

MUST THE SHOW GO ON?

Living in Dhaka has its obvious downs – the horrendous traffic, the atrocious air quality and the repugnant lack of safety for its citizens. While unceremonious deaths are a dime-a-dozen for its citizens, an ‘upside’ of living here could be the fact that we are mostly desensitised towards the misfortune of others, enabling us to go about our day amidst it.

Fuad Almuqtadir, who was one of the headliners of the show alongside Badshah, is a bit more conflicted on the issue. “On one hand, I do understand the argument of postponing the shows. We were between a rock and a hard place before, when Israel attacked Hamas and we had to play in the Coke Studio show.”

SADI MOHAMMAD SHAHNEWAZ

However, the tragedy of the Bailey Road fire which snatched away the lives of four dozen people is hard to digest, even for Dhaka-ites. Many cultural programmes seemed insipid amidst the shadow of death that loomed over one of the capital's cultural hubs – leading to the cancellation or postponement of some.

Aranyak Natyadal, among many, were prompt to cancel or postpone their activities. One of its shows at the heart of Baily Road, the Mahila Samity, was omitted. “The Aranyak family expresses condolences to everyone affected by this horrible event,” says Chanchal Chowdhury. “We cancelled our 4:30pm show in solidarity with the victims.” The actor added that he was horrified when he passed by the site of the accident. “I felt eerily empty, the air around the area still reeks of fire, how tragic!”

However, one of the biggest shows of the year – the Tecno Music Fest featuring Indian Hip Hop star Badshah, took place as planned. Could the event have been postponed?

“It is logistically impossible to

cancel or postpone a concert of this magnitude,” says Triple Time Communications CEO Nabil Ahmed, of the organisers of the music fest. “We spent months getting permission from the ministry and the police. We did get Badshah and other artistes to observe silence during the show, in lieu of the tragedy.”

Fuad Almuqtadir, who was one of the headliners of the show alongside Badshah, is a bit more conflicted on the issue. “On one hand, I do understand the argument of postponing the shows. We were between a rock and a hard place before, when Israel attacked Hamas and we had to play in the Coke Studio show. However, for us musicians, there isn't much we can do – it is our livelihood and so much is at stake.” Fuad himself travels back and forth from the USA on a tight schedule, to play in these concerts.

Musician and journalist Elita Karim also performed in a show on Friday. “Of course, we are all grieving, even during my show, all that everyone



PHOTO: COURTESY OF TRIPLE TIME COMMUNICATIONS

could talk about was the fire the other day,” she says. “But when people say ‘just cancel the show’, they are not taking into consideration that there are livelihoods at stake here.

From the person who arranges the sound to the people who are behind food stalls, a lot of people depend on these events and performers.” Elita emphasises that instead of calling out scheduled concerts, we should look into why these incidents are happening. “We should really prioritise our anger towards why these accidents are happening in the first place.”

Actress Prarthana Fardin Dighi, who attended the concert, echoed the same sentiment. “I personally know

someone who has been affected by the tragedy, and my heart goes out to all the victims,” she says. “However, in this industry, it is hard to go back on your word whenever you sign up for an appearance, there are a lot of things to factor in – we can't just cancel sometimes.”

Many attendees, however, went due to obligation rather than willingness. “A lot of tickets for the influencers of the event were with me, so I had to go to disperse them. I was totally bereft of joy,” says Rubama Fairuz, a make-up artiste and influencer. “I did not see many people my age there, mostly people in their teens and early twenties were in attendance. They were enjoying a lot, and I am sure they have their own sensibilities. I personally could not enjoy it that much.”

Influencer Prothom Mahzabeen

says, “It was supposed to be the first concert that my significant other, my boss and I attended together. I knew about the concert before it was even announced to the public. However bad we felt, we simply could not cancel it.”

In essence, most people who attended or perform at any event post-tragedy are not blind to the fact that the panache and fireworks seem insignificant in the shadow of something so depressing. While the argument for why postponement should be warranted for such events is self-explanatory, the other side of the coin argues that there are too many moving pieces to take into account.

Perhaps the rhetoric from Elita Karim sums it up best, “Would you stop going to work the day after a tragedy, or would you extend your sincere condolences and do your job?”



NEWS

NY court allows BB's case to proceed

FROM PAGE 12
The original complaint in the state court, filed on May 27, 2020, was for the “conversion/theft/misappropriation; aiding and abetting the same; conspiracy to commit the same; fraud (against RCBC); aiding and abetting and conspiracy to commit fraud; conspiracy to commit trespass against chattels; unjust enrichment; and return of money received.”

Without ruling on the case's merits, the court confirmed its jurisdiction over RCBC and the individual defendants in a decision on January 14, 2023.

Bangladesh Bank had filed earlier cases to recover \$81 million in stolen

funds, which were allegedly lost to North Korean hackers.

Some of the funds were allowed to be transacted via correspondent banks in New York before being wired to fictitious accounts with RCBC.

RCBC had vowed to “defend the case vigorously” even after the New York court had dismissed its motion to dismiss.

On February 5, 2016, hackers stole \$101 million from the Bangladesh Bank's account with the Federal Reserve Bank of New York using fake orders through the SWIFT payment system.

Of the amount, \$81 million was transferred to four RCBC accounts in Manila and the rest to a bank in Sri

Lanka.

The \$81 million portion flowed through the Filipino financial system before disappearing in local casinos, where it was used to buy gaming chips.

The Bangladesh Bank then filed a lawsuit with the US District Court in Manhattan in 2019, accusing the RCBC of being involved in a massive conspiracy to steal the money.

Bangladesh Bank executive director and spokesperson, Md Mezbaul Haque, and BB-appointed lawyer for the reserve heist case, Ajmalul Hossain QC, did not respond to phone calls till the filing of this report.

No verdict to date

FROM PAGE 1
“Due to this transfer, it is taking some time to start the trial process,” Haque said.

This is not an isolated incident in which judgment is yet to be served for the fire victims. None of the fire incidents, which left hundreds of people dead, see any judgment.

Nine years before the Churhatta fire, at least 124 people were killed in another tragic fire in Old Dhaka's Nimtoli area on June 3, 2010.

Only a general diary was filed with the Bangshal Police Station on this incident. No investigation was conducted in the GD, so the responsible persons faced no repercussions for what was a tragic case of culpable homicide.

“We become emotional after an incident takes place. There are protests and cases are filed in big incidents. But we forget about the incidents very fast,” said Khurshid Alam Khan, a legal expert.

Besides, the investigation of most of the fire-related death incidents is defective as the cases tend to be filed against unidentified people.

“Substantial evidence is not presented enough to take it to conviction, resulting in the acquittal of the accused,” he added.

In cases where the trials start, the court proceedings drag on for years.

Take the case of the Yazreen Fashion fire on November 24, 2012 that left 112 workers dead.

A case was filed with the Ashulia police station, and on December 22, 2013, AKM Mohsin Uzzaman Khan, an inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department of the police, submitted a charge sheet against the owner Delwar Hossain, Mahmuda Akhter and 11 employees.

The court framed charges against the 13 accused on September 13, 2015. Only 11 out of 104 witnesses gave their depositions before the court in the last eight years, according to the court records.

The last statement was recorded on May 18, 2022. No witnesses came to the court after that date. Delwar was arrested initially but now he is on bail.

It was the same in the case of the FR Tower fire incident on March 28, 2019 that left at least 25 dead. Two days later, police filed a case with the Banani Police Station.

The Police Bureau of Investigation submitted a charge sheet in the case on February 4 this year, but the trial is yet to begin.

“We are struggling to get the witnesses in fire-related incidents death cases. Sometimes, witnesses are not found for testimony and that delays the trial process,” said Md Abdullah Abu, the Dhaka Metropolitan public prosecutor.

He, however, assured taking steps to complete the trial soon.

On September 3 last year, the CID submitted the charge sheet in the

murder case filed over the July 18, 2021 fire at Hashem Foods factory in Narayanganj that killed 54 people. The names of Hashem Foods directors were dropped from the charge sheet.

The trial for the case is yet to begin.

On June 27, 2021, at least seven people were killed in an explosion for gas leakage in Dhaka's Moghbazar area, which is now under investigation by the Bomb Disposal Unit (BDU) of the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit.

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

A day later, a case was filed with the Bangshal Police Station, and the BDU of the CTTC unit also investigated the case, but has not been completed yet.

“Investigation is underway – it may take some time,” said Rahmat Ullah Chowdhury, chief of the BDU unit.

About the Moghbazar case, BDU is expecting to submit the charge sheet within this month, he said.

Asked why the fire-related death cases do not see judgment, Chowdhury said: “We have a deficiency in expertise for fire-related forensic investigation. We are hopeful that we will be able to investigate these types of death cases more effectively once our members finish their training.”

Saifuzzaman admits to having wealth in UK, US

FROM PAGE 12
executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, at a press conference three days earlier disclosed that a minister had concealed assets abroad worth more than Tk 2,312 crore in his election affidavit.

At yesterday's press conference, Chowdhury said the properties were not acquired by exploiting his position as the land minister and urged the authorities to form a high-level investigation committee to probe if he had indulged in corruption.

Chowdhury, who won from the Chattogram-13 constituency in the 12th general election, said that he would resign as a member of the parliament if any corruption against him is found.

He said his father, who founded

the Aramit Group and was one of the founders of United Commercial Bank, had set up a business in the UK in 1967.

After finishing his studies in the US, Chowdhury set up his own business there. That business later expanded to the UK.

About concealing his wealth abroad in the affidavit submitted to the Election Commission before the January 7 polls, Chowdhury said that the affidavit was based on his income tax filings in Bangladesh.

“It (the affidavit) does not have a separate table for information on foreign assets. Why should I provide additional information?”

Chowdhury said he maintains separate income tax documentation for his assets and businesses abroad. He has bank loans against those assets.

About his rapid accumulation

of properties in the UK in 2020-21, which coincided with his tenure as the land minister, he said that the pandemic opened up irresistible investment opportunities for him as property prices crashed and bank interest rates were slashed.

“I took risks – I have been a businessman longer than I have been a politician,” said Chowdhury, currently the chief of the parliamentary standing committee on the land ministry.

The properties are in his name as those were bought with mortgages and his three children were not old enough then for banks to approve the loans to them, he said.

The three-time AL lawmaker has at least 537 mortgages against properties in the UK, The Daily Star reported.

Yunus conviction politically

FROM PAGE 12
to the same law; the authorities' unusually aggressive and potentially unforeseeable interpretation of the Labour Law; and procedural irregularities.

According to the statement, Prof Yunus's supporters say that the case is part of a relentless campaign by Hasina's administration to discredit and undermine him.

Over 150 cases have reportedly been brought against Yunus and his affiliated companies since Hasina came to power in 2009.

A vocal critic of Yunus, she has described him as a “bloodsucker of the poor” and, on another occasion, suggested that he should be “plunged into the Padma River”.

The concerns around the proceedings against Yunus are especially relevant as the growing government crackdown on its critics before the January 2024 general election prompted the CIVICUS Monitor to give Bangladesh's civic space its worst rating, with reports of sweeping arrests of opposition figures.

Hundreds of global leaders and Nobel Laureates, including former

US President Barack Obama and former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, have signed two open letters in which they described the recent cases against Yunus as “continuous judicial harassment” and expressed their “profound concern”.

On January 1, 2024, less than seven months after the charges were framed, Prof Yunus was convicted and sentenced to six months imprisonment and a fine – just a week before the “disputed general election” returned Hasina to power.

The case was based on alleged violations of Bangladesh's Labour Law by Grameen Telecom, a company that Yunus founded in the 1990s to help the poor acquire cell phones and use them to earn a living.

Yunus, who serves as the company's non-executive chairperson of the board, was convicted alongside three other Grameen Telecom Board members targeted for prosecution.

There are eight members in the board of directors. All four defendants appealed against their convictions on January 28, 2024, and the Labour Appellate Tribunal has stayed the lower court's verdict till March 3 (today).

Yunus and his co-defendants are currently on bail.

Meanwhile, a different court will hold a hearing in another case against Yunus and members of the Grameen Telecom Board today.

CEC urges EC

FROM PAGE 12
Habibul expressed deep shock and sorrow over the death of journalist Obhishruti Shastri, who used to cover EC beat, and others in the Bailey Road fire incident that claimed at least 46 lives.

Those present at the discussion observed a minute of silence for the deceased.

Election commissioners Brig Gen (ret'd) Ahsan Habib Khan, Rashida Sultana and Md Alamgir also spoke at the discussion.

Earlier while inaugurating the day's programmes, Habibul announced that the country now has 12,18,50,160 eligible voters.

Of them, 6,21,44,587 are male, 5,97,04,641 are female, and 932 voters are hijras, he said.

According to the EC's factsheet, about 26.99 lakh new voters were enlisted in the country's voter list since March 2, 2023.

The voter growth was 2.26 per cent over the last year.