

Has non-compliance of rules become the order of the day?

FR Tower a glaring example

HARDLY had we gotten over the Old Dhaka fire when we are again left to count the dead bodies of people who perished in the inferno at a landmark building in Banani on Thursday, 25 so far. While we are shocked, we are little surprised to learn that the building is riddled with violations. It had four too many floors than were approved, and it conformed very little to rules regarding safety against fire hazard, e.g. protected exit and staircase as per approved design of the relevant authorities. And to top it off, the fire exits that were there were locked. And the owner of the building couldn't care any less for the five reminders of the fire service to shore up its fire safety measures including emergency fire fighting kits, as were, we are informed, all the other buildings in the area.

And that is what begs the question, something that we have posited often to the authorities without any satisfactory answer. Can the Rajuk answer satisfactorily how the extra floors came to be constructed? After all, the four floors did not go up overnight. Are we to believe that such a gross violation was not noticed by the Rajuk inspectors? The excuse of lack of manpower is a fig leaf that cannot hide the deep nexus between the corrupt officials and the owner of the building. And if the owner submitted a photocopy to Rajuk of a building with 22 stories instead of 18, in 2005, why did Rajuk allow, as the final arbiter of the matter, the extra floors to stand for the last 13 years? And may we ask what action the fire service took after all its five reminders went unheeded? Was it not within its capacity to have declared the building hazardous and order its closure?

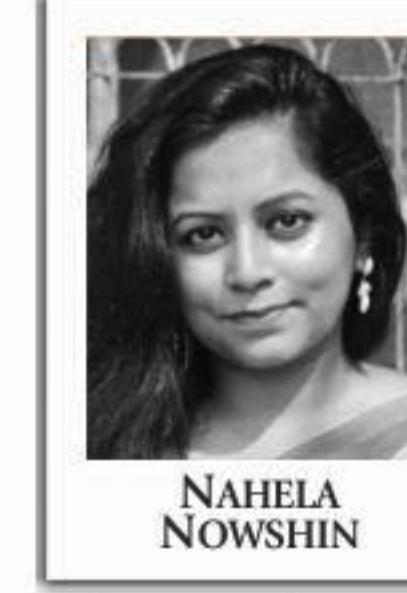
The sad fact is that corruption festers violation of laws. When those entrusted to ensure that norms are adhered to in every walk of public life abdicate their responsibilities, out of greed or helplessness in the face of the powerful, disasters such as the Chawkbazar or FR Tower fire are inevitable. And those who abdicate their responsibilities bear equal responsibility for the mishap.

Inefficiency in road construction

How can roads get damaged within days of construction?

We wonder why the quality of our roads is so poor while the cost of per kilometre road construction here is the highest in the world. A report by this daily on March 27 has revealed that approximately 1.5km road of the under-construction Barishal-Patkhola highway has been carpeted with brick chips and low-quality stones. The result is, the road got damaged within days of the final carpeting. Although high quality stones should be used in carpeting the highways and the standard thickness of the carpeting must be 70mm, none of these was maintained in carpeting this part of the road. Unfortunately, this is not the first instance of such gross violation of road construction code. Many of the important highways of the country are also in a deplorable state because of the use of low-quality materials. For instance, the Dhaka-Chittagong highway was finished in December 2016 costing Tk 3,600, but the road started developing ruts within months of the work being completed. This happened because the road was constructed without following the standard construction procedure.

Needless to say, corruption and inefficiency of the authorities concerned are to blame for the deplorable condition of our roads. In this particular case, the company in charge of the construction work should be held accountable for their sub-standard work. The Roads and Highways Department and the ministry concerned also cannot avoid their responsibility in overseeing the work being done by this company. They should look into the matter and take stern action against those responsible. We cannot keep wasting public money for the benefit of some corrupt and inefficient officials.



NAHEDA NOWSHIN

I was at the canteen during lunch hours at my workplace on Thursday when I found out about the fire in FR Tower. Everyone's eyes were fixated on the TV. The large clouds of thick smoke billowing out of the high-rise seemed unstoppable. Here we were, staring at real-time footage of another fire disaster, only after a little more than a month since the deadly Chawkbazar fire in Old Dhaka which claimed 70 lives. Here we were, eyes glued to the TV screen, watching people standing behind broken windows, waiting desperately, hoping to be rescued, when the memory of Chawkbazar is still fresh in our minds. At least 25 young lives have been lost in the Banani fire that began at around 1pm on Thursday and was doused after six long, gruelling hours.

Is this the kind of danger that we have to contend with on a day-to-day basis? Is anyone listening? Does anyone even care? Are we supposed to bask in the glory of seven-plus GDP growth when no one can guarantee the most basic of safety standards?

The helplessness that comes with being a resident in a city where you have to hear horror stories about people falling from the 11th floor to their death and bear with the sight of people trapped in a building on fire, hands stretched out to rescuers on cranes, is unimaginable. Is this the new normal we have to live with?

Despite all obstacles, the firefighting units, who had support from the army, navy and air force personnel, left no stone unturned in their rescue efforts. These are the men whom we all count upon every time such a tragedy strikes—an all-too-common occurrence in this city. These are the men who have to make do with whatever little resources and facilities they're equipped with, because apparently, we haven't witnessed enough fire incidents—16,000 in 10 years—to substantially increase investment in this sector to turn it into a well-paid profession in order to attract enough manpower (which, according to the fire chief, is currently lacking). These are the men who repeatedly put their lives on the line to save those who are put in a precarious position due to a long chain of negligence of others. To be specific, negligence of some government officials and greedy business owners who feel as though they are above the law because they have friends in high places.

The Banani fire has exposed once again, much like the Chawkbazar fire, the long chain of complicity that often goes into making disasters of this scale. It has also laid bare the myth that some parts of this city—including the ludicrously termed "tri-state" area—are safer than others. They're clearly not. Inflated rent prices, overpriced stores and bustling restaurants are not a sign of wellbeing and safety. Maybe, Rajuk can tell us how many buildings in Banani and Gulshan—which supposedly reflect our prosperity and wealth—were built in compliance with

the building code.

Because after Thursday's deadly fire in the "affluent" area of Banani, the long list of violations behind the construction and management of FR Tower finally came to light. Of course, had the fire not taken place, none of us would ever have gotten to know about this. But then again, no one was surprised by this fact either. You see, as a resident of this country, you have to get used to turning a blind eye to violations of every kind happening around you, for your own sanity. Moving on, the building didn't have permission to build the top four floors and no fire-protected staircase. But it's not that the authorities didn't know this. They had notified the building owners on Kamal Ataturk Avenue,

hospitals, banks and other establishments, more than 2,600 buildings, which fail to meet the basic criteria of fire safety, were found—that's around 75 percent of all structures surveyed. And according to a report of BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, around 95 percent of buildings in Dhaka do not have a fire exit. What's more is that the ones that do, don't have any signs directing people towards those exits. An official of the fire service also told a correspondent of this daily that they found emergency exits on some floors of FR Tower to be locked and no fire drill in the building ever took place.

And now, despite having years of experience with tackling fire disasters, the Banani fire, which took six



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON AND AMRAN HOSSAIN

including the owner of FR Tower (who, unsurprisingly, could not be contacted by this daily for comment), "at least five to six times, asking them to take precautions for fire safety. But no one ever complied," said the director (operations) of fire service. So, is that where Rajuk or Fire Service Department's responsibility ends? What happens after issuing notifications to building owners and the latter don't comply? Nothing, apparently. Despite the near non-existence of compliance to building codes and fire safety standards.

According to a 2017 citywide inspection by the fire service, which looked at over 3,500 markets, schools,

long hours to put off amidst a water crisis, has suddenly reminded us of the necessity to set up fire hydrants all over Dhaka city. How this realisation didn't dawn on us earlier is truly a mystery. But at least we are quick to form committees. So, for now, let's wait and see what the committees that have already been set up find out that we already do not know, so that none of the recommendations ever get implemented and those who have flouted the law, putting in danger thousands of lives every day, are never punished.

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DUCSU ELECTION

When teachers are threatened for revealing the truth



NAZNIN TITHI

DURING the last days of March in 1971, when there was fear among everyone at Dhaka University—the teachers, students and general staff—that the

university could be attacked by the Pakistan military anytime, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, a professor of English department of the university, was the provost of Jagannath Hall. When his relatives and well-wishers had suggested that he should be away from the university, at least for some days, he told his wife, "I am the provost of this hall. I can't just leave keeping my students in uncertainty." Thus he stayed at the hall with the risk of losing his life. And on the fateful night of March 25, when the Pakistan army attacked Jagannath Hall, Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta was taken away from his residence and shot dead by the Pakistan military.

Not only him, many of his colleagues also had to face the same fate because they put their responsibility towards their students and the country above everything else. Thus, whenever there is a crisis in Dhaka University, the highest seat of learning in the country, we go back to them and try to find strength from their lives and their actions with the hope that the moral standard set by them will be upheld by the present teachers of this prestigious institution.

Unfortunately, this has become increasingly difficult as we often find ourselves being disappointed. We are disappointed when the teachers of this university play a highly politicised role instead of being a guiding force for students in times of need. Thus it also saddened us when after the DUCSU election, which was marred by allegations of irregularities and vote rigging and was boycotted by all the major panels except for the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the university's Provost Standing Committee urged the vice chancellor of the university to take measures against a group of teachers, eight teachers to be specific, who voluntarily observed the March 11 election. The committee blamed them for spreading "misleading information" about the recently held DUCSU election and said that the eight teachers have done it "without

permission" from the authorities and as part of a "bigger conspiracy". What is more, the committee alleged that these teachers had "deliberately tarnished the reputation of the university".

On election day, an eight-member teachers' team of DU voluntarily observed the election. And bringing allegations of irregularities in the election, they demanded cancellation of the polls and urged the university authority to announce a fresh election schedule. We all know that no independent observers were allowed to observe the election and there were restrictions imposed on the media in covering the polls. So naturally, we appreciated the role of these eight teachers who had observed the election on their own initiative. Now we are surprised at the allegations brought against these teachers by the provost committee for

violation of the electoral code of conduct, flooded social media on the election day. The students of Bangladesh-Kuwait Moity Hall were the ones to blow the whistle first. They found the stuffed ballot boxes before the polls began. Such incidents were also reported in Rokeya hall and some other women's halls. The teachers who voluntarily observed the polling booths have only revealed such anomalies to the media. Have they done anything wrong?

If the university administration has to hold someone accountable for the debacle in the halls, shouldn't it be the hall provosts because the ballot boxes were under their supervision during the ballot stuffing and they failed to stop it from happening? From what has been revealed in the media, the role of the hall provosts can easily be questioned.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

reporting what they had observed.

The provost committee was wrong in saying that these teachers visited the polling booths without permission, as the chief returning officer gave them verbal permission to observe the election. Also, as per the Dhaka University Order, 1973, all the teachers hold proctorial power which they can practice on campus.

The provost committee's claim that the teachers were spreading "misleading information" was completely baseless. Didn't we see in the media how ballot boxes were stuffed in some of the women's halls in the night before the election? Hundreds of photographs as well as video footages of ballot stuffing and other irregularities, including the

mean when they said that what the eight teachers did was "a part of a bigger conspiracy"? A conspiracy against whom? Did they mean that the teachers had conspired against them by revealing their roles in public? The student organisations as well as the general students had already questioned and protested their roles in the election. The said group of teachers just revealed to the media what they had observed. If speaking the truth is a "conspiracy", then these teachers are certainly guilty of that.

Speaking of "tarnishing the reputation" of Dhaka University, I remember how the reputation of this highest educational institution of the country had been

tainted many times in the past by the politically-aligned teachers and students. Hadn't the image of the university been tainted when members of BCL, the student wing of the ruling party, attacked the general students of the university who were demanding quota reform last year? And when the politically divided groups of teachers often engage in scuffles among themselves, and go as far as to literally attack each other on campus, does the reputation of the university not get tarnished? One can find innumerable examples which have affected the university's reputation badly.

However, whatever good reputation was left of this university has diminished recently during the DUCSU polls. Nurul Haque Nur, despite taking responsibility as the Vice President of DUCSU, has still said that the election was not fair and is demanding a fresh election. What more do we need to know about the way the election was held? Yet, what surprised us most is the way some teachers acted during the polls. After committing to hold a free and fair election, they did not keep their promise. As Mujahidul Islam Selim, the first VP of DUCSU after the country's independence, put it, "it was as if they were teaching the students how many ways an election can be rigged." What could be more shameful than this? Who would have thought a time would come when a section of the teachers of this reputed university would be more interested in gaining personal benefits and power rather than upholding the interests of the general students? If these eight teachers have done anything, they have only made us believe that there are teachers in the DU still who are respectable and can give us hope in the darkest of times.

It is appalling that the provost committee, instead of demanding an investigation into the allegations of anomalies in the election, has rather urged the university VC to take measures against those who have observed and revealed those anomalies. So what message has the committee sent to the students of this university by threatening these teachers with punishment? Reminding the students that there will be no democratic space left for those who have dissenting views? Hasn't the provost committee just put the last nail in the coffin of the university's good reputation?

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Another tragedy that could have been avoided

The Banani fire which has claimed more than 20 lives so far is another tragedy for our nation. We have seen a number of such tragedies hit Dhaka now in a span of only a few weeks.

And what have we learned? That those making the decisions at every level of government could not care less about the safety and security of people living in the city. All of these fires could have been avoided had corruption not destroyed all safety mechanisms and had apathy not led to the complete breakdown of governance and city management.

Yet, despite not being responsible for the mess, it is the firemen who have to risk their lives trying to douse fires in extremely difficult conditions. But it is not them who are responsible at all for these conditions in the first place, which is the real irony here.

Those making the decisions that have led to the complete breakdown of all safety procedures should be sent out to battle the flames too. Only then will they realise the cost of their apathy, and the sufferings of others because of them. And perhaps only then will we see these problems getting sorted out.

Lamia Hossain, Banani