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Plumes of smoke rising from the fire-ravaged BM Container Depot in Sitakunda, Chattogram, as goods inside the stacks of shipping containers kept burning until yesterday evening. Firefighters have yet to ascertain the exact cause of Saturday night's fire that claimed 49 lives and critically injured many others.

PHOTO: NAIMUR RAHMAN

49 deaths and counting

Blaze at Ctg depot yet to be doused; containers with hazardous chemicals kept near RMG products in breach of guidelines; toll may rise; 3 firefighters still missing; toxic gas spreads through localities

STAR REPORT

Flouting the guidelines, hazardous chemicals were kept close to containers stuffed with garment items that fed the blaze at the BM Container Depot in Chattogram's Sitakunda on Saturday, leaving at least 49 dead and over 200 wounded.

Workers of the private depot and firefighters account for the majority of the dead. Of them, 13 have been identified so far.

The number of fatalities is likely to go up as some of the injured are in critical condition and at least three firefighters remain missing.

"At the BM Container Depot, it was primarily found that containers with hazardous chemicals were kept with those full of RMG items, without maintaining enough distance," Bangladesh Freight Forwarders Association (BAFFA) Vice President Khairul Alam Sujan said after visiting the spot.

Containers carrying hazardous chemicals must be stored in a designated place at a depot with proper safety measures in place, maintaining enough distance from the other containers, he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Mentioning that containers with hazardous chemicals have to be marked properly for identification, Sujan said it needs to be investigated whether the depot authorities took such measures or not.

Talking to the media yesterday, State Minister for Shipping Khalid

Mahmud Chowdhury said there has been negligence on the part of those who run the depot.

"... It needs to be checked whether such a private container depot has the preparations and manpower required for storing hazardous chemicals. If so, why didn't they work?" he asked.

Faruk Hossain Sikder, assistant director of Fire Service and Civil Defence (Chattogram division), said the source of the explosions could not be known immediately but many plastic gallons

"... It needs to be checked whether such a private container depot has the preparations and manpower required for storing hazardous chemicals. If so, why didn't they work?"

State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury

containing hydrogen peroxide were found strewn across the depot after a massive explosion.

Mentioning that water should not be used in extinguishing fire in case of some chemicals, another official said that if they had been informed that there was hydrogen peroxide in some containers, they would have taken other precautionary measures and methods to douse the blaze.

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Of valour and selflessness

At least 9 firefighters lay down their lives

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and MUNTAKIM SAAD

They are the ones who run towards danger when others run from it. Be it a fire, explosion, road accident, landslide, launch capsizing or other natural or manmade calamities, these first responders rush to the spot selflessly.

On some occasions, the firefighters risk their lives climbing to high spots to douse fires in multi-storey buildings; on other, they dive deep into rivers to retrieve swollen bodies.

On Saturday night, when a fire triggered a massive explosion at BM Container Depot in Chattogram's Sitakunda the firefighters were among the first ones to die.

Nine were killed and 15 others were injured. Three firefighters have been missing since the massive blasts.

The loss of so many lives in a single incident is unprecedented in the history of Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence.

As videos and photos of the aftermath of the explosion did the rounds on social media, people of all walks mourned the demise of the heroic firefighters.

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A frantic search for loved ones

SANJOY KUMAR BARUA and MOSTAFA YOUSUF

Abdul Majid was scurrying from place to place to find his son since late last night.

From Chattogram Medical College Hospital, he went to the gate of the BM Depot, where a massive explosion, followed by a blaze, so far took 49 lives and injured hundreds.

He then came back to CMCH, desperate to see his child.

Among the piles of charred bodies left on the floor, it was hard for Majid to recognise his son. At least 12 hours later, he was finally able to identify his son Robiul Alam, 18, from his ragged, burnt clothing.

"My son, a labourer at the depot for the last seven months, called me around 10:06pm saying fire. I had

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HANDLING CHEMICALS The depot didn't follow rules

MOHAMMAD SUMAN, Ctg

Mandatory safety measures like storing chemicals on a separate part of the premises with caution signs were not followed at BM Container Depot.

According to the Dangerous Cargo Act-1953, shipping companies, ports and container depots should store and ship chemicals like hydrogen peroxide separate from other goods. Besides, there should be multiple caution signs.

But firefighters, who have been working at the site since the fire broke out on Saturday night, said they saw no such safety measures there.

According to customs record, there were around 240 tonnes of hydrogen peroxide in 16 containers, waiting to be shipped to Pakistan. These belonged to Al Razi Chemical Complex Limited, which is owned by Mojibur Rahman, the same businessman who owns the depot.



Debasish Palit, a chemistry professor at University of Chattogram, told The Daily Star that if the hydrogen peroxide concentration is 3-10 percent, it is not dangerous. But it could act like an explosive if the concentration is over 30 percent.

The concentration of hydrogen peroxide stored at BM Depot was 50 percent, according to customs document.

Shahidul Islam, senior station officer at Agrabad Fire Service and Civil Defence, said, "Foam should have been used to extinguish the fire on chemicals. But water was being sprayed as there was no indication that there were chemicals in those containers. There was no warning sticker on any of the containers."

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Scenes from the burn institute

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Masum Miah, assistant manager at BM Container Depot, willingly left the safety of his home on Saturday night to help guide the firefighters to battle the inferno.

He is now battling 15 percent burns at the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery.

On Saturday night, Masud was safe in his bed at the rented house not far from the depot, talking on the phone with his wife who lives in Narsingdi and is seven months pregnant.

He told her that he was tired and was almost dozing off while talking. It was then that he received a phone call from his office, asking him to go to work. He told his wife that there was an accident and that he must go to office immediately.

He was soon at the depot to guide the firefighters through the alleyways as they fought the blaze.

A container exploded and a large ball

of fire engulfed him, leaving his entire body peppered with burn injuries.

His younger brother Imran Nazir described these horrible events at the burn institute yesterday.

Masum was one of 14 injured brought to Dhaka Medical College Hospital from Sitakunda yesterday. Seven of them were air-lifted to Dhaka while the rest arrived by road.

Twenty-two-year-old firefighter Gausul Azam lay in a bed inside the intensive care unit with 80 percent burns. The doctors performed a complicated surgery to save his life.

Azam rushed to the spot when the Sitakunda Fire Station was called after the fire broke out.

When a container exploded, Azam was directly in the line of fire, and his life hangs by a thread, doctors said.

Azam joined the fire service in August 2018, said Abdul Halim, an assistant

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Firefighters looking at the torn clothes of their fellow, who died trying to douse the flames at the BM Container Depot on Saturday night. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Worst of nightmares

Together in crisis

The screen went dark

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