



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina addresses the audience during the National Insurance Day-2024 at the capital's Bangabandhu International Conference Center yesterday.

PHOTO: BSS

PM inaugurates bancassurance service

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday inaugurated National Insurance Day-2024, which is aimed at promoting the concept of insurance by enhancing public awareness.

During the programme at the Bangabandhu International Conference Centre (BICC) in the capital, she also inaugurated the bancassurance service that facilitates insurance premium payments directly from banks.

The Ministry of Finance and the Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority (IDRA) jointly organised the programme.

The National Insurance Day-2024 is being observed elsewhere across the

country in a befitting manner with this year's theme -- "Karbo Bima Garbo Desh, Smart Hobe Bangladesh".

The PM also distributed prizes among those who finished first, second and third in essay writing competition in two groups.

Two life and non-life insurance companies each also received an honorary crest from the PM for their contributions to flourish the insurance industries.

President Mohammed Shahabuddin and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina issued separate messages on Thursday on the occasion.

Finance Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali, Secretary of Financial

SEE PAGE 6 COL 4



Govts weaponising laws to curb press freedom

Say speakers at a seminar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Draconian laws, self-censorship, random arrests of journalists, and blocking of websites have severely reduced press freedom in India and Bangladesh, said speakers at a seminar yesterday.

They said the governments have been weaponising laws and public money to curtail media freedom.

Renowned photographer and activist Shahidul Alam moderated the seminar titled "Real Journalism in Times of Repression" at DrikPath Bhaban in the capital.

The speakers added that shrinking space for journalism has also severely affected the lives of minorities and underprivileged people.

At the event, Siddharth Varadarajan, founding editor of The Wire, said, "In India, the government has imposed draconian ICT Rules 2021 that permit the government to order online platforms to delete any content that they think inappropriate or block the entire website."

"Whenever the government, even the state government, notices that some media are publishing reports that are embarrassing for the government, they stop sending government advertisements to those offices. They even force private companies to do the same."

Prof A. Al Mamun, of the mass communication and journalism department at Rajshahi University, said, "In Bangladesh, security intelligence and bureaucracy often threaten

SEE PAGE 6 COL 1

Myanmar junta's access to arms, cash must be cut off

Says UN rights chief

AGENCIES

The international community must take "targeted action" to restrict the Myanmar junta's access to arms, jet fuel and foreign currency to prevent it from committing "atrocities" against its people, the UN human rights chief said yesterday.

"I repeat my call to the international community to refocus its energy on preventing atrocities against all people in the country, including the Rohingya," Volker Turk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, told the Human Rights Council in Geneva, referring to the junta, reports Reuters.

He said countries should "end the military's access to arms, jet fuel and foreign currency that it needs to sustain its campaign of repression against civilians."

"The human rights situation in Myanmar has morphed into a never-ending nightmare, away from the spotlight of global politics," Turk said, according to AFP.

Sri Lanka awards energy deal to India after rejecting China

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka yesterday awarded the construction of three solar and wind hybrid power generation facilities to an Indian company after scrapping a tender won by a Chinese firm.

New Delhi has long been concerned about growing Chinese influence in the island nation, which sits near key global shipping lanes and which India considers to be within its sphere of influence.

The project, initially financed by an Asian Development Bank (ADB) loan, was temporarily shelved two years ago after India raised concerns over China's involvement.

Sri Lanka's energy ministry said yesterday that the project had been revived and was now fully funded by a USD11 million Indian government grant.

It was a bomb waiting to go off

FROM PAGE 1

(Rajuk), at least seven restaurants were running in it.

Rajuk Chief Town Planner Ashraf Islam said the building owners took their permission for a residential-cum commercial building in 2011.

There was permission to run offices, not restaurants, he told The Daily Star.

FIRE WARNING WENT UNHEEDED On September 3 last year, Adhir Chandra Hawlader, a warehouse inspector of Fire Service and Civil Defence, wrote a letter to one of the owners of the building, detailing the fire hazards.

Two days later, Adhir served Sardar Mizanur Rahman, who owns the sixth and seventh floors, a notice asking him to make sure in 90 days that there are two unobstructed stairways and proper fire safety measures.

Mizanur, also managing director of the rooftop Ambrosia Restaurant and Music Café, then wrote to the fire service, stating that he would talk to the other owners and take the safety measures.

Since nothing was done, Adhir

was preparing to issue another notice.

Adhir added that the letters were sent to Mizanur because of his substantial ownership stake.

The first letter sent to Mizanur mentioned the lack of fire alarms, pillar hydrants, smoke and heat detectors, emergency lights, and proper ventilation.

Most of the people who died were asphyxiated, experts said.

Lt Col Mohammad Tajul Islam Chowdhury, chief of the five-member probe body of the fire service, said, "We found 33 bodies at a restaurant on the first floor. The room had no window at all."

The letter sent to Mizanur mentioned that during an inspection, firefighters saw 16 extinguishers, but there was none at the generator room which was not properly isolated. Fire stoppers were also missing at crucial locations, and the only stairway was just four feet wide.

The building owners had neither a fire safety plan nor a no-objection-certificate from the fire service, Adhir said.

A fire safety plan means at least

20 percent of the workforce has training from the fire service and two fire drills are held every year.

The Daily Star could not reach Mizanur for comment, and the building manager's phone was unreachable.

THREE DETAINED

Police yesterday detained Anwarul Haque and Shafiqur Rahman, both owners of a cafe called Cha Chumuk on the ground floor, and Jisan, the manager of Kachchi Bhai.

They have been detained for questioning, and action will be taken based on their responsibilities, said Mahid Uddin, additional commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

The police will file a case over deaths caused by negligence. Anyone from the victims' families can also file a case, he added.

Of the eight children, 18 women and 20 men who died in the fire, 40 have been identified and 38 bodies have been handed over to the families.

Officials said DNA tests will be needed to identify the six other bodies.

Tragedies recur as inaction persists

FROM PAGE 1

plan within 90 days, but the plan was not implemented within the period.

A fire service official said they were not empowered to take any action against anyone flouting fire safety rules.

On March 8 last year, an explosion caused by a leaked gas line at a basement café of a seven-storey building in the capital's Siddikbazar killed 25 people and left around 100 wounded.

Following the incident, Rajuk inspected 2,204 buildings in the capital and found that 683 were using their basements to store flammable items, violating building construction rules.

Tommy Das, former member (development control) of Rajuk, said they had issued notices to the owners of the buildings and asked them to remove the flammable items and restaurants from the ground floors within a month.

He, however, could not say whether their instructions were followed as he left Rajuk in June.

Asked what action, if any, was

taken against those building owners, Ashraf Islam said the regulatory authority along with the fire service followed up on some 20 buildings in the last three months and found lack of fire safety in those buildings. Rajuk issued notices asking the owners to correct the flaws, he added.

Rajuk has no information on whether the owners followed the instructions.

He admitted that they needed to step up efforts and, if necessary, the tasks of monitoring and following up should be outsourced.

"Now we are planning to conduct mobile courts. From now on, we will slap fines and if necessary, will seal buildings not following fire safety rules and building codes," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said Rajuk's scrutiny mainly falls on design shortcomings of buildings, and not as much on how buildings are being used.

As per Building Construction Rules-2008, there is a provision for renewing occupancy certificates every five years and that gives Rajuk a

chance for fresh inspections.

But it is not being enforced properly, Ashraf said.

The lone stairwell of the building was narrowed by gas cylinders kept by the occupants of the building.

He also said that because of their widespread use of gas cylinders, restaurants should fall under a separate category when applying for permission. They now fall under the commercial category.

In many areas like Satmasjid Road in Dhanmondi, Banani II, Gulshan Avenue, restaurants occupy large portions of most commercial buildings, Ashraf added.

Adil Mohammad Khan, president of Bangladesh Institute of Planners, said as the Bailey Road building is a mid-rise, it has one stairwell, but the building had lots of restaurants and therefore should have two.

He said ensuring fire safety was a must in every building, particularly those with design shortcomings. Even if firefighters come within five minutes of a fire, that is enough time for people to die. This is why establishments, especially

Iran Revolutionary Guards colonel killed in strike in Syria

State media says

REUTERS, Dubai

A member of Iran's Revolutionary Guards navy serving as a military adviser in Syria was killed in a suspected Israeli strike yesterday, Iran's official news agency IRNA reported.

Other Iranian media reports said Colonel Reza Zarei was killed along with two fighters from Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah group.

Zarei was killed in a strike on a building used by Iranian forces in Syria's coastal region of Tartous, a senior security source from the alliance supporting Syria's government told Reuters.

When asked about the strike, the Israeli military said it did not comment on foreign reports.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards have scaled back deployment of their senior officers in Syria due to a spate of deadly Israeli strikes and were relying more on allied Shi'ite militia to preserve their sway there, Reuters reported in February.

Death came draped in smoke

FROM PAGE 1

The stretchers carried the bodies to two cramped, dimly-lit emergency morgues and placed them on the floor before going back to get more bodies. While some were in body bags, others were not.

The bodies filled both rooms to the brink.

Dr Ashraf Islam, assistant director of DMCH, said, "We were prepared to receive a huge number of critical patients and were ready with adequate manpower. But those who made it to the hospital were mostly dead-on-arrival."

The morgue doors had to be locked as relatives of the victims tried to rush inside to identify their loved ones.

They negotiated with the morgue attendants, begged to be let in, and then those who were allowed in came out broken, hysteric and in tears.

Bashona Rani sat defeated on the dirty, wet floor outside the morgue and kept bashing her head with her slippers.

She had just seen the bodies of her grandchildren Shampurna Poddar, 12, Sun Poddar, 8 and her daughter Poppy Roy. "What kind of fate is this?" she wailed.

Other than the soot stains on their clothes and dried blood near the noses, it would not be possible to identify them as fire victims.

Most of them died of asphyxiation -- carbon monoxide poisoning from smoke inhalation. The fire, which began on the first floor, hadn't reached them, but neither could the rescuers.

Lt Col Tajul Islam Chowdhury, director (operations) of fire service, told this newspaper that 32 bodies, of those who succumbed to smoke inhalation, were recovered from the Kachchi Bhai restaurant on the first floor.

The bodies were so convincingly unscathed that Ashik Ahmed, who was sitting and crying outside the hospital, was requesting his relatives to help him take his son Arhan elsewhere on an air ambulance to save him.

But Arhan was already dead, along with his mother Nazia and younger brother.

A survivor, Prothit Shams, described what the ordeal was like.

"I could feel everything inside me burning up and that's when I honestly thought there would be no way out and this is it for me," he wrote on social media.

Prothit, who works in a logistics

company, had gone to Ambrosia Restaurant & Music Café on the seventh floor of the building.

"I saw people jumping from the floor above us and what I saw next was just traumatising -- people were caught in flames and I could do nothing to help them. At that moment I thought the fire would soon reach us as well."

"There were about 20 of us stuck there. We first tried to remain calm and figure a way out but there was no fire escape and the staircase was in flames. Our floor was filled with black smoke, we were barely able to breathe," he wrote.

"One of us tried to go and see if there was any way to go to the roof but he came back coughing, saying the entire staircase was ablaze and that the scorching fire was getting closer to us."

Prothit and the others made their way to the balcony hoping to catch the attention of the fire fighters.

They were spotted and rescued. Many others, such as Kachchi Bhai employees Jewel Gazi and his nephew Mohammad Rakib, chose to jump, risking injuries and even death.

Rakib said, "We jumped off the building as we were having breathing problems."

Mujahidul Islam Jubayer, chef of Khana's restaurant on the second floor, also jumped.

The three are receiving treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

PM deplors absence

FROM PAGE 1

The government repeatedly instructed to install fire extinguishers and ensure other fire safety measures at all buildings, but those are hardly followed, she said.

"And I know there was no insurance, so they [victims in the fire incident] won't get anything [as compensation]. Awareness is very much needed in this regard," she said.

The PM asked all concerned to take prompt measures to settle insurance claims at the quickest possible time to encourage people to come under insurance coverage.

She, however, asked the authorities concerned to be watchful about false insurance claims, referring to some RMG factories' acts of causing fire deliberately time and again for claiming insurance money.