

## Horrific fire at FR tower

Were basic safety standards met?

WE are filled with sorrow at the lives lost in the terrible fire at FR Tower in Banani yesterday. The scenes of people jumping off the building to sure death or grievous injury and others desperately trying to climb down ledges and air conditioner shafts, shown live on TV, are hard to forget. At the time of writing this editorial, several people had jumped off the building and been taken to hospitals nearby and there were people trapped inside the building—their condition unknown.

But even without the latest facts it is obvious that safeguards in case of such a fire hazard in this building leave much to be desired. We are shocked that people tried to escape the fumes by jumping off the building or precariously climbing down as there were no fire escapes. This is a mandatory requirement for all high rise buildings and it is a case of gross negligence on the part of the building owners as well as the authorities that give permission to construct these buildings that such fire escapes have not been built.

With buildings so close together and many factors that could cause a fire—short circuits, faulty gas lines or wiring, poor pipefitting, improperly stored combustible materials or open flames, gas leaks from air conditioners—it would be inconceivable that basic precautions would not be ensured in these buildings.

The location of the fire allowed for fire fighters to come in fairly quickly unlike the horrific Chawkbazar tragedy which was intensified because the lanes were too narrow for firefighting trucks to come in. But the speed with which the fire spread is a shocking reminder of how vulnerable these high rises are to fire hazards. We urge the owners of these buildings and of the establishments that have rented space in them to ensure that all measures are taken to ensure that fires can be put out quickly (by making sure there are enough fire extinguishers, that they work and there are people who know how to use them) and that people inside the building can be evacuated quickly through safe fire escapes. Smoke-detectors, sprinklers and fire extinguishers must be installed and regularly checked. Regular fire drills have to be enforced. Rajuk must be especially diligent about enforcing basic building codes. We should not have to bear the grief of losing precious lives to fire hazards because of negligence in safety standards. While accidents can and do occur precaution and appropriate facilities reduces the risk and minimises the tragic consequences should they happen.

## Frightening picture of road safety

The real culprits get away

ALMOST every day we are presented with horrendous reports of more road accidents and more deaths and injuries. And almost every day newer media reports on various facets of road safety continue to inform us as to how poorly this very important sector is administered and managed. At least 7,221 people have died in road accidents across the country in 2018, according to a report by the Bangladesh Passenger Welfare Organisation (BPWO), and a further 15,446 people were injured in a total of 5,514 road crashes throughout the year. The most dreadful aspect of road casualty statistics is that of the unfortunate victims, 12 percent were students. Furthermore, according to BPWO, 68.4 percent of these accidents involves buses and trucks.

It is inconceivable that despite the outcry against the chaos in the transport sector, engendered by the deaths of the two college students last year, no tangible improvement has been noticed. On the contrary we hear shamefaced admission by responsible people in the administration that the bus in question was running without proper route permit or that it was without fitness certificate, and have been without it for the last 10 years. What has the police been doing the last 10 years then? Regrettably, most of the drivers involved in accidents were without proper license, or in some cases the helper was driving the vehicle. It is shocking to learn that the vehicle which killed Abrar was driven by the bus helper, who was ordered by the owner to take the steering-wheel after the driver was handed over to the police, having overrun a female student a few minutes before that.

We have asserted in the past that the owners share equal culpability in the accidents and the deaths and injuries. But often we see them getting away literally with murder. Although the person at the wheels has caused the accident, the owner in many cases are also responsible for it, and must face the court.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

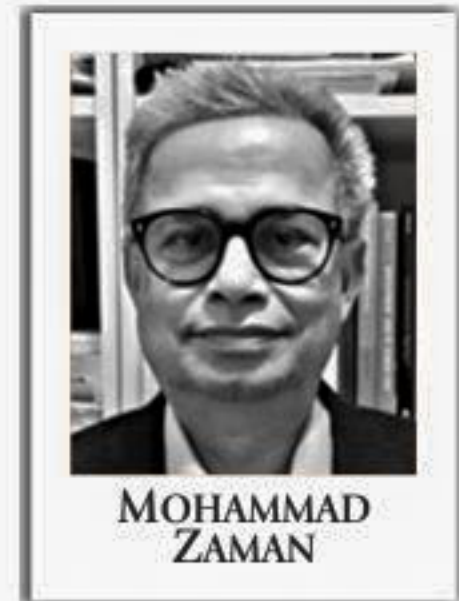
### Freedom of expression must be ensured

Our struggle for freedom was for our most fundamental cultural, economic and political rights. Pakistani rulers denied people of these rights, and the right of people to freely express themselves. Despite us now being an independent nation, this right is yet to be ensured. Without this right, there can be no real criticism in the hope of improving our condition.

People are afraid to express themselves because ordinary citizens, teachers, journalists and others have been arrested over allegations of defamations or for criticising the government. Such practices are not only contradictory to the principles of democracy, but they reek of authoritarian tendencies. In the month of our independence, I would like to draw the attention of lawmakers to abolish draconian laws and ensure freedom of expression for everyone.

Abul Khaer, Government Saadat College, Tangail

# Risks and responses to Rohingya relocation plan



MOHAMMAD ZAMAN

IT is now clear that the Bangladesh government is all set to relocate nearly 100,000 Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char, a remote island off its coast, starting April 2019. All preparations and logistics are nearly ready. Available reports indicate that the United Nations is finally helping to facilitate the relocation plan. However, the UNHCR international protection chief called for “voluntary” relocation of refugees to this new remote home on the Bhasan Char. The move is opposed reportedly by many refugees because they fled Myanmar to save their life; and don't want to risk it now by living on the char in the middle of the Bay of Bengal.

My own view published in *The Daily Star* over a year ago (January 7, 2018) was that refugee relocation to Bhasan Char would be a great mistake. The relocation of 100,000 refugees, only one-tenth of the refugee population in Cox's Bazar, is not going to ease congestion or overcrowding in the camps as claimed by the government nor reduce and/or minimise the growing conflict with the host population. Even if dispersal and resettlement was required to lessen the pressure on the squalid settlements in the camps, why relocate such a huge number of refugee population to an inaccessible and physically hostile environment on a remote island in the Bay of Bengal? There is perhaps no clear answer or response to this as yet.

We all know that the Bhasan Char was not readily available for refugee resettlement. The Bangladesh government spent its own USD 280 million to transform this 20-year-old uninhabited island char to a secured and planned settlement with flood defence embankments, roads, housing quarters, water supply, solar panels, power, emergency shelters, helipad and other infrastructural amenities. The Bangladesh Navy supervised a team of British and Chinese engineers who worked for over two years to complete the site. The site consists of 120 blocks. Each block with 12 buildings for a total of 1,440 buildings to house 100,000 refugees. The available covered space for each refugee is about 3.6 metres, barely meeting the UN emergency standard of 3.5m per person. The infrastructure developed in the Bhasan Char is huge and surely very expensive for refugee relocation on a temporary basis unless the Bangladesh Navy has other intended use for the facility in future.

In Cox's Bazar, mobilisation is underway for compiling a list of the first refugees to be moved on the basis of voluntary relocation. The bulk of the families for relocation have been targeted from Camp 15, which is the second largest camp in Ukhiya, only after Kutapalong. Over the past couple of months, officials in charge of various camps known as Camp-in-Charge (CIC) have shown videos of Bhasan Char to the refugees and explained the various facilities built there for their families. After each video was shown, the Majhis (camp leaders) typically showed a positive

attitude to the new site in the presence of the CICs. However, in private, they seem to have no interest in moving to the distant and isolated char in the Bay of Bengal.

The overwhelming preference is to remain in Ukhiya, which is a safe haven for the refugees, and is not too far from the Myanmar border. The proximity to Myanmar keeps them socially and culturally alive as Rohingya people. They also get familial information from Rakhine almost on a daily basis through informal channels. Furthermore, many families depend on remittances from their relatives and family members working in the Gulf and Middle East. So, the refugees have no interest in moving to Bhasan Char without any telecommunication connections or any easy and dependable transportation with the mainland. Many fear the isolation and lack of freedom there. “Don't send me to the island,” a poem written by a Rohingya



PHOTO: REUTERS/MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN

A view of Bhasan Char island in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, February 2, 2017.

refugee went viral on social media. It read: “I am a human being, I deserve all human rights.”

Bhasan Char is typically a three to four hour-long trip by boat from the mainland. The World Food Program (WFP) has already raised concerns, based on their initial assessments, on the viability of safely relocating the refugees to the island within the context of food security and other emergency considerations. There are no clear-cut answers yet on their future employment and livelihood on the island except for fishing and farming, as one official mentioned. The island has an estimated 13,000 acres of land; of this, a 1,500-acre area is circled by a 9-foot (or three-metre) flood embankment, short of 21-foot barrier recommended by WFP. The remainder of the land is not available for year-round cultivation and subject to flooding.

globally. The focus should be more on the safety and security of refugees, with the ultimate objective being the repatriation of refugees to their homeland. The dispersal and relocation to Bhasan Char or other alternative settlements in the future may give the wrong signal to Myanmar that Bangladesh is perhaps slowly absorbing the refugee population. Thus, the relocation to Bhasan Char may potentially complicate refugee repatriation and resettlement. Bangladesh should work with the international community, more particularly the superpowers, to resolve the current standoff and force Myanmar for speedy repatriation with the full rights and citizenship of the Rohingyas restored.

Mohammad Zaman is an international development/resettlement specialist and advisory professor at the National Research Centre for Resettlement (NRCR), Hohai University, Nanjing, China. Email: mqzaman.bc@gmail.com

## The daily adversities of garments workers



HASANAT ALAMGIR

THE boom of export-oriented garment business created jobs for millions of mostly young female workers in Bangladesh, many of who moved from rural areas to urban centres like Dhaka. This created unique and important health and safety issues for these working women—some are typical with women of reproductive age such as maternal and reproductive health whereas some are work-related such as back-pain, machinery injuries, and exposure to particulate matters. Yet, one more issue that has been largely unknown or ignored is their daily exposure to traumatic events.

According to a recently published research conducted by a University of Texas Health Science Center Medical and Public Health students and led by this author, garment workers in Bangladesh are found to be highly prone to traumatic events in their daily life. Out of the women they surveyed, three most commonly reported events they experienced in life are

Bangladesh geographically is prone to natural disasters such as flood where many low-lying regions including some parts of the capital go underwater almost annually and living arrangements of these workers in poor neighbourhoods are not by any means resistant to rain and flood. It is more than likely that these workers are living in makeshift slums or informal-housing facilities which do not follow building codes. Also, the streets of Dhaka and other major cities get clogged with water very quickly and easily after any heavy rainfall. The cities in Bangladesh are overcrowded and its basic infrastructure is very fragile and weak. When their houses get flooded and streets go underwater, garment workers face challenges to live and commute to work.

With all the recent and highly visible efforts by western retailers, to get the Bangladesh government and factory owners to improve workplace health and safety, about half of these workers (43.33 percent) are still reporting experiencing a fire/explosion incident. This is unusually high though the survey did not ask if these were encountered at the workplace or their homes or somewhere else, nor asked about its

(17.89 percent), accidental death (30.15 percent) and serious accidents (14.33 percent) were reported by many of these workers. These findings show the extreme uncertainty associated with a garment worker's life who is so frequently encountering or witnessing these very sad and unfortunate events. Some of these events are likely referring to transportation related accidents that they encounter in their commuting to and from factories or when they visit their family members in rural areas or other parts of the city. The safety of transportation in this country is notoriously bad. Other events may be associated with overall law and order situation. Garments workers, because of their increased use of transportation and interaction with other/outside people, may be encountering more of these adverse events compared to stay at home women.

Encountering so many sad and stressful life events create mental stress for garments workers who may develop short- or long-term episodes of depression, anxiety or prolonged period of grief in life. Given all these adversities going on in their personal and social life, the highly demanding and strenuous garments factory work may add to their existing miseries.

Providing social protection for these workers is an obligation for the government, factory owners, western retailers and buyers. While the country's economy is heavily dependent on their labour, garments workers are living in deplorable conditions with respect to their physical safety, living arrangements and commuting. The stakeholders can think beyond building and fire safety at the factories and act in a more socially responsible and holistic way to advance the non-work determinants of health and safety of these workers. Raising minimum wage is a very laudable first step. However, instead of only increasing their income, these workers have a lot of other needs as identified and reported here and earlier by many research studies and newspapers reports.

Given their age bracket, providing them subsidised and safe rental accommodation close to the factory or in a decent neighbourhood may be more of what they need which can somewhat protect them from many of these unwanted traumatic daily events. Creating specific housing complexes for garments workers in certain areas of Dhaka and its vicinity, factory provided transportation options for these workers, providing discounted grocery vouchers, giving them access to preventative care at factory-run-clinics can be meaningful undertakings by the stakeholders. These may greatly help improve the safety, health, quality of life and wellbeing of this large economically active workforce.

Garments workers of Bangladesh do not need to live in constant fear and anxiety.

A different version of this article was published previously in the *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*.

Hasanat Alamgir directs the Doctoral Program in the Department of Public Health at New York Medical College. He served as a Chair of Health Policy and Management Department in Bangladesh, as an Associate Professor at the University of Texas School of Public Health and as Director of Research and Evaluation for a Public Health Agency in Canada.



Even with the pay increase in September 2018, to USD 95 per month, the country's garment-sector minimum wage lags behind that of its competitors.

PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

natural disasters (71.83 percent), fire/explosions (43.33 percent) and exposure to sudden accidental death (30.15 percent). Contact with such exposures may have short- and long-term impacts on their life, health and wellbeing. The findings may be considered not that unusual for people in general of low socioeconomic status living in a developing country.

seriousness. If these occurred at home, this finding again highlights the vulnerability of living conditions of these workers in informal and unsafe housing arrangements. In fact, it is surprising that with such high rates of exposure to risk, more workers are not actually sustaining severe burns from such incidents.

Witnessing or experiencing sudden violent death