



These burnt mobile phones were recovered from the site of the deadly explosion that took place in Sitakunda’s BM Container Depot. According to Chattogram District Police’s count, 41 people have perished in the fire and the subsequent explosion, of whom, 26 have been identified so far. The injuries they succumbed to were so gruesome that it has been impossible so far to confirm the identities of the remaining 15. Around 230 are currently undergoing treatment for sustaining critical injuries at different hospitals in Chattogram. Meanwhile, the factory producing the chemicals responsible for the explosion is still operating despite multiple violations. No one from the depot authorities paid a visit to the injured workers in the hospitals. Healthcare providers are still struggling to accommodate and provide treatment to these many patients with critical burn injuries.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

The many faults of Al Razi Chemical Complex

Plant owned by BM Depot owner still in operation despite multiple violations

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DOE DEPUTY DIRECTOR.

MOSTAFA YOUSUF AND SIFAYET ULLAH

Al Razi Chemical Complex, located at South Pahartholi (Ward 1) of Chattogram City Corporation, was found to be producing Hydrogen Peroxide nine times higher than the permissible limit by the Department of Environment.

According to DoE officials, the plant’s environment clearance also expired four months ago, and its effluent treatment plant (ETP) was also found to be faulty.

The complex is owned by Smart Group, which also owns BM Container Depot in Sitakunda, where a chemical explosion took at least 44 lives and injured around 400 on Saturday.

The chemical produced in this factory was behind the explosion at the Sitakunda depot, Abdul Mobin, member of the investigation committee for the BM depot incident and vice-principal of the

fire service training complex of Mirpur, revealed to this newspaper.

The Al Razi plant was allowed to produce 1,000 tonnes of the oxidising agent in 2020 when it went into production in South Pahartholi, a densely populated area under CCC.

However, according to National Revenue Board (NBR) data, the plant exported 9,635 tonnes of chemicals in 2021.

Mia Mahmudul Haque, deputy director of the DoE (metro), told The Daily Star that the DoE declined to renew their clearance as their ETP had flaws in its designs, asking them to apply after implementing necessary corrections.

Asked whether they inspected the factory to ensure it complies with environmental guidelines and production ceiling, Mahmudul asked this newspaper to contact Hillol Biswas, director of DoE Chattogram (metro).

This newspaper could not reach the DoE Chattogram director despite repeated attempts.

These are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the faults of the Al Razi Chemical Complex.

“Apart from this, the company has been fined twice -- amounting to a fine of Tk 7 lakh in total -- for cutting down hills to construct the plant,” said the DoE deputy director.

Pollution from the plant and the risks of another explosion have also turned into

major reasons for concern.

During a recent visit to the complex site, this newspaper saw that toxic wastes from the factory was being dumped into the adjacent canal, polluting the environment.

Khairul Alam, a local, told The Daily Star, “This canal was our go-to source of water for paddy cultivation. Now it’s all polluted.”

Contacted, Jahidul Islam, administrative officer of the complex, said they have applied for the environment clearance renewal and ETP approval.

However, the official admitted to cutting down the hill for the factory’s construction.

Meanwhile, despite repeated attempts, this newspaper could not reach Muzibor Rahman, owner of the complex, regarding the issue.

In the wake of this situation, locals agitated in front of the chemical complex asking the authorities concerned to shut down the facility.

“We are worried about our safety after the Sitakunda blast. There is a market, residential buildings, schools and madrasas within a kilometre’s radius of the plant,” said Gazi Maenuddin, a local of South Pahartholi.

“The plant authority assured us of suspending their operations. We want the facility to be closed permanently,” said former councillor and local Awami League leader Jafar Alam Chowdhury.

Going beyond the call of duty

Constable who first informed fire service of explosion in critical state

ARUN BIKASH DEY

Imrul Kaisar, a constable of Industrial Police at Kumira, was the first to inform firefighters of the BM Depot explosion on Saturday night. Imrul is currently fighting for his life at the Burn and Plastic Surgery Unit of Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH).

Imrul, along with his two colleagues rushed to BM Container Depot minutes after receiving information that the depot had caught fire. He immediately called the fire service.

But his work did not stop at that. He and his colleagues got busy on the frontline, trying to disperse outsiders from the depot who were live-streaming on Facebook and taking pictures.

“In the meantime, the fire service arrived and started dousing the blaze. Moments later, another blast occurred and sub-inspector Kamrul Hasan, constable Sohag and I were within its 100-yard radius. We felt a heat wave in our bodies and then I couldn’t see anything... I couldn’t open my eyes,” said Imrul, while describing the horrors that unfolded that night.

Dr Sadia Akter, assistant registrar of Burn

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and Plastic Surgery unit at CMCH, said Imrul’s corneas have been badly affected. He also sustained burns on both legs.

Md Raihan, Imrul’s elder brother, rushed to CMCH from their village at Narsingdi after hearing about the incident. He was attending his brother in the hospital.

“My brother went there on call of duty but now his life is under threat,” Raihan told The Daily Star.

“Imrul is a brave heart. He could’ve remained aloof from the spot but his sense of duty did not let him,” he added.

Raihan said an eye specialist from Dhaka visited CMCH yesterday morning and advised them to take him to Dhaka for better treatment.

‘No one came to see us’ Injured staffers yet to be visited by depot authorities

ARUN BIKASH DEY

Tofajjal Haque, an IT in-charge of BM Container Depot, was on duty when the depot caught fire on Saturday night. He was around 120 feet away from the explosion spot inside the container but could not save himself from the blaze.

Tofajjal is currently fighting for his life at the Burn and Plastic Surgery unit of CMCH.

“When the firefighters came, we felt a sigh of relief. None of us could imagine what awaited us a few moments later,” said Tofajjal, lying in the unit’s bed B-15.

“Suddenly, I felt immense heat on my face, head, and hands. I started running and at one stage I fell.”

“Next thing I know, someone was lifting me on the ambulance,” added Tofajjal.

A woeful Tofajjal, attended by his family at CMCH, said the BM Depot authorities are yet to visit any of the victims.

“I have heard that the depot authority issued a statement to stand by the families of the deceased and injured staffers with financial and other logistic support. However, no official has even come to see our state,” he said.

Md Akter (32), a labourer of the depot, echoed the same, lying in a bed next to Tofajjal.

Akter, an employee of the Depot for four years, had no attendant by his bed.



“My family lives in Sandwip. My wife is there but she could not come and so I lie here alone,” he said.

“We have been visited and cared for by many voluntary organisations but none from the company visited.”

“I cannot believe that such a big company would show such irresponsible attitude. They are yet to provide any assistance for the injured who are fighting for their lives at the hospital,” said 18-year-old injured worker Anwar Hossain’s maternal uncle Abdul Mannan, who is attending him at CMCH.

Contacted, Major (ret’d) Shamsul Haider Siddique, general manager of BM Container Depot Limited, said their teams were in hospitals with food, medicine and blood from the very first day of the accident.

When informed about the injured staffers’ accounts, he said he would look into it.

Goodwill bounded by limitations

CMCH struggling to treat burn patients

ARUN BIKASH DEY

Never has the burn and plastic surgery unit of Chattogram Medical College Hospital (CMCH) faced the rush of so many patients with burn injuries at the same time. Such was the scene after the deadly explosion at Sitakunda BM Depot -- an incident that not only exposed the fault lines in the country’s factory management procedures yet again but also the limitations of the hospitals in Chattogram.

The city has no burn ICUs to treat critically injured patients. On top of that, Chattogram’s public hospitals lack adequate equipment and facilities for state-of-art treatment for patients suffering from optical injuries.

As a result, 16 patients have already been shifted to Dhaka. Another was scheduled to be moved as of filing this report.

CMCH sources said 100 patients injured in the Sitakunda blast have been receiving treatment at CMCH, while 16 others were being treated at different hospitals of the port city.

Doctors in CMCH said around 50 patients have optical injuries. However, they could not be treated at CMCH due to a lack of facilities.

During his visit to the hospital on Tuesday, Prof Dwin Mohammad, former director-general of National Eye Science Institute, said

he attended to 63 patients and most of them had optical injuries.

“Six such patients with major optical injuries should be immediately shifted to Dhaka for proper treatment. However, many of them sustained burn injuries in other parts of the body and could not be moved immediately,” he said while talking to journalists.



While visiting CMCH on Monday, Prof Samanta Lal Sen, director of Sheikh Hasina National Burn Institute, also emphasised establishing an ICU for burn injuries in the port city.

Asked about the difference between a usual ICU and a burn ICU, he said infection control is the first goal for treating patients

with burn injuries, along with ensuring other facilities. “These can only be ensured in a burn ICU, not a usual one.”

Then comes the space-related crisis in the hospitals.

“My ward can cater to 60 patients at best. Yet on Saturday night, just after the accident, we already had 59 patients. Many more were yet to come,” said Dr Rafiq Uddin Ahmed, associate professor and head of the burn and plastic surgery ward of CMCH.

CMCH is also understaffed and lacks human resources to manage a crisis of this magnitude. This posed a greater problem than ever, which could only be worked around by the goodwill of the doctors and nurses on duty.

“My colleagues from other departments, director of the hospital and principal of CMC extended their help at this crucial time... CMC Principal Prof Shahena Akter, also a professor of the gynaecology department, helped us by evacuating their ward to accommodate patients from the explosion site, while CMCH director Brig Gen Shamim Ahsan authorised the operation of the central pharmacy all night long and provided all medicines that we needed for treatment,” said Dr Rafiq.

“All the doctors, intern doctors and nurses gave their best effort to save as many lives as possible,” he added.