

OF PAIN, RELIEF AND RESPONSE



PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS, AMRAN HOSSAIN

Left top: Traumatized after witnessing the incident that killed many of her peers, Tisha Sarkar Sreya, a ninth-grader at Milestone School, calling her relatives as she waits in a separate building near the crash site. She had left the affected building for a few minutes just before the crash. **Left bottom:** Rafsi Akter Rafia, a fourth grader, undergoes treatment for burn wounds at Uttara Crescent Hospital (Photo: collected). **Centre:** Army and fire service personnel, along with others, rush an injured patient into a military helicopter. **Right top:** Still gripping her pencil, a child is carried away by her guardian after the crash at her school. **Right bottom:** Hundreds gather in front of DMCH to donate blood.

Jet slams into school, kills 22

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He was attending class on the seventh floor of another building across from the crash site. "Suddenly, I saw a plane crash into the first floor of the adjacent building," he said. "The entire site was engulfed in flames with a loud bang, and screams began coming from the building."

SM Mahin, an HSC second-year student, recalled: "The heat and thick smoke were overwhelming. Still, we saw some children coming out, severely burnt. We helped as many as we could."

Purnima Das, a teacher of the school, posted on her Facebook around 8:00pm: "I had just finished class and was heading to the teachers' room when the fire started. About eighty percent of the students had already left as school ended at 1:00pm."

The rest, she wrote, were in tuition classes or waiting for parents.

"Before I could process anything, I saw children running toward me... fire spreading. I poured water on two or three of them in the washroom."

"Then another teacher shouted, 'Purnima, get out!' I stepped out and saw the corridor ablaze -- just two arm-lengths away. One colleague, terribly burned, collapsed at my feet crying, 'Save me.'"

Purnima froze before realising someone was dragging her out.

During a briefing around 8:00pm, Professor Md Sayedur Rahman, the chief adviser's special assistant for health and family welfare, told reporters that 88 of the injured were undergoing treatment at seven hospitals and 25 of them were in a critical condition.

He said 17 bodies had been kept at various hospitals across the capital, and that the death toll could rise.

Of the 17, 10 are children while the identities of seven could not be known. "But we fear that all of them are children," said Sayedur.

At the burn institute, the stream of patients arriving in ambulances was constant.

Heartbroken relatives gathered outside, desperately waiting for updates on their loved ones. The area was overcrowded, and medical staff were struggling to manage the high volume of patients while continuing urgent treatment.

The Bangladesh Air Force has formed a high-level committee to investigate the crash and determine its cause.

The ISPR said the pilot, flight lieutenant Towkir Islam, was on a routine training mission when the jet "encountered a mechanical failure."

"The exact cause remains under investigation," it said in a statement.

The pilot tried to divert the aircraft away from densely populated areas but, "despite his best efforts", crashed into the school building, the ISPR added.

It was Towkir's first solo flight. He reportedly completed his first 100 hours of flight training during his cadet years in PT-6 aircraft.

The crash was the worst aviation accident in the country in several decades. The deadliest ever disaster happened in 1984 when a plane flying from Chattogram to Dhaka crashed, killing all 49 on board, reports AFP.

The government has declared a day of state mourning today.

President Mohammed Shahabuddin and Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus expressed deep sorrow and prayed for the departed souls.

Messages of solidarity poured in from around the world. India, Japan, Pakistan, Switzerland, the United

Nations, and the European Union each expressed condolences and support for Bangladesh in this moment of tragedy.

The main campus of Milestone School and College was established in 2002 on Gareeb-e-Newaz Avenue in Sector II of Uttara Model Town. Around a decade ago, the institution set up its Diabari campus, which consists of 11 buildings and serves approximately 6,000 students across various grades, according to the school authorities. Principal Mohammad Ziaul Alam did not receive phone calls for comments.

Briefing reporters at the scene around 4:45pm, Brig Gen Muhammad Jahed Kamal, director general of the Fire Service and Civil Defence, said the crash occurred after classes had ended for the day. "Children and possibly some guardians had gathered in the building when the plane struck," he said.

Talking to reporters at the burn institute, Law Adviser Asif Nazrul said, "Such a massive, catastrophic accident has never occurred in our national history."

He said the authorities of the burn institute took all necessary preparations to provide the best possible treatment to the victims.

"If needed, foreign doctors will be brought in, and arrangements will be made to send critically injured students abroad for treatment," he said, adding, "There will be no shortage in any aspect of their medical care. But what we have lost today cannot be compensated by anything."

Fire service personnel called off the rescue operation last night while air force and police cordoned off the area. They said there were no bodies or survivors left within the school premises.

Experts question training flights

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challenges to military jet pilots.

"Although the entire field is supposed to be clear of any building over one or two storeys, there are plenty of high-rise buildings in the flight path. As a result, we have to gain altitude very fast and remain at higher altitudes," said the pilot.

Another veteran pilot with similar training experience agreed.

He, also requesting anonymity, opined that the pilot may have realised that he was flying at an altitude higher than the "glide path" and, as a result, would overshoot the runway, so he reduced power to lose altitude.

The glide path is the vertical flight path that an aircraft follows as it approaches a runway for landing, typically during the final approach phase.

"Then he might have needed to reintroduce power to proceed with the landing. But jet engines have a limitation -- it takes a few seconds to spool up," said the veteran pilot. Those lost seconds are precious when the landing strip is only seconds away.

Fighter jets like the FT-7 BGI, which crashed inside a school compound in Uttara yesterday, fly at supersonic speeds, calculated in "Mach", a unit relative to the speed of sound, which is 1,234km per hour. Unlike commercial aircraft, these planes fly and land at higher speeds. The plane in question is capable of flying at Mach 2, which is well above 2,400kmph.

Experts and pilots say if everything had gone okay, Flight Lieutenant Towkir Islam Sagar would have been able to land at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, 3.3 kilometres from the crash site, in seconds.

Military and civil aviation professionals questioned the logic of operating such training in a city like Dhaka when the air force has the option to conduct such training from bases in Jashore or Chattogram.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, one such professional noted that very few countries in the world allow Air Force training aircraft to operate on the same runway used for commercial aviation.

However, he acknowledged that countries with limited land availability, historical military bases,

or strategic partnerships often utilise civil-military joint-use airports.

Imran Asif, a veteran of the aviation industry with 20 years of experience and currently the chief executive officer of Air Astra, stated that in the case of yesterday's incident, the fatalities could potentially have been avoided if the fighter training aircraft had conducted the operation from a base outside Dhaka.

"We, the aviation experts, have long been calling for the relocation of the air base from Dhaka on valid grounds. But Bangladesh remains one of the few countries where no action is taken until lives are lost," he added.

He also criticised the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) for failing to protect the interests of civilian passengers, whose safety is compromised by military flights operating from Dhaka airport.

"After this tragic incident, will CAAB finally raise its voice to stop jet fighter training operations from using Dhaka airport's runway for the safety of passengers?" Asif further questioned.

A senior pilot of Biman Bangladesh Airlines with 32 years of experience pointed out, "I have been flying as an airline pilot to hundreds of airports, but I have never faced any delay anywhere due to Air Force flying. Dhaka and Chattogram are probably the only international airports that allow such fighter jet activities."

He also criticised the unplanned urbanisation surrounding the airport.

"Aircraft accidents most frequently occur during takeoffs and landings, that is why strict regulations prohibit the construction of high-density establishments such as schools, colleges, and shopping malls near airport approach paths," he said, blaming unplanned urbanisation for the tragedy.

"This accident was just waiting to happen," he said.

Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that the accident happened due to a mechanical failure shortly after take-off from BAF Base Bangabandhu in Kurmitola, and that the pilot had tried to steer the plane towards a less-populated area.

Towkir tried to steer plane away from populated areas: ISPR

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Flight Lieutenant Towkir Islam Sagar, whose FT-7 jet crashed into Milestone School & College yesterday, was of the 35 squadron, 76 BAF course.

He died while undergoing treatment in the intensive care unit (ICU) of the Combined Military Hospital (CMH), according to Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR).

Towkir completed his first 100 hours of flight training during his cadet years in PT-6 aircraft.

He later served with the 15th Squadron, where he logged approximately 60 hours of flight time, before joining the 35th Squadron.

To avoid a major disaster, the pilot, Towkir, attempted to steer the FT-7 BGI aircraft away from densely populated areas and towards a sparsely inhabited zone, said ISPR.

However, despite his efforts, the aircraft smashed into a two-storey building of the school in the Diabari area of Uttara.

The victim's family lives in a rented house in Sector-3 of Rajshahi city's Upashahar area, according to Prothom Alo.

His father Tahurul Islam, mother Saleha Khatun, sister Srishti, and brother-in-law stay in that house. His father is involved in the export-import business. Their ancestral home is in the Kansat area of Chapainawabganj, it said.

After the plane crash, Towkir's family members expressed their wish to fly to Dhaka to see him while he was under treatment. The air force then arranged a helicopter for them.

Around 4:30 in the afternoon, Towkir's father, mother, sister, and brother-in-law were taken from their home to Shah Makhdom Airport in Rajshahi. From there, they departed for Dhaka in a special air force helicopter.

After the news of Towkir's death broke, journalists and locals were seen gathering in front of the house in Upashahar.

Towkir's grandfather, grandmother, and aunt were still at the house, reported Prothom Alo. His maternal uncle, Motakabbir, was standing outside, informing curious people and journalists about the family's condition.

Motakabbir said Towkir studied up to class seven at Rajshahi Laboratory School and College. He was later admitted to Pabna Cadet College. He joined the service in 2017. A year ago, he married a lecturer at a private university.

For students

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Mahreen was responsible for escorting students to the gate to ensure they safely reached their parents. According to news reports, she managed to lead at least 20 children out while sustaining injuries herself.

Her brother, Munaf Mojib Chowdhury, told The Daily Star last night, "She was on her way out of the school when the incident occurred, but she saw students trapped inside. She knew she had to get them out."

Monsur later told reporters, "From head to toe, she's completely burnt. It looked like 100 percent to me."

Nation numb with shock

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flown at half-mast at all government, semi-government, autonomous, and educational institutions across the country.

Similar instructions have been given to Bangladeshi missions abroad. Special prayers will be offered at places of worship for the deceased and the injured.

President Mohammed Shahabuddin expressed deep shock and sorrow over the tragic incident. In a condolence message, he prayed for the salvation of the departed souls and conveyed sympathy to the bereaved families. He also wished for the swift recovery of those injured in the crash.

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus also conveyed his profound grief, describing the incident as a "moment of deep national sorrow".

"I'm deeply saddened by the casualties caused by the heartbreaking accident involving a Bangladesh Air Force jet on the Milestone School and College campus," he said in a statement issued by the chief adviser's press wing.

He described the loss suffered by air force personnel, students, teachers, staff, parents, and others associated with Milestone College as irreparable.

The chief adviser instructed all relevant authorities, including the hospitals concerned, to treat the situation with the highest level of urgency. He also affirmed that the government would take necessary steps to investigate the cause of the crash and extend all possible assistance to those affected.

The UN, European Union, and several other nations, including

India and Japan, have expressed condolences to the victims and families affected by the crash.

Meanwhile, Law Adviser Asif Nazrul said, "We are all devastated. Doctors are doing their best for the injured. If patients need to be taken abroad, arrangements will be made."

Chief Justice Syed Rezaul Karim and Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed also expressed grief over the incident.

After the incident, several political parties, including BNP, Jamaat e-Islami, National Citizen Party (NCP), Communist Party of Bangladesh, Islami Andolon Bangladesh, Socialist Party of Bangladesh, Jatiya Party, Gono Odhikar Parishad, Revolutionary Workers Party of Bangladesh, and Nezam e-Islam, issued messages mourning the tragedy.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia expressed deep shock and sorrow at the loss of lives in the incident, reports BSS.

In her message, she prayed for the eternal peace of the departed souls and the speedy recovery of the injured.

The BNP chief asked the leaders and activists to stand by the families of the deceased and injured.

In a Facebook post, BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman wrote, "We are heartbroken by the tragic aircraft crash at Milestone College. No student should face such horror in institutions meant to facilitate their learning, growth, and well-being."

"My earnest prayers are with the shaken young souls, and I call upon leaders, activists, and professionals of the BNP to stand by the affected. Together, as a united nation, we must tackle this situation."

BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed said, "We consider those who lost their lives in this sudden tragedy as martyrs."

Jamaat, in a statement, called upon its members and locals to come aid of the injured.

"May Allah have mercy on those who lost their lives, forgive them, and grant them the honour of martyrdom and the highest rank in paradise. May Allah grant the injured a swift and complete recovery," it said.

In a statement, NCP Convener Nahid Islam expressed deep sorrow and instructed party leaders and activists to assist the victims.

The National Consensus Commission postponed yesterday's dialogue with political parties and observed a one-minute silence in memory of the victims and offered prayers. Talks are expected to resume tomorrow.

Bangladesh's top sports bodies -- the Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF), Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), and the Bangladesh Kabaddi Federation -- issued statements mourning the lives lost in the crash.

The Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) also expressed deep sorrow over the tragedy.

Celebrities and public figures took to social media to express their heartbreak. Many have also stepped forward to support the victims and their families.

Public personalities who posted tributes and extended support include actors Shakib Khan, Ziaul Faruq Apurba, actresses Shobnom Bubby, Apu Biswas, Tasnia Farin, and Mehazabien Chowdhury, singer Elita Karim, and filmmakers Sunny Sanwar and Ashfaque Nipun.