now ward 36) comprising Islampur, Shakhari bazar, Simpson Road and Court House Street, and found that most of the buildings there were moderately vulnerable to fire.

Similarly in 2015, a report published in the *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* by graduate students of University of Texas and BUET, studied the buildings in ward number 29, which is the area around Islambagh.

They found that less than half of the buildings there could be accessed by fire engines and that nearly 59 percent of the buildings were vulnerable to fire.

So why can not the fire service simply go and evacuate the places without any fire safety clearances?

"We do not have the powers of a magistrate. We can only intervene after a disaster has already occurred," said Maj Shakil.

Besides, he added, that it was not as if they could empty out the city considering the widespread nature of the problem.

"Did you know that 71 percent of the streets in Dhaka are too narrow for fire engines to pass through?"

According to the current law, the roads need to be at least nine metres wide for fire engines to pass through. There need to be at least a 4.5 metre wide space in front of the building for the fire units to set themselves up.

"These laws completely fall flat in entire areas like Old Dhaka, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Rampura and Khilgaon, among others," he said.

Mostly onlookers, some of real help

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

When the deadly fire was raging through the FR Tower in Banani yesterday, thousands of "over-enthusiastic" people poured into the Kamal Ataturk Avenue, giving the firefighters a tough time while running the rescue operation.

Although some people were seen helping firefighters, most of them were mere onlookers. Some of them were standing there for hours taking selfies, capturing videos and streaming live on social media.

Firefighters and law enforcers repeatedly requested them to leave the area but they didn't comply, triggering criticism on social media.

Thousands of people gathering at the spot of a major incident is a common occurrence in Bangladesh. It is also usual that they would extend help in the rescue operation. But in many cases, such gatherings create obstacles during a rescue operation.

Take for instance last month's fire in the city's Chawkbazaar area. A lot of onlookers had gathered near the Wahed Mansion, hindering the firefighting and rescue operations.

After visiting the fire victims at Dhaka Medical College Hospital on February 23, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina requested those 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 help to all," she said.

She also criticised a section of TV journalists for obstructing firefighters when carrying out their duties.

Yesterday, when the 22-storey FR Tower was on fire, many people had rushed near the building before the firefighters reached there.

Fire service officials said they had a tough time to manage the crowd and get close to the spot. As time passed, the size of the crowd got bigger.

Staying at the spot for around seven hours, this correspondent saw around 200 people, mostly private university students, helping the rescue effort. But thousands of others were blocking the road, making it difficult for the firefighters and

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Banani fire kills 19



A mass of people stare up at FR Tower in Banani, while police and fire service officials try to direct them to safety. The sudden blaze drew thousands who seemed oblivious to the risk.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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building that houses a food court and dozens of offices.

The incident took place a little over a month after a fire killed at least 70 people in Old Dhaka's Chawkbazaar area.

At a press briefing at 9:15pm yesterday, the fire service DG said the building did not have adequate fire safety equipment.

"There were only a few equipment, and that too were unusable," he said.

The fire broke out around 12:50pm, trapping several hundred people inside the building. Many of them screamed for help, waving hands and cloths on different floors as hundreds of onlookers crowded the adjacent Kemal Ataturk Avenue.

Scores were spotted on ledges of the building, desperately trying to climb down to safety. A few others grabbed ropes lowered by rescue helicopters, which pulled them out of the blaze. Crowds below cheered and applauded every time someone was rescued.

One of The Daily Star correspondents saw at least six people fall to their death while trying to escape the blaze.

The helicopters sprayed water on the building while firefighters used ladders to climb up different floors.

They smashed windows to create escape routes and rescued people in groups.

More than four hours after the blaze, people were still seen trapped on the 13th and 14th floors, waving for help amid clouds of black smoke.

A total of 22 firefighting units, backed by the army, the navy and the air force personnel, struggled to



Nirosh Vignarajah, a Sri Lankan national, who died in Banani fire yesterday.

tame the blaze.

The fire was brought under control around 4:45pm and doused at 7:00pm, said Rasel Shikder, a duty officer at the headquarters of the Fire Service and Civil Defence.

According to data provided by Fire Service and Civil Defence's media centre at 8:30pm, 19 people,

including a Sri Lankan national, were killed and 70 others suffered injuries. At least 73 people were rescued while six firefighters were injured in the operation.

Eleven of the dead were identified as Rumki Akhter, 30; Masudur Rahman, 32; Nirosh Vignarajah, 30; Abdullah Al Faroque, 32; Mamun, 32; Monir 50; Amir Hossain Rabbi, 29; Sheikh Jabin Tasnim Bristi, 27; Anjir Abir Siddiqui, 26; Fazle Rabbi, 27; and Monjurul Hasan, 45.

The identity of the others could not be known.

Nirosh, a Sri Lankan national, reportedly fell to his death while trying to escape the blaze. He was declared dead after he was brought to Kurmitola General Hospital, said Brig Gen Quazi Rashid-Un-Nabi, director of the hospital.

Of those rescued from the building, seven were admitted to Kurmitola Hospital, 10 to the United Hospital and three to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The rest were released after primary treatment.

Many of them had respiratory problems as they inhaled smoke. The others suffered wounds while trying to escape.

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed profound shock at the loss of lives and property in the devastating fire.

Narrating his three-hour ordeal on the 12th floor, Badsha Faisal, one of the survivors, said, "My father advised me not to jump from the building and said I should rather take shelter on the rooftop.

"I tried to go up but failed due to thick smoke. I then returned to the 12th floor."

"We broke the glass walls and waved cloths for help. At one stage, we thought we would die," mentioned Faisal, an executive manager of an IT firm.

He said his three-hour ordeal came to an end when firefighters rescued him and five others around 3:30pm.

"It was like I got a new life," he added.

As black smoke engulfed the building, Ishtiaq Mahmud, an official of the Empire Group, attempted to get down from his office on the 10th floor but failed due to excessive heat.

Later, he along with four others took shelter at a toilet on the 13th floor with the hope of being rescued.

"We drank tap water and soaked our bodies with water to get relief from the scorching heat...We waved pieces of clothes to get noticed by the rescuers," he said.

"It was like a countdown to death," he said, adding that firefighters rescued them around 3:45pm.

from the upper floors of the high-rise.

In reply to a query, he said, "We cannot say anything about the cause or source of the fire until the investigation is completed."

A five-member body was formed to investigate the incident, added the DG.

Asked whether there was any negligence in the rescue operation,



A firefighter takes a rescued survivor to safety.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

FIRE SERVICE DG'S BRIEFING Sazzad said the eighth, ninth and 10th floors were badly damaged as electronics, carpet and vinyl boards used inside the building allowed the fire to spread quickly.

The victims were either suffocated inside the building or died in their attempts to escape the fire, falling

fire service Deputy Director Dilip Kumar Ghosh said they responded quickly to an emergency call and reached the spot within 15 minutes.

"We worked hard and managed to limit the fire within three floors of the building and did not let it spread to adjacent buildings," he added.