

# These are murders

Says housing minister about Banani fire

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Housing and Public Works Minister SM Rezaul Karim yesterday said the people who lost their lives in Thursday's fire at a Banani building were murdered.

"We want to clearly say that those who were killed in the fire were not victims of any accident. These are murders that take place due to negligence of the [building] owner, developers or others [involved in the construction]," he said after visiting FR Tower in the capital yesterday.

Such incidents happen due to negligence of some unscrupulous Rajuk officials, greed of landlords and developer companies, he added.

"A murder case will definitely be filed if the probes find negligence behind the killings."

He then referred to the people responsible as people who only pos-

## Nowhere to escape

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Tower had two staircases apart from three lifts. The narrower of the two was what the building authorities called fire escape but it was not up to the standard.

"Even the exit doors on different floors used by separate owners were found locked," Shahjahan told this newspaper. "There would have been fewer causalities had the exit doors been kept open."

A person is supposed to stay safe from fire, heat and smoke while using a properly designed fire exit, but things were different at the Banani building, he added.

Besides, no fire drill or demonstration on how to escape through the emergency exits was held there in recent years, officials said quoting some employees of business organisations housed at FR Tower.

Former Fire Service DG Abu Nayeem Md Shahidullah said there were hose reels and fire extinguishers in building but those were not used to tame the blaze.

Talking to The Daily Star, a number of survivors said they didn't hear any fire alarm and made escape attempts following screams of people from adjoining offices.

Some made it to safety by sliding down cables on outer side of the building. Several people, including a Sri Lankan national, died after falling to the ground while climbing down.

Most of the victims died of suffocation after inhaling smoke, said fire officials and doctors.

This was not the first blaze at the building.

Fire broke out here at least three times, including that on Thursday, said Monirul Islam, assistant general manager of DIRD Group, which has offices on the 2nd, 12th, 13th, 16th and 19th floor of FR Tower.

Monir, a survivor of Thursday's blaze, said he also had experience of a fire in 2008 when he escaped through the rooftop.

Besides, according to media reports, a fire on the ground floor originated from an old air conditioner on Wednesday. Security guards at the building managed to douse it quickly.

Meanwhile, a police control room set up near the site disclosed the list of 25

## Are we learning?

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Two staircases are often provided, but they are next to each other or very close by. A larger building requires more than two stairs depending on the number of users, but this requirement is not always met.

Panic is natural to set in and people will take unknowingly extreme measures like jumping from height. Regular fire drills and a mandatory Refuge Cell could have saved lives.

Compartmentation contains fire and smoke within a compartment by preventing their spread horizontally throughout a building. A protected staircase helps prevent fire and smoke from travelling vertically.

Compartments on different floors helped people from being overtaken by smoke. Some in distress were able to post on Facebook. Several were rescued by the fire service. This is the task of Refuge Cells, a mandatory requirement in tall buildings.

Every large building must itself be a self-sufficient Fire Station: equipped with detection, alarm, means of escape, extinguishers, sprinklers, water, foam and carbon dioxide (if required). AND trained manpower with a Fire Marshall/Supervisor on each floor.

Dedicated Safety Committee in every building, including apartments, must meet regularly to update information related to fire prevention, precautions and control.

Tall buildings must have a Refuge Cell on each floor, where people will take shelter before rescue forces can reach them for safe evacuation after dousing the fire.

Fire Service cannot save life in the first few minutes of a fire. Even in the

sensed the appearance of human beings.

"We will publish a report, because people should know [who they are]."

Visiting the scene, Inspector General of Police Mohammad Javed Patwary said, "It will be better if family members of the victims file the case. If they are unwilling, police will file the case."

He added that the owner of the building had been identified.

The police chief also raised questions about Rajuk's role.

"The building was supposed to be 18-storey, but it is 23-storey. And this happened 14 years ago. Then what was Rajuk doing?"

Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Atiqul Islam said owners of high-rise buildings will be asked to submit documents related to their safety measures in 10 days or face action.

DMP Commissioner Asaduzzaman Mia said, "We will bring the responsible persons to book."

dead yesterday morning. All the bodies were handed over to the families.

"This is the final list and no one else is missing," DMP Commissioner Asaduzzaman Mia told reporters.

Of the 70 injured, at least 23 were taking treatment at different hospitals yesterday. Six of them were admitted to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital, two to Kurmitola General Hospital, and 15 to United Hospital.

### CAUSE STILL UNKNOWN

Fire officials suspected that an electrical short-circuit on the seventh floor might have caused the blaze. But, they said, it was not possible to say anything for sure before the investigation completes.

The deadly blaze left a trail of devastation on the seventh, eighth and ninth floor where almost everything was charred beyond recognition. No mentionable damage was seen up to the fifth floor.

Heavy smoke and ash created black layers on the furniture, computers and documents of the 10th and several other upper floors, which remained outside the reach of flames, said firemen.

Monirul of DIRD Group said valuables at their office at 12th and 13th floor were damaged mainly because of ash.

Rezwan Mondol, a security guard at FR Tower, said floors from ground to fifth were okay. But the offices on the floors from 7th to 11th were damaged. "The remaining floors have been blackened with smoke."

DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam, who visited the site in the afternoon, said staffers of respective offices housed at the building collected valuables that were found intact.

Buet experts will now check usability of the building and as per their recommendations further steps would be taken, he added.

Firemen in 10 groups searched all the floors of the tower from yesterday morning to be sure if there is further risk of fire.

Fire officials said they did not find any bodies inside the building yesterday. But the death toll was revised as they earlier had no information of several bodies sent to hospitals on Thursday night.

UK, response time of Fire Service is almost nine minutes. Here, traffic situation and narrow roads are major impediments. Road width should be minimum 4.5m wide with 5m height clearance for fire engines.

Rajuk has made it a habit to come up with a "not guilty" statement after any disaster, saying that a particular building did not follow its rules. Why after, and not before, a life-threatening incident? Let Rajuk publicly declare today the buildings that are potentially at risk in case of fire, earthquake, and by poor design, construction or maintenance. Rajuk shall mark such flawed buildings with red-lettered signage.

The owner of a threatened building shall either renovate and retrofit, as applicable, or lose licence to operate. The public will avoid renting, visiting or using such buildings.

Architects and engineers should educate themselves further and be extra careful. We have a duty to serve not only the paying client/owner, but also the unknown public. Architects should collectively refuse to provide service to building owners and developers, who have the inclination to violate rules and codes.

Several government authorities have affirmed that persons responsible for the FR Tower fire will be brought to task. Their commitment should include other buildings in the area and the city, which are equally tall, have wrongly designed, maintained and located staircases, and have breached safety requirements.

Their decision will save lives in the near future.

*(The writer is an architect. He introduced the postgraduate course "Safety and Security in Buildings" at Buet in 1988)*

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Faruk used to live in Dhaka's Sarulia with his wife, two daughters and other family members. He was laid to rest at Darul Najat Madrasa Graveyard in Dhaka's Demra following yesterday's Juma prayer around 3:00pm.

### ABDULLAH AL MAMUN, 47

Son of late Abul Kashem from West Baluadanga area in Dinajpur, Mamun was second of his five siblings and had been staying in Dhaka with his wife and two daughters for last 15 years. He was the chief accountant of the Heritage Air Express housed on the 8th floor of FR Tower. He fell down from the building while trying to climb down holding a cable. Critically injured Mamun died at a city hospital.

### AHMED JAFOR, 59

Ahmed Jafor, a former high official of Sonali Bank, joined as the chief of transport department at the Asif Enterprise located at FR Tower three months ago. Jafor's family live in their own residence in Dhaka's Mohammadpur. He was laid to eternal rest at Nabinaur Graveyard at his village home in Narayanganj's Sonargaon upazila.

### AMIR HOSSAIN RABBI, 29

Amir Hossain was originally from Charpara village of Pabna's Santhia upazila. After achieving his master's degree from Pabna Edward College in 2014, Amir joined a buying house situated at FR Tower. He was supposed to get married after this year's Eid-ul-Fitr.

### ANZIR SIDDIQUE ABIR, 27

Anzir Siddique Abir was the son of Abu Bakkar Siddique, a businessman, and Tasriba Khanam Tamanna, a school teacher. His parents live in Lalmonirhat's Patgram upazila. He was the younger of two brothers. After passing BBA, he joined as an executive at the Mika Securities Ltd located on the 15th floor of FR Tower.

### ATAUR RAHMAN, 62

Ataur Rahman used to work at the Heritage Air Express. As the fire erupted, he ran up to the rooftop of the building and made a phone call to his son Erfanur Rahman from there around 1:00pm. He was laid to rest at his family graveyard in Chandpur's Kachua upazilla.

### ATIKUR RAHMAN, 42

Hailing from Shariatpur, Atikur was a senior executive officer at Scanwell Logistics on the 13th floor of FR Tower. He came to the capital 15 years ago and started his job life. He left his wife and two children behind to mourn. Atikur called his wife Anny Akther around 1:10pm and said he got trapped in the fire. This was their last conversation.

### EKTIAR HOSSAIN MITHU, 37

Ektiar Hossain Mithu was from Char Baniapara village in Kushtia's Kumarkhali upazila. Mithu worked as a senior accountant at Frugal Logistics, a freight forward company housed in the FR Tower.

He completed his bachelor and master's in Accounting Information System from Kushtia Islamic University.

Mithu had been living with his wife and 3-year-old son Ifte Arzoo Mugdho in Dhaka.

Mithu was the eldest among his siblings.

### FAZLE RABBI, 30

Fazle Rabbi was as an executive at the Frugal Logistics Ltd on the 11th floor of the building. He used to commute from Narayanganj to Banani every day. Around 12:00 noon on Thursday, Rabbi went out of the building for having tea and made a call to his wife and asked about his two-year-old son Redowan.

After an hour and a half, he informed his father over phone about the fire and asked him whether he should jump off the building. This was Rabbi's last conversation with his family. Rabbi was laid to eternal rest at the Bhuigar Graveyard in Narayanganj yesterday.

### FLORIDA KHANOM POLY, 45

Originally from Chapainawabganj, Florida Khanam was the manager of Scanwell Logistics Bangladesh Ltd

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Contacted, Rajuk Chairman Abdur Rahman said most high-rise buildings were built before the passage of fire safety rules in 2008.

"Yes, many buildings were constructed without fire safety measures. For example, almost all buildings on Kemal Ataturk Avenue in Banani were built before 2008 when the fire safety rules were incorporated in the Fire Prevention and Extinguishing Rules 2003. I joined Rajuk in 2015. And I can say that since then not a single building was allowed to be built without fire safety measures," he said.

There are three safety hazards in a high-rise -- structural, electrical and fire. To ensure fire safety, a high-rise building requires an investment of around Tk 1.5 crore and needs regular maintenance, experts said.

In any high-rise, every floor must

have a mini fire station -- water reservoir, fire extinguisher, hose reel, sand

buckets and a refuge area for every five floors with an open space where fire or smoke cannot enter, said former fire service chief Brig Gen (retd) Abu Nayeem Md Shahidullah.

"Ensuring fire safety requires a lot of money, which is why building owners or developers are often reluctant to invest," he noted.

While taking permission, owners of high-rise buildings show fire safety measures in their plan, he said.

"But a high-rise building takes three to five years to be built and the fire department cannot often follow up on the fire safety issue. Building owners take advantage of this," he noted.

At FR Tower, for example, fire spread to other floors. But if the building was constructed in line with the national building code, the fire would not have spread to other floors.

"It indicates that the building has structural flaws. Primarily, it is assumed that the fire originated from



## YOU WILL BE MISSED



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Architect and urban planner Iqbal Habib said in high-rise buildings, fire safety issue is more stringent compared with those two to six floors.

"It is not about old Dhaka or new Dhaka. Entire Dhaka is in a severe danger as most buildings have been constructed flouting building codes, and there is no one to oversee these," he said.

Renowned urban planning expert Nazrul Islam, also chairman of the Centre for Urban Studies, echoed his views.

"If the government does not take strict actions, the situation will not improve," he said.

Toufiq M Seraj, founder and managing director of Sheltech, a real-estate developer, said fire safety issue was not mandatory till 2008. So many buildings constructed before 2008 may not

have fire safety measures.

"But all the buildings constructed by reputed organisations after 2008 comply with the fire safety rules. Now fire safety measures in those buildings can be ensured and strengthened through corrective measures," he said.

The most important thing is fire safety management, such as keeping the emergency exits clear and open at all time, he added.

Brig Gen Sajjad Hussain, director general of fire service, said most buildings in the upscale of Dhaka were constructed without leaving any space. Even the car parks are occupied by shops.

Everybody is talking about strengthening the fire service but the way such buildings are being built is very alarming, he said.

"Time has come to enforce the law firmly. The government should strictly monitor the fire safety measures at