ANATOMY OF A CITY ON FIRE

ZYMA ISLAM

The city has a long way to go before it will be ready to tackle fire disasters.

A resource-strapped fire brigade, skyscrapers with non-existent fire exits, no fire hydrants on the roads, and hospitals on top of chemical warehouses—that is the city of Dhaka.

"Shortage of water was a big obstacle we had to face when trying to tackle the Banani fire," says the director of the operations department at Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defense, Major AKM Shakil Newaz. His sentiments were echoed by the fire-fighters gathered in his room during the meeting earlier this week.

"During the Banani fire, Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority sent us tanks of water," says Shubhash Chandra Debnath, a fireman serving as the secretary of the investigations committee in the DNCC fire. "Having to wait for the water to arrive is risky in such situations where time is of the essence."

According to maps obtained from the city corporations, WASA has water pump houses almost all over the city—on every block in some places, on every alternative block in others. "All we need are fixtures that fit with the pumps and we can directly draw from the pumps," adds Debnath.

But even in the water pump network, there are desert zones—and these are also the upscale residential/commercial zones of Dhanmondi, Banani, Gulshan, Baridhara, Badda, Bashundhara, Khilkhet and Uttara Model Town. What this means is that in the case of the Banani FR tower fire, the nearest water pump would have been in Mohakhali Wireless.

Experts say that one way of tackling these zones is to revive the water bodies of which there are many in the north, lying unused, polluted.

"There are overhead water tanks in areas like Lalmatia, Dhanmondi but they are used for storing drinking water," says project director of Dhaka's Detailed Area Plan, Md Ashraful Islam.

"The whole city needs to be connected to water," adds the urban planner. "Every 300 meters should have a fire hydrant. We can use pocket spaces within neighbourhoods—empty lots of as little as half a *katha*—as places to build community water tanks. I've seen it being done in Japan."

But he also feels that there are not enough fire stations. "Fire stations are designed such that they have big spaces to cover. How can they maintain the standard response time?"

The Fire Service director of operations considers eight minutes to be the optimum response time in the case of a fire. *Star Weekend* collected data from the two city corporations. on how far the fire engines can go from the stations in eight minutes under normal Dhaka traffic conditions.

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AGAINST THE ODDS

Here's what the firefighters had to fight through before they could tackle the fire

The helicopter created a strong wind current causing the ladders to sway, putting the fire-fighters and those being rescued at fall risk.

The strong wind created by the helicopter also fanned the flames, made the smoke spread to the other floors of the building, endangering those who were stuck, and blew soot at the eyes of the fire-fighters.

35 mins

The fire service got to know about the fire 35 minutes after it started. If there was a fire alarm then people would have been alerted before a significant time had gone by, and they could have called the fire service earlier.

Traffic jam and the constant crowd of by-standers hindered the movement of the vehicles, including the water trucks and ambulances that had to do multiple trips.

2000°C

Because it was an electrical fire, the temperatures reached around 2000 degree Celsius. When the fire-fighters aimed water at the fire, it turned to boiling hot steam that came back at them. No fire-fighter could stay in position for more than a few minutes without getting scalded.

Lack of fire hydrants meant that the fire-fighters were constantly at a water shortage.

The crowd kept trying to climb

on top of the fire-trucks for a better look, and someone pulled a switch in one of the specialized trucks, causing it to hang.

Info: Zyma Islam - Design: Ehsanur Raza Ronny