

How many more will die in fires?

Factory fires continue as a result of lax safety standards and apathy

MARCH 18: A fire broke out at a plastic factory in Dhaka's Bangshal area; no reported casualties.
April 15: A fire broke out at a plastic factory in Dhaka's Lalbagh area; no reported casualties.
May 30: A fire broke out at a plastic factory in Konapara; there were no reported casualties.

August 15: A fire broke out at a plastic factory in Dhaka's Chawkbazar area. Six bodies were recovered by fire officials. Employees of a hotel on the ground floor, the deceased were sleeping in a break room after having worked all night. Only one person has been identified. The nature of their injuries mean the other five cannot be recognised, even by their own families.

Can we continue to call these accidents? A cursory look through the last few months' news makes it clear that it was only a matter of time that people would end up being killed. And these are only the fires in plastic factories. There have been many more incidents of other factory fires, such as in a garment factory in Gazipur in early June, and a printing and packaging factory in Narayanganj in early July. The running theme is a complete lack of safety standards in workplaces that puts lives in danger, and total apathy from the relevant authorities, including the government, in bringing about change.

The fact that this most recent fire occurred in Chawkbazar raises a number of red flags. We all remember the deadly fire that originated from a chemical warehouse in Chawkbazar on February 20, 2019, killing 67 people on the spot. It is impossible to forget the images of distraught family members lining up to hear about their loved ones, many of whom could only be identified through DNA evidence. At the time, our reporters found that in 2017, Dhaka South City Corporation fined several chemical and plastic warehouse owners for not moving out of the area, yet they continued to operate there. Again, in 2019, a task force was formed to eject the factories from this congested part of Old Dhaka. Yet here we are again, reading about more deaths from factory fires.

To only add to the horror, our reporters also found that nine female workers were locked inside a plastic godown opposite this most recent blaze. This was done by the owner to ensure that nothing was stolen, although he "reassured" the workers that if the fire came too close, they would be let out. We are reminded of how this same line of thought meant that when the Hashem food factory caught on fire in July last year, 49 workers, many of them minors, burnt to death because the only exit was locked.

We can talk about criminal liability. We can ask for justice, or at least for compensation. We can talk about safety standards, and about probe committees and task forces that ultimately do nothing. But today, the only question we want to ask the government is, why do the lives of our underprivileged workers have so little value in this country?

Malnourished women make a malnourished nation

Address the double-edged sword of undernutrition and obesity

IT is an alarming revelation that about 1.7 crore women, aged 15-49 years, suffer from nutrition deficiency in the country. A recent study points out that, despite the gains made over the past decade as far as women's empowerment is concerned, women and girls' nutritional status is yet to improve.

Malnourishment in women of reproductive age groups has been a persistent problem in Bangladesh, which has its roots in the patriarchal family structure. In an overwhelming majority of families, particularly in the villages, a boy child receives preferential treatment, including the tastiest and most nutritious food, while the girl must make do with the leftovers. As she grows older, she learns to repress her own needs, being the last to eat after everyone else has been fed. Traditionally, malnourished girls as young as 12-14 are forced into marriage by their parents. These victims of child marriage in turn give birth to babies with low birth weight (LBW) who suffer from various illnesses since birth. Thus, the cycle continues.

The study also highlights another condition affecting an increasing number of women: obesity. The proportion of overweight women has increased from 12 percent to 32 percent over the last decade, and it is estimated that if the trend persists, about 46 percent of married women of reproductive age will be overweight by 2030. However, this new phenomenon, which is equally affecting mothers and children and thereby creating an "inter-generational challenge", is yet to be addressed by the country's maternal and child health programmes and policies.

Public health experts appear to be handling a double-edged sword at the moment. Women with nutritional deficiency are less immune and thus more prone to suffer from different infectious diseases, while obese women are at higher risk to develop non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease and cancers. Effects of malnutrition are further devastating for women because it not only affects their own health but also increase the risk factors for infant survival, growth, and overall development.

What is particularly challenging for public health experts is that they must undertake different strategies to address undernutrition and overnutrition, as interventions for one may exacerbate the other. To address undernutrition, we need to raise awareness within families about its devastating impacts, ensure low-cost food options for low-income households, and ensure nutrition-related support at healthcare facilities, among other interventions. To address obesity, we need to promote healthy lifestyles, regulate marketing of packaged foods and beverages and provide healthy meal options at schools and workplaces.

How to get away with murder

The authorities can't escape liability for deaths at BRT site by blaming the contractors



THE SOUND & THE FURY

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IN a country where the only thing that is cheap is human life, it is not surprising that the heart-wrenching stories of untimely, unnatural deaths also hog news headlines and the public imagination for a few days only. Every time such a tragic incident takes place, the same cycle repeats itself with increasing ruthlessness: front-page leads of victims or their families in tears, public outrage (mostly on social media), predictable calls for investigation, haphazard formation of probe committees, cases against "unnamed" people to appease the public and families, and – if we are lucky – vague promises of reform from the authorities.

Except nothing ever really changes. Until we, too, become tired of the tears, and the sad stories turn into statistics for us to quote – but not fully relate to. It sounds cruel, but if we are honest, how many of the 6,284 people killed in road accidents or the 1,053 people who died at workplaces in Bangladesh in 2021 alone do we remember, much less cry over?

An overwhelming majority of what we call "accidents" in Bangladesh are actually "structural murders" – meaning that the governance structures and institutions in place to protect and serve the public are so dysfunctional and callous that they make these deaths not only possible, but inevitable. Two incidents took place in two different parts of Dhaka on August 15 – on National Mourning Day – and both were avoidable. Both were allowed to happen by the state and its institutions because, despite their constitutional obligation to the public, protection of human lives is simply not a priority.

Let me dissect the accident that took place in Uttara: a girder of the BRT project fell from a crane on a private car, crushing five members of a family, including two children, to death. We already know that the operator at the control panel of the hydraulic crawler crane – which let the girder slip because it was carrying a load heavier than its capacity – did not have the required licence. We also know – inconceivable as it may be – that the street where the risky construction work was going on was not cordoned off, in clear violation of safety protocols. As the script goes, a case has already been filed against the concerned officials of China Gezhouba Group Co Ltd (the contractor firm) and the crane operator, construction work has been stopped by the DNCC mayor till safety can be ensured, and a five-member probe committee has been formed to investigate the incident. It is certainly some relief that action is being taken against the company that is directly implicated in the murder (after



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FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

all, we've seen many instances of the government trying to protect powerful business quarters), but the Tk-4,268-crore (which is how much the BRT project costs) question is: Does the buck stop there?

Unfortunately, but predictably, efforts are already underway to

The apathy of the authorities regarding public safety reveals the crux of the problem with our conception of development: the public, for whom these development projects are supposedly undertaken, are the last and least important stakeholders in the process.

distance state institutions from the private company that was leading the development work and to absolve the authorities of any and all responsibilities. The probe committee, in its primary investigation, has only found the contractor to be negligent, which is hardly surprising, given that the committee is headed by Neelima Akhter, additional secretary of the Road Transport and Highways Division and coordinator of the BRT-3 project.

on these agencies to ensure that the contractors they have commissioned – and who are being paid with taxpayers' money – are abiding by safety protocols? Where are the safety officers of this project, and who are they reporting to? In interviews with the media, RHD officials bemoaned the construction companies' reluctance in paying attention to their warnings about safety guideline violations. It's as if the implementing partners have no control over their contractors, nor the capacity to monitor whether basic guidelines are being followed.

This is hardly the first time that such an "accident" has taken place at the BRT project site. During the project period, girders have slipped and fallen on pedestrians and construction workers on at least four separate occasions. In March last year, six workers sustained injuries after a part of a girder of the BRT project collapsed near Dhaka airport twice in one day. In July this year, a 30-year-old guard named Ziaur Rahman was killed and a pedestrian injured after a part of a girder fell on them in Gazipur. What should have been wake-up calls were swept under the rug, as per usual. But it's high time the government made the investigation reports of these previous "accidents" public, so that we can see what steps were recommended, what steps were ultimately taken to safeguard the site, and what actions were taken against those found negligent. Work has been halted now at the site reportedly till foolproof safety can be ensured; why was the same not done when Ziaur

and least important stakeholders in the process. Their voices and needs don't even find a peripheral stage in the planning and implementation stages, even as crores of their hard-earned money are spent without accountability on lavish projects conducted without proper feasibility studies, with poor and faulty designs, and by substandard contractors who don't abide by minimum safety or quality standards. Every project sees numerous cost escalations and time extensions, for which no one is ever held to account, and the public must silently bear both the costs and the inconvenience, as the corrupt project officials (and ministers) continue to line their bank balances with their cuts of the proverbial pie. The public, who has been paying for these projects with their sweat and blood, must now apparently literally pay for them with their lives as well.

What's even more dangerous than the unguarded construction sites is the attitude of the authorities that they are above all accountability. What else can we expect of a government that no longer requires the public mandate to stay in power, or institutions whose foundations can no longer support the unapologetic corruption, dishonesty and nepotism of their officials? The authorities' attempt to downright deny their complicity in these structural murders is proof enough that nothing is likely to change in the near or far future.

Who knows, maybe next time it will be you, or me?

Has Modi sounded the 2024 poll bugle?



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THE next round of general elections in India are less than two years away. But the rumblings of the next battle seem to have been sounded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his speech from the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi, on the occasion of Independence Day on August 15.

The nearly 90-minute speech stood out for its political content more than anything else. There was no announcement of any social welfare scheme or initiative, nor any major policy. Instead, Modi flagged three main issues – corruption, nepotism in politics and institutions, and women's empowerment – in a big way, setting the template of his campaign strategy for 2024 Lok Sabha polls. Along with these issues was the contour of a development vision for India in the next 25 years, when independent India will turn 100.

Modi left little doubt that corruption would be one of the mainstays of his campaign against his political rivals in the run-up to the 2024 general election. Without mentioning the finding of heaps of currency notes and gold during the Enforcement Directorate's recent

raid on the premises of West Bengal's former minister Partha Chatterjee's close aide Arpita Mukherjee in Kolkata, Modi said while the Indian people were fighting poverty and struggling to survive, there are some people who have stolen so much that they don't find enough place to hide them.

He said it is a matter of concern that while there is general disdain against corruption across the country, at times certain indulgence is also seen towards the corrupt. Modi said some people have reached such a level of shamelessness that they glorify people who have been convicted by court for corruption and are spending time in prison. He pointed out how some individuals plundered crores of rupees from state-owned banks and ran away during the rule of previous governments, and said his government was trying to recover that money by raiding their properties.

Modi's remarks on graft came with the backdrop of Congress interim President Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi's questioning by the Enforcement Directorate for days in connection to alleged money

laundering, and the main opposition party's street protests across India protesting their interrogation. Modi is no doubt trying to tap into the growing resentment against the unedifying spectacle of an entire party apparatus being mobilised in support of the leaders facing questioning in connection with alleged corruption.

Modi apparently also had at the back of his mind the mounting public anger against the recovery of 500 million rupees in cash at Arpita Mukherjee's flats in Kolkata and the arrest of another Trinamool Congress (TMC) strongman Anubrata Mandal, the party's Birbhum district president, by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in connection with cattle smuggling along the border with Bangladesh. But it's not just Congress or TMC whose leaders are at the receiving end of anti corruption investigations. A number of leaders of important regional outfits like Aam Aadmi Party, Nationalist Congress Party and Shiv Sena, BJP's former ally in Maharashtra, are also behind bars for their alleged involvement in money laundering.

Modi's reference to graft and to the need for viewing the corrupt with contempt – the second one is a new framing in the fight against corruption – clearly indicates his determination to press ahead with probes into graft cases in the days to come. That should throw a big challenge to the anti-BJP parties, national or regional, to find a more cogent answer than the repeated cry of "political vendetta" by the Modi government. The opposition

must answer if the anti-graft probes against their leaders, many of which are mandated by courts, should be allowed to proceed.

Modi's talk against corruption is nothing new. He did it successfully in the run-up to the 2014 general election, which brought him to power for the first time as the prime minister, against the backdrop of allegations of a major scam in the allocation of 2G telecom spectrum. This time, one cannot help but notice the unambiguous political overtones in his flagging graft as a major challenge at a time when several opposition politicians are facing anti-graft investigations. What has come as an additional boost to the anti-corruption drive is the Supreme Court's recent upholding of the tough law against money laundering. The opposition has criticised the apex court's ruling.

By choosing corruption as a key campaign plank, Modi seems ready to hit the opposition where it will potentially hurt the most. He appears convinced that corruption and nepotism will once again resonate with the electorate and drown the opposition's charge against his government of "mismanagement" of the economy and creation of polarised narratives. After listening to Modi's latest Independence Day address to the nation, one is left with the inescapable conclusion that he may have sounded the bugle for the 2024 battle.

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