



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

# In the line of fire

MOHAMMAD TAJUL ISLAM

"I've heard that the fire of hell is supposed to be 70 times hotter than fire on Earth. But if anything comes even close to that, it will be the fire at Churihatta," says Din Mohammad, the leader of the firefighters at Mohammadpur fire station, explaining how devastating the Chawkbazar fire tragedy really was.

"When we stream water into fire, it usually becomes colder and colder and eventually the fire stops. But in Churihatta, it was almost as if the water was working as some sort of fuel. In theory, we read that when the temperature of the fire goes above 700 degrees Celsius, almost all metal objects start to melt. When we stream water into a fire that hot, an atom of water

instantly breaks down into hydrogen and oxygen. Oxygen burns and hydrogen helps it to burn," he adds.

45-year-old Din Mohammad, who has two sons, started his career as a firefighter roughly 26 years ago at Narsingdi Fire Service and Civil Defense. Since then, he has worked at five different fire stations around the country—including Kurmitola, Dhaka EPZ, and Mohammadpur fire station.

In almost three decades on the job, Din Mohammad has come upon many disturbing experiences. But the experience that still haunts him takes us nearly six years back. It was during rescue operations at Rana Plaza in 2013. Din Mohammad

was working at the DEPZ (Dhaka Export Processing Zone) fire station at the time. His team was the second team of firefighters to go to Rana Plaza immediately after it collapsed. The situation was so devastating that he called the control room and told them to send as many rescuers to the spot as soon as possible.

"We made an opening through RS Tower, which was located just beside Rana Plaza. Upon entering, I saw a girl stuck in the collapsed structure. At the same time, I also saw a hand hanging from above her trying to grab the girl's face or anything at all. The girl was continuously trying to move that hand away from her face. The body the hand belonged to wasn't visible to us. We rescued the girl. But at the same time, I saw that hand stop moving right in front of my eyes. I've never felt so helpless in my entire life."

Din Mohammad kept telling one story after another, without blinking, as if this was normal. In this job of his, seeing dead bodies or dealing with them without any fear is what makes them a better firefighter. However, he wasn't like this from the beginning.

"When I heard the fire station bell ring for the first time, I was scared. This was back in 1993. I was shaking so much that it was difficult for me to even wear my shirt," he says. It was also during the first few weeks of his job that he saw his first dead bodies. "It was a father and son. There was no signal at that rail crossing. They went under a train and their bodies were split into half." Din Mohammad couldn't eat anything for a week after that incident.

While Din Mohammad has gotten familiar with dealing with such accidents, his station officer Md Ashraful Islam, 30, who considers Din Mohammad his teacher, has a hard time reporting to certain situations. "The first time I saw a dead body was when we received a call from Dhaka Residential College. A man was electrocuted while trying to cut a tree. When we went there, I saw the electrocuted dead body just hanging from the tree entangled in the wires like a bat. I got scared. While I was panicking, Din Mohammad told me to keep calm and call the control room to tell them about the situation."

"After a couple of days, we got another call from a road accident in Gabtoli. Upon arriving there, I saw a person looking at me as if that person was still alive. I told Din Mohammad about it. He, again, told me to calm down and did everything he could do. Those ice-cold eyes haunted me for the next few months. But it's all in the past now," Islam adds.

Dr Jhunu Shamsun Nahar, professor of psychiatry at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, finds it highly unusual that the firefighters don't appear to get traumatised. "Even we, the psychiatrists, become traumatised when we listen to the heartbreaking details of accidents," she says. "Maybe the stress-coping capacity among some of them are so strong that it doesn't bother them anymore. But it should have some impact on their family life."

Dr Nahar believes that the responsibilities and ideology of firefighters make them deny the fact that this stress is something they should worry about. She is also unaware of any initiative taken for the psy-