

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-

sessed 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."

Nowhere to escape

FROM PAGE 1

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 casualties 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

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.

Rezwon 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)

FROM PAGE 1

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 at 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 Jafar, 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. Jafar's family live in their own residence in Dhaka's Mohammadpur. He was laid to eternal rest at Nabinagar 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 Tasrif 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 upazila.

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 Akhter around 1:10pm and said he got trapped in the fire. This was their last conversation.

He completed his bachelor and master's in Accounting Information System from Kustia 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

YOU WILL BE MISSED



NAHIDUL ISLAM TUSHER



ABDULLAH AL MAMUN



AMIR HOSSAIN RABBI



ANZIR SIDDIQUE ABIR



ATAUR RAHMAN



ATIKUR RAHMAN



EKTIAR HOSSAIN MITHU



FAZLE RABBI



FLORIDA KHANOM POLY



AHMED JAFOR



REZAUL KARIM RAZU



PARVEZ SAZZAD



MOSTAFIZUR RAHMAN



TANJELA MOULE



SALAUDDIN MITHU



MIZANUR RAHMAN MILTON



MONJUR HASAN



SHEIKH ZAREEN TASNIM BRISHTY



SYEDA AMINA YASMIN RATUL



ABDULLAH AL FAROQUE TOMAL



NIROSH VIGNARAJAH



RUMKI AKTER AND MAKSUDUR RAHMAN

located in FR Tower. She joined the organisation over two years ago as an executive, said Usuf Osman, husband of the dead.

With their only son, the couple used to live in the capital's Rupnagar Housing area.

Florida was laid to eternal rest at his family graveyard in the district's Shibganj upazila following yesterday's Juma prayer.

JEBUNNESA, 30

Hailing from Noakhali's Begumganj, Jebunnesa was an employee of the Heritage Air Express and used to live with her father in West Rajabazar area of Dhaka.

MAKSUDUR RAHMAN, 32, AND RUMKI AKTER, 30

Rumki was the daughter of Sayed Ashraf Ali hailing from Binnyakuri village in Nilphamari's Jaldhaka upazila. She was the only child of her parents. Her husband Maksudur was a resident of the capital's Gendaria area. Both of them used to work at the Heritage Air Express housed in the building.

MIZANUR RAHMAN, 30

Hailing from Terokhada of Khulna, Mizanur was an employee of Heritage Air Express. He was planning to visit his wife Tania Begum at their village home pretty soon as Tania was expecting their second child. Their first child Tanim is five years old. Mizanur was the only earner of his family.

MONIR HOSSAIN SARDER, 52

Originally from Barishal's Biman Bandar thana, Monir was a senior executive at Heritage Air Express at its Motijheel branch and transferred to the Banani branch only a week ago.

MONJUR HASAN, 49

Psychically challenged Monjur used to work as an accounts officer at Quasem Industries, located on the 20th floor of FR Tower. All of his colleagues could escape the fire except for him. Originally from Naogaon, Monjur used to live in Kafrul area of the capital.

MOSTAFIZUR RAHMAN, 36

Mostafizur Rahman, son of late Abdur Rashid of Kangurpara village in Rangpur's Pirganj upazila, was the eighth of 12 siblings. He was an employee of a private bank housed on the 8th floor of FR Tower. He had been living in Dhaka with his wife and five-year-old daughter.

NAHIDUL ISLAM TUSHER, 35

Nahidul Islam Tusher was second among three sons of Md Ichhak Ali from Bhanuabhabha village in Tangail's Mirzapur upazila. He too was an employee at Heritage Travel Agency. He got married four years ago. Tusher was buried in Tangail.

NIROSH VIGNARAJAH, 35

Sri Lankan national Nirosh Vignarajah used to live in Dhaka with his mother Anusharani Vignarajah and his brother Imayan Vignarajah. Nirosh used to work at a Sri Lankan firm located in the FR Tower. His cremation took place yesterday evening at the Rajabagh Kali Mandir, Kamalapur.

PARVEZ SAZZAD, 46

Parvez was a senior manager at Scanwell Logistics Bangladesh Ltd. He joined the company 15 years ago. Hailing from Kashiani upazila of Gopalganj, he used to live with his wife and only son.

Parvez had his last conversation with

his family around 1:00pm. He fell off while trying to climb down with the help of cables hanging from the building. He was buried at his family graveyard in Gopalganj.

REZAUL KARIM RAZU, 40

Rezaul Karim Razu was the owner and executive director of Asif International, housed on the 4th floor of FR Tower. He was the only son of Benu Pradhania, a businessman in Chattogram.

Razu was laid to rest in Chattogram's Halishahar area after his Namaj-e-Janaza after yesterday's Juma prayers.

SALAUDDIN MITHU, 25

Salaudinn Mithu worked as an accountant at Al Freight Services Ltd. He used to live in the capital's Modhubagh area with his family.

SHEIKH ZAREEN TASNIM BRISHTY, 25

Sheikh Zareen Tasnim Brishty, daughter of Sheikh Mozahidul Islam, of Bejpara area in Jashore's Sadar upazila, finished her SSC and HSC from BAF Shaheen College, Jessore.

She was a Human Resources Management graduate from United International University. Later she joined EUR Service (BD) Ltd as a human resources officer.

She was married with the same district's Kazi Saad Nur.

SYEDA AMINA YASMIN RATUL, 48

Syeda Amina Yasmin Ratul used to work as an administrative officer at a Sri Lankan company on the 11th floor of the high-rise. Amina was the youngest daughter of retired captain Syed Mahiuddin Ahmed.

Amina completed her graduation from Dhaka University. She was not married. She used to live with her parents in the capital's Kafrul area.

TANJELA MOULE MITHI, 25

Hailing from Bogura's Santahar, Tanjela Moule Mithi got married only eight months ago with Rayhanul Islam, an employee at the US-Bangla Airlines.

The couple had been living Dhaka's Mirpur area since their marriage. Tanjela was a BBA student at Asian University. She used to work as a part-time employee at Heritage Air Express besides her studies.

Our Benapole, Bogura, Chandpur, Dinajpur, Kushtia, Moulvibazar, Narayanganj, Pabna and Tangail correspondents contributed to this report.

Concern over sloppy fire safety measures

FROM PAGE 1

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

an electrical short circuit. This means there were faults with the electrical wiring in the building," he said.

Architect and urban planner Iqbal Habib said in high-rise buildings, fire safety issue is more stringent compared with those with 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 all high-rise buildings," he said.