

Ensure compliance from high-rise owners

Govt must solve systemic issues, ensure accountability

As more information surfaces about the building code and fire safety violations in the Bailey Road mall where a fire claimed at least 46 lives, the government cannot remain in denial that the burden of recurring fire tragedies in our cities rests mostly on its agencies tasked with monitoring and enforcing compliance. While Rajuk, fire service, and city corporations are once again attempting to shift responsibility onto each other, a familiar pattern emerges—systematic negligence and lack of coordination among these vital departments.

A major issue, as per a report by this daily, seems to be the lack of a unified definition of “high-rise” buildings. Currently, the Fire Prevention and Extinguishing Act defines any structure with over six storeys as high-rise, requiring an NOC from the fire service. However, the Building Construction Rules 2008 and Bangladesh National Building Code, which Rajuk follows, define high-rise buildings as those with over 10 stories or exceeding 33 meters in height. This inconsistency further intensifies as the fire prevention act, which empowers the fire service to file cases against non-compliant buildings, is currently halted due to a High Court stay order. This means that even after identifying 2,118 risky structures in 2023, the fire service can now issue warning letters only.

Consequently, a seven-storey building like the one on Bailey Road did not obtain an NOC from the fire service during construction, nor was it forced to implement fire safety measures despite being identified as a fire hazard. Similarly, every major fire incident in Dhaka over the past few years—Siddique Bazar, New Market, Bangabazar, Krishi Market—had a common theme of well-marked risky buildings meeting their inevitable doom. The fire service claims it sends copies of fire safety violation letters to the city corporations and Rajuk. However, no action follows. Fire officials say buildings like the Bailey Road’s shouldn’t house restaurants without safety measures, yet they get licenses. City corporations claim they cannot demolish high-risk structures due to court orders in favour of owners, while Rajuk faces allegations of ignoring widespread violations and enabling illegal operations.

Clearly, we need a comprehensive action plan to address these underlying issues so that the relevant agencies can ensure compliance from all building owners. But first, the government must acknowledge that the repeated fire incidents in our cities are a direct result of systematic issues, and it must hold relevant agencies accountable for their failure and negligence.

Kidney diseases taking a growing toll

Investing more in kidney treatment, encouraging organ donations vital

The continued toll that kidney diseases take on our society is really worrying. Recent data from the Kidney Foundation has revealed that 54 individuals succumb to kidney-related ailments each day, with approximately 20 million Bangladeshis facing such diseases and nearly 80,000 grappling with end-stage kidney failure. The statistics also reveal a grim annual death toll of 40,000, attributed to complications associated with dialysis or organ transplant. These findings underscore the pressing need for a better policy response.

A lot can be said about the causes of kidney ailments, but for policymakers, it’s more urgent to build an infrastructure that can support the growing number of patients facing challenges in accessing both dialysis and kidney transplantation. Firstly, there is a critical shortage of organ donors that severely limits treatment options for end-stage patients. Currently, kidney transplants are authorised if only the donor is from a patient’s family or a clinically dead person. But the crisis of donors cannot be addressed by relaxing the law alone; for that, a social transformation is also vital. The high cost of transplants also serves as a deterrent for many patients.

Secondly, there are various challenges for patients on dialysis, which must be addressed. According to a study, around 40 percent of patients cannot afford dialysis at all, and 90 percent discontinued treatment after three to four months. Roughly 50 percent of these patients die within two years of kidney failure. Unfortunately, there is no government-determined fee for dialysis. The costs of dialysis and associated services/medicine can widely vary between public and private facilities. Government hospitals, the lost resort for the financially vulnerable patients, also come with their own sets of challenges.

We, therefore, need to take a critical look at the current state of affairs and make necessary reforms. The importance of increasing funding, building proper infrastructure and other policy initiatives in this regard cannot be overstated. Donations can be one source of funding, and the authorities must undertake regular drives to tap into zakat funds, tax exemptions, CSR funds, and other such options. There is also a need to popularise organ donation, which can help tremendously.

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Death is built into our cityscapes

Why do authorities gamble with our lives?



THE SOUND AND THE FURY

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I am not a morbid person, in general. But, increasingly, I find myself spending an unhealthy amount of time obsessing over what sort of a death awaits me in Dhaka. Will I die in a fire while shopping in my go-to kitchen markets or while having french fries with my toddler at a nearby cafe? Will it be an earthquake of the magnitude that hit Morocco or Turkey last year, with us trapped in the ruins of Dhaka’s unplanned development for days on end till we are released permanently from the burden of being its residents? Perhaps, if we are lucky, it will be a quick run-of-the-mill road crash. Or something far less glamorous, like a slab from an unguarded construction site as we are passing by. Or maybe it will be something more topical, like death from dengue, with women in my age group reportedly being the most vulnerable to untimely demise. Or something classic, like air pollution, which is guaranteed to reduce at least eight years of our lives.

It certainly isn’t normal to go through life paralysed by vivid premonitions of impending deaths. Yet, I can’t help but wonder how normal it is for Dhakaites (or residents of any major city in the country) to go through life taking such risks for granted. Why have we accepted this deadly state of affairs as inevitable?

For all the development projects taking place in and around the capital that will supposedly propel us into the future, our lives—at least for the overwhelming majority—remain as precarious as ever. Except for a handful, none of the high-rise buildings of the capital follow building and safety codes. A recent report confirmed what we have known in our gut all along—that we are essentially gambling with our lives every time we frequent those tall commercial buildings housing our favourite burger or kachchi joints. Many of these buildings, tantalising us with their flashy signs, and promises of fusion menus and Instagrammable decors, lack emergency exits, while others store LNG cylinders and large boxes on both the main stairwells and the emergency exits blocking any possibility of an exit during a fire. LNG cylinders and combustible materials on almost all floors of the building, without adequate fire safety equipment or training of those working as staff, mean that any small accident can flare into a fire of tragic proportions at any moment. And it isn’t just these commercial buildings, of course. It’s also hospitals, schools, kitchen markets, shopping malls—the list goes on—which do not have even

the most basic of safety protocols in place.

An overwhelming majority of these structures will also not stand a severe earthquake: our cities will turn into living graveyards within seconds. In our frenzied rush for urbanisation, we have ravenously consumed wetlands and landfills, without anyone factoring in the geological features or vulnerabilities, building high rises defying land use guidelines or building codes. We can cite stats all we want, but the simple and terrifying truth is that death is built into the very foundations of our cityscapes.

Life goes on in the metropolis, with us living the same nightmares and risks day in and day out, with topical outbreaks of outrage when a relevant news item grabs the headlines. But in the end, nothing changes; what’s worse is that we all know—and have somehow accepted—that nothing will change.

Sure, a case has been filed against Amin Mohammad Group, owner of the building, Anwarul Haque, owner of Chumuk fast food, Munshi Hamimul Alam Bipul, the building’s manager, and Shoel Siraj, owner of Kacchi Bhai for causing death by negligence and attempted murder. But if the past is any indication, those arrested can rest assured that they will soon be released on bail and no conviction will take place in the near future, if ever.

Twenty-three years have passed since 124 people were killed in a preventable fire in Old Dhaka’s Nimtoli area, but beyond filing a GD with the police station, no investigation was ever conducted for what ought to have been a case of culpable homicide. The owners of Tazreen Fashion, who blocked the stairwells and locked the gates of the factory once the fire started, roam around freely, enjoying the fruits of their bloody profits, 14 years since the fire at their factory killed at least 117 people. Of the 46 hearings fixed to collect testimonies of witnesses between 2015 and 2022, the state was able to produce witnesses only nine times. There has been no progress on the case since then. Meanwhile it took a whopping five years for the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) to simply submit their charge sheets against those implicated in the fire at FR Tower in Banani. It is the same infuriating story for every major fire incident in the country over the past two decades. This, too, we all know—that when power, money and might is involved, justice can be conveniently delayed, indefinitely, if necessary.

The city authorities, those tasked



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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

with ensuring our safety, meanwhile, have devised a brilliant strategy of getting out of any responsibility—they simply point the fingers at the myriad other useless authorities that are supposed to ensure our basic amenities. As you go through the list of regulatory bodies and service providers, asking them why they have failed so miserably at doing the bare minimum, you ultimately realise you are stuck in an endless loop of self-serving hogwash. So we give up. What else can we do? When there is no accountability at even the highest levels of state governance, when might and money reign over human lives and rights, when perpetrators can buy their way out of the most egregious of violations and violences, where do you even start? We can call upon the authorities all we want in the editorial pages of our newspapers to see reason, to stop this unplanned and unmonitored madness, but in the end, how many, if any, listen to us?

It is the sheer helplessness of our situation that consumes and in the end defeats most of us. There’s really only two paths we can take from here. One is the path we always take. Escape in mindless social media reels and the day-to-day drudgery of our inflation-ridden lives in an attempt to forget the spectre of arson or some “accident” looming over our heads, until the next tragedy strikes. The other is a far more daunting task: that of challenging the state and its apparatuses and demanding that they prioritise the people of this country over the short-term gains of corrupt officials and businessmen.

Our policymakers need to realise that the current development model, with its shining highways and flashy billboards, on which they have been feeding their limitless greed for the past decade, cannot hide the gaping holes in its very foundation. They might be the ones running the country, but they do not have the right to gamble with our lives.

Mental health at the workplace

A growing labour legislation concern



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Mental health, frequently neglected compared to physical health, is gaining recognition as an essential element of holistic well-being, especially in the workplace. However, a more comprehensive examination of the country’s labour legislation and the obligations of employers to cultivate a supportive atmosphere is warranted.

According to Section 22 of Bangladesh Labour Act, a worker may be discharged from service for physical or mental incapacity or continued ill health certified by a registered medical practitioner. If a discharged worker completes at least one year of continuous service, the employer must pay them 30 days’ wages for each year of service. However, no provision exists to improve workers’ mental health.

Although Bangladesh’s labour laws are comprehensive regarding wage rights, working hours, and physical health and safety, they do not explicitly address mental health concerns. This gap underscores a critical area of concern given the growing body of evidence that establishes a

connection between mental health and productivity, job satisfaction, and overall economic development. The global recognition of the significance of mental health in the workplace is increasing. Developed countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia have implemented mental health provisions as part of their labour legislation, demonstrating a proactive approach. For example, the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 in the UK requires employers to consider and mitigate physical and mental health hazards. Similarly, Australia’s Fair Work Act of 2009 incorporates mental health provisions into its anti-harassment and anti-bullying policies.

According to a 2020 WHO survey, 16.4 percent of Bangladeshi adults were thought to have mental health issues. Workers are concerned because long hours, precarious labour, low income, and repressive workplaces can harm mental health. The failure of labour laws in Bangladesh to provide adequate provisions for mental health not only impacts individual employees

but also has far-reaching economic consequences. For instance, the garment industry has been censured due to its labour conditions, which can worsen psychological well-being among employees and subsequently impact productivity and international competitiveness.

Employers have a significant impact on the way mental health is addressed in the workplace. Promoting mental well-being among employees is not only ethically sound but also economically viable. To optimise the capabilities of its labour force, Bangladesh must immediately incorporate provisions for mental health into its labour legislation. This entails acknowledging mental health as a critical element of employee welfare and economic output. Together with non-governmental organisations and the private sector, the government should strive to integrate clear and specific provisions for stress management, anti-bullying measures, and mental health support within the work environment. They can conduct nationwide campaigns to raise awareness among employers and employees regarding the critical nature of mental health. Plus, gathering information regarding the prevalence of mental health problems across various sectors is necessary to guide policy development and intervention efforts.

Bangladesh can also learn from nations which have effectively incorporated mental health provisions

into their labour structures. For instance, implementing frameworks such as the Management Standards established by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in the UK could offer a methodical strategy for effectively handling tension in the workplace. Furthermore, particularly in rural or marginalised regions, scalable solutions for mental health support can be provided through the utilisation of technology and telemedicine. However, in 2018, the government passed the Mental Health Act, which promotes mental health and mental health patients’ rights. A government mental health policy encourages awareness and education and increases access to mental health care.

Incorporating mental health provisions into Bangladesh’s labour legislation is an economic and legal imperative that transcends morality and legality. In the pursuit of international expansion and competitiveness, the welfare of the nation’s labour force will emerge as a pivotal factor influencing its level of achievement. Bangladesh can foster a future in which mental health is acknowledged as a fundamental component of labour rights and economic progress by drawing insights from international models and modifying them to suit the local environment. All stakeholders must unite to establish an inclusive, healthier, and more productive workplace environment for every employee.