

HC slams authorities over fire disasters

Orders them to put up signboards at risky buildings

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday blasted the authorities concerned for their failure and inaction to prevent the incidents of devastating fire at buildings, including at the Green Cozy Cottage on Baily Road where 46 people were killed on February 29.

"There are laws and rules, including the Fire Prevention and Extinguishing Act 2003 and the Bangladesh National Building Code-2020, to prevent such incidents of fire and save the lives of people. But these are not enforced and followed properly that is very unfortunate. Gas cylinders had been kept haphazardly in the building on Baily Road that caused the devastating fire killing and injuring many people. How the owners got permission to run restaurants and commercial operations in the building! It must be found out," the bench of Justice Naima Haider and Justice Kazi Zinat Hoque said during hearing two writ petitions involving the issue of fire.

The court also formed a seven-member committee to find the reasons behind the fire incidents and those negligent, look into safety measures in the buildings and find out what steps have been taken against the risky buildings in the city.

The committee has been asked to submit a report in four months.

The body includes representatives of the home secretary, inspector general of police, Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk), Fire Service and Civil Defence, Buet, and Dhaka city corporations, the HC said in its order.

The court also ordered the Rajuk and fire service to put up signboards on risky buildings in Dhaka so that people can be aware of the risks while entering there.

SEE PAGE 6 COL 1



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inspects a parade on the occasion of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) Day-2024 at its headquarters in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: BSS

Maintain chain of command

PM tells BGB personnel during annual parade

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday emphasised the importance of Border Guard Bangladesh personnel's adhering to the chain of command during the BGB's annual parade.

"Keep in mind that the chain of command is the most important driving power for a disciplined force. Never break the discipline; continue following the chain of command," Hasina urged BGB members.

The premier was addressing the parade of BGB Day 2024 at its headquarters in Dhaka.

She reflected on her government's initiatives to bolster the BGB, citing the enactment of the Border Guard Bangladesh Act 2010 as a pivotal step

towards enhancing the force's capabilities. "Now BGB has been built as an efficient, strong, modern three dimensional force," she said, adding that BGB is now capable of performing its duty on land, water, and air.

She said the Awami League government adopted the "Border Guard Bangladesh Vision 2041" in a bid to develop the BGB as a world-class border guard force.

"We want Border Guard Bangladesh to be developed as a world-class border force, and march forward as border sentinels, becoming a symbol of trust for the people of Bangladesh," she said, adding that the BGB will also be a smart force in Smart Bangladesh by 2041.

"Alongside protecting the border, the BGB resisted different border crimes

SEE PAGE 6 COL 6

BARGUNA JOURNO MURDER 5 newsmen, 8 others sued

OUR CORRESPONDENT, PATUAKHALI

Thirteen people have been sued over the death of Daily Bhorer Dak's Barguna correspondent Talukdar Masood, who died in hospital after being critically injured by fellow journalists at the Barguna Press Club.

Two days after his death, Masood's wife, Sajeda Begum, filed the case at the Barguna Sadar Police Station yesterday.

Five of the accused are Barguna correspondents for different private TV channels.

They are Hafiz Al Asad of NTV, Ferdous Khan of Jamuna TV, Abdul Malek of DBC News, Saiful Islam of Somoy TV, and Jafar Hossain of Mohana Television.

Talukdar Masood was also a

SEE PAGE 6 COL 2

3 Bangladeshis killed after being hit by train in Malaysia

THE STAR, Kajang

Three Bangladeshi men were killed on the railway tracks at Taman Puncak Utama Jade Hill in Malaysia's Kajang when they were hit by a commuter train.

Selangor Fire and Rescue Department Assistant Director Ahmad Mukhlis Mukhtar said the incident occurred around 10:50pm on Sunday after the victims allegedly trespassed onto the tracks.

The identities of the victims were not immediately disclosed by the Malaysian authorities concerned.

"The victims are aged between 30 and 40 and all died at the scene. Their bodies were not trapped on the tracks. The impact of the collision threw their bodies to the side of the tracks," he said in a statement yesterday.

He added that the bodies of the three were recovered around 12:15am and have been handed over to the police for further action.

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BCL leader, one other sent to jail for rape, blackmail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Two people, including a Chhatra League leader, have been sent to jail on charges of rape and blackmail in Patuakhali.

Bauphal Upazila Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court passed the order yesterday after police produced the accused before the court.

A 28-year-old married woman filed the case against them with Bauphal Police Station on Sunday morning.

The accused are Sujan Howladar, 24, organising secretary of BCL's Kachipara union unit, and Rajib Howladar, 22, driver of an auto-rickshaw.

On Sunday afternoon, police arrested them from Kachipara market, said Bauphal Police Station Officer-in-Charge Shonit Kumar Gayen.

The OC said Sujan and Rajib raped their neighbour a few days ago. At that time, they took objectionable photos of the woman on their mobile phones. Later, they tried to blackmail her with the photos into raping her again. When the victim resisted, the duo sent the photos to her husband.

Legal action is being taken over this incident, he added.

US reiterates the need

FROM PAGE 1

released on March 1.

Both worker safety standards and worker rights have been issues of concern after Bangladesh's eligibility for the Generalised System of Preferences was terminated in 2013, it said.

"Despite the progress on worker safety standards in the last decade, the US continues to urge Bangladesh to align its domestic labour laws with international labour standards."

During the US-Bangladesh Trade and Investment Cooperation and Facilitation Agreement (TICFA) council meeting in September last year, USTR and interagency partners highlighted growing concerns on worker rights in the areas of violence against and harassment of workers, unfair labour practices, freedom of association, collective bargaining and the need for a fair and transparent minimum wage

process for garment workers.

The US urged Bangladesh to reform its labour laws to extend the rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining to the export processing zones and special economic zones, and to ease the trade union registration requirements for workers.

The USTR officials engaged with the US government agencies and textile and apparel brands, retailers, trade associations, and domestic and international labour stakeholders towards this end.

During the TICFA council meeting, the US also engaged with Bangladesh on a full range of pressing bilateral trade issues, including trade in agricultural products, digital trade policies, and intellectual property protection and enforcement.

"This resulted in Bangladesh addressing a number of longstanding

US concerns."

For example, in May last year, the agriculture ministry published a regulatory order allowing the import of US cotton into Bangladesh without fumigation on arrival, removing a longstanding bilateral trade irritant.

Subsequently, American cotton exports to Bangladesh hit \$339 million in 2023.

Bangladesh also amended its Seed Law, which reduced the time required between when companies obtain their dealership registration and when they can actually sell their seed varieties.

The US also consistently engaged with Bangladesh, through virtual and in-person meetings, on draft versions of the Data Protection Act, which resulted in significant positive changes for US commercial interests when it became law in November 2023, the report said.

Exports cross \$5b for third month in a row

FROM PAGE 1

percent from a year earlier but fell short of the periodic target by 6.5 percent.

Apart from garment items, agricultural products, cotton waste, carpet, plastic goods, handicrafts, man-made filament and non-leather footwear also performed well in the first eight months of the fiscal year.

However, some potential sectors like leather and leather goods, jute

and jute goods, frozen and live fish, home textiles, ceramic products and furniture could not perform well during the July-February period of fiscal 2023-24.

During the period, leather and leather goods export fell 14.4 percent, jute and jute goods 4.68 percent and home textiles 29.94 percent.

The strong export showing along with the 7.5 percent growth in remittances means the country's foreign exchange reserves, which

have been under pressure for more than two years now, can stage a recovery from here onwards.

Remittance inflows soared 39 percent in February to \$2.16 billion, the highest in eight months, to take the tally to \$15.06 billion.

As of February 28, foreign exchange reserves stood at \$20.57 billion, enough to meet about three months' import bills, according to the latest published data by the Bangladesh Bank.

Mujib foresaw

FROM PAGE 1

"... I asked Mujib-ur Rahman [Mujibur Rahman] what scenario he visualised and how the stalemate could be broken. He replied that the situation was very clear. Yahya Khan would come to Dacca [Dhaka] first, followed by MM Ahmed [head of the Planning Commission], who would be followed by Bhutto. Yahya Khan would then order military action and that would be the end of Pakistan." [Mohammad Asghar Khan, Generals in Politics: Pakistan 1958-1982, UPL,

1983, pp.29-30]

GENERAL YAQUB RESIGNS

General Yaqub, who had taken charge of East Pakistan from Governor Ahsan on March 1, 1971, sent his resignation by telegram on the morning of March 5, 1971. Yahya removed him because he protested against a hard line towards the Bengalis. Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, nicknamed 'the Butcher of Baluchistan', was appointed to replace Yaqub.

ARMY WITHDRAWN TO BARRACKS

The Martial Law authorities withdrew the army to the barracks on March 5. According to a government announcement, this action followed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's appeal for peace.

A complete hartal was observed in the capital as well as other parts of the province.

Security forces opened fire on the demonstrating workers of Telephone Industries at Tongi, which left four workers dead and 25 others injured.

Teacher shoots student during exam

FROM PAGE 1

"At one point, he [the teacher] drew out his gun and said, 'See, I can shoot.' He first misfired and then in his second attempt, he shot Tamal."

Another student said the teacher initially tried to cover up the incident and said "nothing happened".

"He tried to escape but we confined him and started demonstrating."

One student said, "The teacher had targeted some students whom he used to threaten to shoot."

Speaking to The Daily Star, Dr Amirul Hasan Chowdhury said, "We had urged him not to carry his gun but he didn't listen. We had even informed the higher authorities, seeking his transfer.

"As he is a local, he didn't pay heed

to any warning and we didn't dare to say anything more."

Abdul Hannan, additional superintendent of Sirajganj police, said they seized the firearm.

"We don't know yet whether it's [the gun] licensed or not."

Additional police were deployed on the campus as the students are currently in fear.

3 out of 4 city markets risky

FROM PAGE 1

removed soon and more fire extinguishers would be placed, he added.

"Highly risky" Rajdhani Supermarket, with about 1,500 shops, has no fire hydrants. During a visit last Thursday, these correspondents did not find any fire extinguishers in 300 shops.

"No one told us about having any fire safety equipment," said a shop owner, requesting anonymity.

Faznun Hoque Biplob, a leader of the Shop Owners' Association, hung up when he learnt a reporter was on the line asking for comments and did not pick up further calls.

"Highly risky" five-storey Sharif Market in Sadarghat has three staircases, but there were no fire extinguishers seen on the walls.

The leaders of the market owners' association refused to talk to this newspaper.

The six other "highly risky" markets are Barishal Plaza Market in Bangabazar, Alauddin Market in Lalbagh, Shahidullah Market and Shakil Anwar Tower in Chawkbazar, Maya Katara in Sadarghat, and Rosenil Vista in Siddique Bazar.

Agencies spring into action, finally

FROM PAGE 1

The team fined a restaurant, "Spice and Herbs", on the ninth floor, Tk 2 lakh and demolished a portion of a rooftop eatery "Retro Live Kitchen".

However, no fines could be imposed on the restaurants from the 10th to the top floors as no managers or owners were present.

Meanwhile, a DSCC mobile court sealed off an entire 12-storey building called Keari Crescent, also on Satmasjid Road, as it lacked fire safety measures.

The building, which houses restaurants on almost every floor, was closed off after a drive, led by Executive Magistrate Md Jahangir Alam, around 3:00pm.

The DSCC team detained three staffers of a visa processing office in the building, as the rooms of the office were constructed without following adequate safety procedures. They were, however, let go after being fined Tk 3 lakh.

Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence hung a banner in front of the building's main gate, marking it as risky.

DSCC also raided Rupayan ZR Plaza on the same road and fined the owners of three restaurants - Buffet Empire, Buffet Lounge and Buffet Paradise - Tk 1 lakh each for a lack of fire safety measures.

Abdul Wadud, former president of Rosenil Vista Shop Owners' Association, said, "Our market has no flammable materials. So, we don't believe our market is highly risky."

POINTING FINGERS

Brig Gen Abu Nayem Md Sahidullah, former director general of the fire service, pointed at the lack of coordination between the authorities issuing permits, approvals, and licences for buildings.

"When an incident occurs, one organisation blames another organisation," he said.

Echoing him, Adil Mohammad Khan, president of the Bangladesh Institute of Planners, said, "Most of our city buildings do not have effective fire safety measures and fire safety plans.

"It comes to light after almost all the accidents that the fire service had served a notice upon the building authorities stating that the buildings were risky. But no action had been taken."

Contacted, Lt Col Tajul Islam Chowdhury, director (operations) of the fire service, said, "We cannot do much even if we want to because we don't have the enforcement power. If we had a magistrate, then we could have conducted drives regularly and

taken action."

The Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) blamed the fire service for not sending them the list of buildings violating fire safety rules.

Md Ashrafur Islam, Rajuk chief town planner, told this newspaper, "Last year, we had prepared a list of 691 risky buildings in the capital. We recently visited 20 risky markets and gave them a verbal warning. We will start our drive soon after finalising the list."

NATIONWIDE INSPECTION

The fire service inspected 5,374 markets and institutions across the country in 2023. Of these, 3,256 were found to have had satisfactory fire safety measures in place.

Of the rest, 424 were classified as "highly risky".

The fire service said 39.41 percent of buildings across the country are "risky". In 2022, the percentage of "risky" buildings was 53.78.

Even though repeated notices have been issued to the owners of some risky buildings, problems have not been rectified.

Lt Col Tajul said, "We have decided to file cases against the [authorities of] risky buildings who did not pay heed to our notices."

Commissioner of Wari Division Iqbal Hossain said action would be taken against those operating restaurants within residential buildings, especially those using gas cylinders carelessly.

During the Rankin Street drive, the DMP team found one restaurant with an exit path next to the kitchen. However, the exit was closed and littered with various objects, the DC added.

The 16 were detained under sections 285 and 286 of the penal code, which deal with negligence regarding fire and combustible and explosive substances, police said.

Rajuk Chairman Anisur Rahman Miah said they have identified several buildings violating the design and policy rules during drives in different areas of the capital, including Dhanmondi, Bailey Road, and Gulshan, since Sunday morning.

"The eviction drives are being conducted in phases. Strict action will be taken against the buildings that got permission from other departments apart from Rajuk," he said, urging the agencies concerned to be more aware while granting permission for restaurants.

He added that there was no permission for the restaurant business in Green Cozy Cottage building on the capital's Bailey Road.