



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Skyscrapers exist without any viable fire exits or any form of fire protection, as seen in the case of the FR Tower in Banani.

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For this calculation, the government body took the average vehicle speed to be 7 km/h, which is the figure stated by the World Bank.

What the data shows is that there are large parts of Dhaka where the fire engines cannot even reach in 15 minutes—let alone the standard time of 8 minutes. The southern-most parts of the city were mostly covered by some fire-station or the other, but everywhere else in the city large areas remain uncovered.

This includes areas like Malibagh, Bangla Motor, Eskaton, Baily Road, Ramna, Maghbazar, Agargaon, Sheker Tek, Adabor, Kafrul, Mohakhali, Banani, Madhya Badda, Bashundhara, Bhashantek, Kalshi, Pallabi and certain parts of Uttara. If a fire breaks out in these areas, fire engines travelling at Dhaka's average traffic speed would not be able to reach even in 15 minutes. Of these areas, only Pallabi is slated to get a new fire station, a project that has already been undertaken by the government.

While the fire stations in the south can provide coverage to that part of the city, some like the ones in Lalbagh, Khilgaon and upcoming Nawabganj fire station are not connected to any wide roads. They are constantly tasked with fitting their engines into narrow alleyways.

"Traffic jam was a big problem when fighting the Banani FR tower fire," says Major Shakil. The fireman adds that the traffic hindered the movement of the vehicles, including the water trucks and ambulances that had to do multiple trips.

"On top of that, we were not notified as soon as the fire started," states Major Shakil. "The fire started at 12:20 pm. I was notified at 12:55 pm. It took me 10 minutes to send my first fire engine there.

When I went there, I saw that three floors were already engulfed by flames. 35 minutes had already gone by. Why was I not alerted exactly when the fire started?"

Currently, when a fire starts, the fire service gets notified when people call the control room. In an ideal fire protection system, buildings have fire alarms that are connected to a switchboard in a central monitoring station. FR Tower did not even have a fire alarm, claims Major Shakil.

Because of the time that had gone by, and the fact that it was an electrical fire, the fire had reached a temperature of at least 2000 degree Celsius, says the fire service director. "When my firemen shot jets of water at the fire it turned to boiling-hot steam that came back at them in hot clouds. No fire-fighter could stay in position for more than three minutes without getting scalded."

To tackle the risk our city faces, our Fire Service needs more—way more, according to experts. While Dhaka has enough for the day to day fire-fighting, the same cannot be said for the rest of the country where high-rise buildings have also become the norm. Sources at the department said that Dhaka city has six fire-engines that can reach the height of tall buildings over 10 storeys, while Narayanganj, Chittagong and Sylhet have one each. In addition, Dhaka has two engines that can reach up to eight storeys. Each of these engines also exists in Gazipur, Chittagong, Khulna and Comilla.

Firemen fear that if there is ever a large earthquake, such as is predicted to happen in Dhaka, they will be left woefully underequipped. They fear that a large earthquake will be disastrous because only a tiny minority of the buildings in Dhaka are built according to the law.

"The Building Code came into effect as law in 2006. Meanwhile, many buildings without any fire safety have already been constructed," says Fatiha Polin, a senior research associate with Bengal Institute of Architecture, "but we could not blame them nor could we accuse them for violating law, as there was none before."

"It took a further two years to prepare the 'Dhaka Imarat Nirman Bidhimala' (building code) in 2008 and to give authorisation to RAJUK to enforce the law. Then again, a revised Building Code was prepared in 2015 with special attention for fire safety, but it is yet to be published even though four years have passed by. In the meantime, couple of thousands of buildings have been built night and day. Who will be blamed? And how?" asks the architect researcher.

Professor Ishrat Islam, Chairperson of the Department of Urban Planning at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), thinks that nothing will help unless the city itself is willing to change its culture.

"It is a culture for architects to draw up plans for a residential building to get it approved by RAJUK, and then turn it over for commercial purposes. Dhanmondi's Satmasjid Road has so many restaurants, all of which are on skyscrapers. Are they designed as restaurants? This is a fire risk," adds the expert. "On the other hand, residential buildings without any fire escapes or fire protection are being used as hospitals."

Sarjana Sanam Islam, an architect who is currently pursuing graduate studies at McGill University in Canada, explains how this corruption happens.

"In my office, finding the loopholes in the law and working around those was definitely the norm and it was a running joke between my colleagues and I. The office I was working in is a small one and this is more common in small firms, because they don't want to give up the little body of work they get," she says.

Sarjana describes how she would design one set of plans for a building to be submitted to RAJUK, and simultaneously, draw a separate set of plans for the actual construction of the building.

"The plans submitted to RAJUK for residential buildings, the plans show that the staircase has reinforced walls and a fire door, but during construction, nothing is maintained. I once drew plans for a commercial building where I showed that there were exits through all of the floors, but in reality, several floors would not have any direct connection to the fire exit," describes Sarjana. It is a question of job security for these architects.

Architects who cannot find work earn money by signing off on buildings designed by local construction contractors, she adds "Most people think that there is no reason to hire an architect to design buildings since contractors can do the job for cheaper." Unfortunately, this also compromises on safety.

No amount of inspections by the city authorities, no amount of fire hydrants installed, can change the scenario until the inhabitants of the city change on a personal level. As long as fire incidents are treated as accidents, the building owners will continue to put the lives of people at risk with impunity. Let's call it what it is—murder in cold blood.

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