

Road accidents claim six lives

Mother, daughter among dead

STAR REPORT

At least six people, including a woman and her daughter, were killed in separate road accidents in Noakhali and Cumilla yesterday.

Of the deceased, five died in the accident in Noakhali. They are Khadija Begum, 40, her 24-year-old daughter Kamrunnahar Poly, Shakil, 19, Maulana Raju Ahmed, 35, and CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver Azad. They all were from Begumganj upazila of the district.

The accident occurred as a passenger bus collided head-on with the auto-rickshaw on Chowmuhan-Majidjee Road near the upazila's Ekhlaspur Bazar around 3:00pm.

All the victims were in the auto-rickshaw, said police, who seized the bus but could not arrest the driver and his helper.

The bodies were sent to Noakhali General Hospital for autopsies, said Firoz Hossain Mollah, officer-in-charge of Begumganj Police Station.

In Cumilla, a commuter was crushed under the wheels of a recklessly driven bus at Alekharchar bus stop on Dhaka-Chattogram Highway around 11:30am yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Sharifa Akhter Bristi, 18, daughter of Shariful Islam, of Nandail upazila in Mymensingh.

Witnesses and police said two buses were racing recklessly for passengers. The victim was waiting at the stop for a bus to Dhaka. At one stage, the bus of Al Baraka Paribahan lost control and ran her over.

Both the driver and the helper fled immediately, but police seized the bus, said Sirajul Islam, sub-inspector of Mainamati Crossing Highway Police Station.

Talking to reporters, witness Mostofa, who runs a local shop, said the accident occurred due to reckless driving and blamed the driver for it.

Our Noakhali and Cumilla correspondents contributed to the article.

6 lakh Bangladeshis

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"Malaysia needs workers. As the workers are already there and know local language and rules, the best solution would be arranging jobs under direct employers there."

He stressed on a high-level diplomatic move by Bangladesh to negotiate with Malaysia so that the irregular Bangladeshi migrants could be re-employed. This is important because they have already spent hefty sums to find jobs there, and their deportation would be tragic.

Meanwhile, thousands of Bangladeshis fell victim to fraudulent brokers, who promised legalisation and charged hefty sums, but then vanished, migrants and activists told The Daily Star.

They too cannot re-apply for regularization.

Contacted, Joseph Paul Maliamau, director of Tenaganita, a rights body in Kuala Lumpur, termed the Malaysia human resources ministry's latest moves "a serious injustice".

Almost all these workers would have incurred huge debts to pay the recruitment costs, he said.

"If they don't go home or are not deported in any case, they are condemned to a life of constant fear of being hunted down and arrested by immigration authorities, time in prison, whipping, detention and deportation and being blacklisted."

Has the human resources ministry taken these factors into consideration when implementing the laudable policy of banning the services of outsourcing companies?"

OUTSOURCING COMPANIES TO GO Rights activists said as Malaysia was closing its around 279 outsourcing agents by March 31, one to two lakh legal workers may become irregular as an immediate consequence.

Shahidul Islam, Bangladesh high commissioner in Malaysia, however, said he received no official communication from the authorities on eliminating outsourcing companies, but said it was a good step.

He claimed no Bangladeshi worker was employed under any outsourcing company since 2016. Some Bangladeshis, who had come to Malaysia before 2016, might work under outsourcing companies, he told this correspondent on March 22.

On threats of deportation, Shahidul Islam said Malaysia regularly detains those violating immigration laws.

Migrant rights activists say outsourcing agencies have been plagued with criticisms from employers, trade unions and civil society organisations for exploiting workers.

They have also increased recruitment costs and contributed to the increasing number of undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia.

Nearly three lakh Bangladeshis were recruited since 2016, but the migration cost was as high as Tk 4 lakh, though as per the MoU signed in 2016, the cost was set at Tk 40,000.

Additionally, thousands of Bangladeshi migrants had to return home in 2008-09 following various forms of exploitation—being confined to rooms, forced work and low wages—by the outsourcing companies.

The Mahathir Mohamad-led government then took reform initiatives, and one of them was eliminating outsourcing agents.

Experts believe eliminating such companies is a welcome move, but the consequences have not been addressed.

Sumithra Shaanthinni Kishna, director of migrant rights body Our Journey, said the Malaysian home ministry gave 31 December, 2018 for the outsourcing companies to apply for changing employers so that the foreign workers working under them could be absorbed by the companies that directly employ

and manage them.

Now the outsourcing agencies have until 31 March, 2019 to relocate the migrant workers or repatriate them to their home countries.

"Unfortunately, not many employers were willing to absorb the workers directly into the companies as they would then be duty-bound to manage the migrant workers, provide accommodation and other basic amenities and meet other responsibilities that they were happy for outsourcing agencies to shoulder," Sumithra said in an email interview from Kuala Lumpur.

Further, companies without the required quota to employ migrant workers would also not be able to absorb the workers, which is another reason why companies resort to using services of outsourcing agencies.

Malaysian home ministry has made no provisions to address situations where the employers may not want or be able to absorb the workers into the companies, but decided that if the outsourced workers were not absorbed by direct companies, they would be treated as 'illegal' workers.

"It is unjust that these workers are being punished yet again in the government's pursuit to tackle the shortcomings of the outsourcing system," Sumithra said.

She urged the Malaysian home ministry to allow affected employers to absorb the workers without quota or for other employers who are in need of migrant workers to absorb them into their companies.

"While workers have the right to voluntarily return to their home countries, there should never be threats to deport workers," Sumithra said.

Contacted, Andy Hall, an independent labour rights expert working in Malaysia, said the employers who now outsource the undocumented migrants would discontinue it. Thus, they would end up being jobless.

"I am very worried about Bangladeshi cleaners and others who were victims of the rehiring or other syndicate scam. They are going to lose their jobs, be deported or run away. It means more debt bondage," he said.

Malaysia, which began labour recruitment from Bangladesh in 1992, had before suspended recruitment—in 1997, 2009 and in 2018—following allegations of malpractices and labour exploitation.

The latest suspension of labour recruitment was in September last year following allegations of a monopoly formed by a syndicate of ten Bangladeshi recruiting agents and their Malaysian counterparts linked to former ruling party politicians of Malaysia.

They will

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building rules.

Building regulator Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakha (Rajuk) has been trying for years to justify its failure to enforce regulation with manpower shortage.

The minister yesterday said that he often heard allegations that probe reports after disasters got buried.

Reports of the ongoing probes will be published the week after the investigations end, he said.

He then urged people to create awareness in this regard.

"If there is no awareness among people...only the Rajuk, ministers or MPs will not be able to solve the problem...Let me know the complaints you have. We will take action."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is monitoring the situation, he added.

Dhaka 17 lawmaker Akbar Hossain Pathan Faruque and Awami League Acting Secretary Mahbub-Ul-Alam Hanif were present there.



Broken glass windows of the FR Tower devastated by Thursday's fire in the capital's Banani. Inset, officials snap power connection to the building.

PHOTO: STAR

Nothing is right

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About the allegation that Rajuk officials allow illegal construction work, he said, "There might be some underhand dealings. This happens in such cases."

"I issued a letter on Thursday to check fire safety measures and compliance with the approved plan of every commercial building with more than 10 storeys. The drive will begin in Banani tomorrow [today]," he told The Daily Star.

He said he didn't know what happened in the past regarding making the errant building owners accountable.

Maj Shakil said they held the last meeting with the owners of commercial high-rise buildings in Banani in December and issued notices asking them to follow the fire safety measures in line with the Bangladesh National Building Code and fire safety law.

But no progress has been made in

this regard till date, he added.

Asked why they didn't exercise the legal power vested in them, Shakil said they were preparing the ground for it.

Following the last month's Chawkbazar fire tragedy, the fire service department had written to the authorities concerned to operate mobile courts against those building owners who were neglecting fire safety.

The Rajuk chairman said a probe into FR Tower in August 2007 found that the developer, Rupayan Housing Estate Limited, built the building with 22 storeys, although it had an approval for 18 storeys. There were no relevant documents with the Rajuk for an approval of 23-storey building as claimed by the developer firm, he added.

National Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury said ensuring structural, foundation, fire and electrical safety of

a building are fundamental requirements.

"All the promises [of the authorities] will become empty words and the tragic fire incident will go into oblivion like what happened in the past.

The media will be occupied with another pressing issue, and the people will wait for yet another incident of tragic deaths of innocents," said the noted civil engineer.

The Fire Preventing and Extinguishing Act, 2003 stipulated that the owners and occupants of multi-storey buildings have to file a report on fire safety compliance within six months of the law coming into force. They have to follow a complete fire safety plan in light of the building code. If they fail to comply, the fire service department will declare the building unsafe for occupancy.

Buet's Prof Maksud Helali, who worked as a fire safety expert on RMG

factory buildings' safety compliance, said the faulty design of FR Tower enabled smoke from the fire to engulf the staircase. The blaze easily burnt one floor after another, killing many people, he added.

Prof Mehedi Ahmed Ansary of the same university said the building's emergency stairs were only about 1.5 feet wide.

Patwary Jahirullah, adviser to Rupayan Group, said they kept provisions for fire hydrants, emergency exits and staircase as per building rules of 1996 and the Rajuk approved their design.

He said Rupayan handed over the building to the floor owners' association in 2008 and that they had nothing to do if the association neglected the safety provisions.

About putting fire safety plan in place as per Fire Safety Act, 2003, Patwary said he was not aware of it.

Traders in for bleaker days

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loans were paid back, fire struck again bringing all their efforts to naught.

They used to sell a wide range of products such as cosmetics, rice, edible oil, fish, meat, utensils, baby foods, imported cereals, vegetables and household appliances to upscale customers.

Following the fire on January 3, 2017, many of the wholesalers and retailers in the market started selling goods under temporary sheds.

"I was struggling to revive my business from the loss in the previous fire. I incurred a loss of nearly Tk 1 crore at that time. After that, I borrowed money from different associations at high interest rates," said Mohammad

Shahidul Islam, owner of Ratul Baniyati Store, a wholesale and retail spice shop at the market.

"This time, the fire gutted goods worth Tk 85 lakh... I used to sell goods worth around Tk 5 lakh wholesale every day," said Shahidul, who had been running three shops at the market for around 21 years.

Of the three, one was used as a warehouse, he mentioned.

"I still owe Tk 2 crore to different associations, goods suppliers and my relatives. I have to pay back this amount," he said.

Similarly, almost all 248 shop owners are in severe financial hardship as the fire destroyed all the goods in the warehouses and shops inside the market.

Shariful Islam, a fruit trader, was seen in tears as he sat in front of his gutted shop in the market.

"I used to sell fruits worth about Tk 1 lakh a day from my two shops here. The fire took everything away from me," Shariful said adding that he was struggling to repay Tk 30 lakh he had borrowed from different sources after the 2017 fire.

"This time, I lost at least Tk 7 lakh," he said.

Many of the traders were seen trying to recover whatever remained after the fire.

"I lost everything I had," said a weeping Julhas Mia, who had two shops at the market.

SM Rashed Zaman, owner of Yio-

KEE Enterprise, said, "I used to sell imported noodles, baby foods like powdered milk, sauce and other food items. Every day, I used to get Tk 40,000 from sales at my two shops."

"Goods worth Tk 40 lakh were damaged completely in the fire," said Rashed who has been doing business at the market for the past 17 years.

Samrat Hossain, another shop owner, said, "I don't know what I will do now. The fire gutted all the products at my two shops."

"I will have to borrow money from my relatives and friends again since banks are less interested in lending money to shop owners," Samrat mentioned adding that he used to earn around Tk 1 lakh a day.

Ravaged by fire again

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the nearby Gulshan Shopping Centre. But the traders believe it was a sabotage to evict them and build a multi-storey building.

Yesterday's was the second major fire in the market.

On January 3, 2017, around 300 shops of then two-storey market were burned down. No one was killed or hurt while a portion of the market collapsed on impact.

Months later, the affected traders built a temporary shed on their own to rise from the ashes, mostly borrowing money from family members, relatives and banks.

After the blaze yesterday, the victims demanded rehabilitation and financial assistance from the government.

Maj AKM Shakil Nawaz, director (operation and maintenance) of Fire Service, told reporters that they struggled to tame yesterday's blaze as there were no arrangements there for extinguishing fire.

The fire officials said they issued notices to the authorities three to

four times to take fire safety measures after the 2017 incident but those were not complied with.

Some traders, however, said they had fire extinguishers in their shops but those were not used as the fire broke out in the morning when none was there.

Md Ridoy, an employee of an adjacent restaurant, said the fire originated in the middle of the market and they noticed it only when it spread and created smoke.

Visiting the spot, this correspondent saw traders searching through the ashes and gathering charred iron materials. Many were trying to hold back tears while some were consoling each other.

Foodstuff, utensils, baby food, imported household appliances were either burnt to ashes or charred beyond recognition. Fish kept in fridges or boxes was found roasted in heavy heat.

Traders at nearby markets rushed to their shops learning about the fire and took their goods to safety.

'I LOST MY LIVELIHOOD'

Ashraf Uddin Liton was seen giving a blank look at the ashes inside his cosmetics shop in the market.

"I lost 11 of my family members in Nimgiti fire, now I lost my livelihood," he told The Daily Star.

Just yards away, Abdul Hakim was expressing gratitude to the Almighty that his three sons, who used to run seven shops in the market, are safe.

Md Hasan, owner of Fariha Enterprise, said traders were raising funds to change all the electric wires after a minor