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Prolonged inaction, recurring fire tragedies

Failure to relocate hazardous warehouses keeps Dhaka vulnerable to deadly fires

2023

27,624

fires, explosions claimed 102 lives, caused losses worth Tk 792 crore

2024

26,659

incidents killed 140 people and injured 341

First seven months of 2025

154

people have already died in such incidents

**MAJOR INCIDENTS**

NIMTOLI FIRE, OLD DHAKA

June 3, 2010

Deaths: 126

CHURIHATTA FIRE, CHAWKBAZAR

February 20, 2019

Deaths: 71

CHEMICAL GODOWNS

Active in Old Dhaka

25,000

Located inside residential buildings

15,000

SOURCE: FIRE SERVICE, BAPA



PHOTO: STAR

HELEMUL ALAM and MONJURUL HAQUE

Despite repeated deadly fire incidents, the government has yet to relocate hazardous chemical warehouses from Dhaka's residential areas to designated industrial zones in Munshiganj.

Tuesday's fire at Mirpur's Rupnagar, which has so far claimed 16 lives, once again points to the failure of successive administrations to implement relocation plans launched over a decade ago.

The devastating blaze at a chemical warehouse and garment factory is believed to have started from a chemical explosion that released toxic gas.

"We suspect the fire began with a chemical explosion that produced poisonous gas. Many victims might have died instantly after inhaling the toxic fumes," said Lt Col Mohammad Tajul Islam Chowdhury, director (operation and maintenance) of the Fire Service and Civil Defence.

Despite repeated promises, the relocation of chemical warehouses and factories from Old Dhaka remains largely incomplete, even after several catastrophic fires have claimed hundreds of lives over the past 15 years.

Following the 2010 Nimtoli fire that killed 126 people, the government launched four relocation projects for chemical, plastic, printing, and electrical goods industries. However, only one project has been completed, while the others remain stalled due to bureaucratic delays and land disputes.

Even the 2019 Churihatta fire in Chawkbazar, which killed 71 people, failed to accelerate the process.

Authorities have not updated the list of chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka since 2019, when a Dhaka South City Corporation survey identified 1,924 warehouses, 98 percent of which were categorised as "moderately risky".

Locals say the real number is higher, as many unregistered warehouses operate inside residential buildings.

Under the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Rules (1997), industrial units handling hazardous materials are banned in residential areas. The DSCC stopped issuing or renewing licences for chemical businesses after the Nimtoli

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and Churihatta fires, but the move has had little effect.

Chemical traders argue they cannot relocate until the government provides the promised resettlement under a 2017 MoU.

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Around 1,500 die of burn injuries a year**About 12.09 lakh sustain burns annually****Lack of facilities outside Dhaka causing preventable deaths****Experts cite lack of treatment centres, trained personnel****Focus should be on preventing fire incidents**

Around 1,500 people die in the country every year due to burn injuries – equivalent to four deaths a day – according to a government report, highlighting a serious issue that rarely draws attention unless a major incident occurs.

In addition, around 12.09 lakh people sustain burn



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injuries annually, and nearly 3,000 of them become permanently disabled, putting pressure not only on the health system but also on overall productivity.

The report, titled "Prevalence and Risk Factors for Mortality and Morbidity in Relation to National Health

15-minute-long battle against smoke, fire, fear
Survivor recounts harrowing moments

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

When a fire broke out at the Arian Fashion factory in the capital's Rupnagar area on Tuesday morning, four people, including 15-year-old Mohammad Hossain, were trapped on the third floor.

On the second floor of the same factory, his sister Marzia Sultana Alo, 18, and brother-in-law Mohammad Joy, 20, were working.

Alo and Joy could not survive the blaze. Their bodies now lie in the morgue of Dhaka Medical College.

Hossain, however, was saved after a 15-minute-long battle between life and death, thanks to the

Every breath was painful, the heat and fumes burning our faces. But the sound of the hammering kept us alive – it felt like a race between suffocation and the wall breaking.



courage of workers from an adjacent building who broke through a wall to rescue them.

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, Hossain recounted the harrowing moments that felt like an eternity.

"It was pitch dark. The air was filled with toxic smoke. We could not breathe. I thought I was going to die," he said.

"There was a window on the sidewall. I kept waving and screaming for help – 'Save us! Save us!' The other three were shouting too. Flames were flashing from the front, and the heat was unbearable," he said.

As they gasped for air, a sound from behind brought a faint ray of hope.

"We heard loud bangs – people hitting the wall from the other side. The wall began to shake. I thought, if it breaks, maybe we can live," Hossain said.

"Every breath was painful, the heat and fumes burning our faces. But the sound of the hammering kept us alive – it felt like a race between suffocation and the wall breaking," he said.

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JULY UPRISING CASES

Formal charges against 45 accused soon

Says ICT chief prosecutor

SIRAJUL ISLAM RUBEL

The prosecution will soon press formal charges against 45 accused, including 18 high-profile political figures, as investigations near completion, ICT Chief Prosecutor Tajul Islam said yesterday.

Speaking to journalists, Tajul said investigations into several of the accused have already been completed, while inquiries into the rest are at their final stages.

He explained that although the initial complaint named all 45 accused together, separate investigations have since been carried out. "Formal charges have already been pressed against some, and the rest will be charged in small groups of two or three as their investigations conclude," he said.

"Once all investigations are complete, the formal trials will begin," he added.

The accused include 11 former ministers, two ex-advisers to former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, two former state ministers, a former lawmaker, a former Supreme Court justice, and a former secretary.

16 ACCUSED PRODUCED BEFORE ICT-1

At around 11:15am yesterday, 16 of the high-profile accused were brought to the courtroom of the International Crimes Tribunal-1 in connection with a miscellaneous case filed against the 45 individuals over crimes against humanity during the July uprising.

A miscellaneous case becomes a regular case once formal charges are pressed.

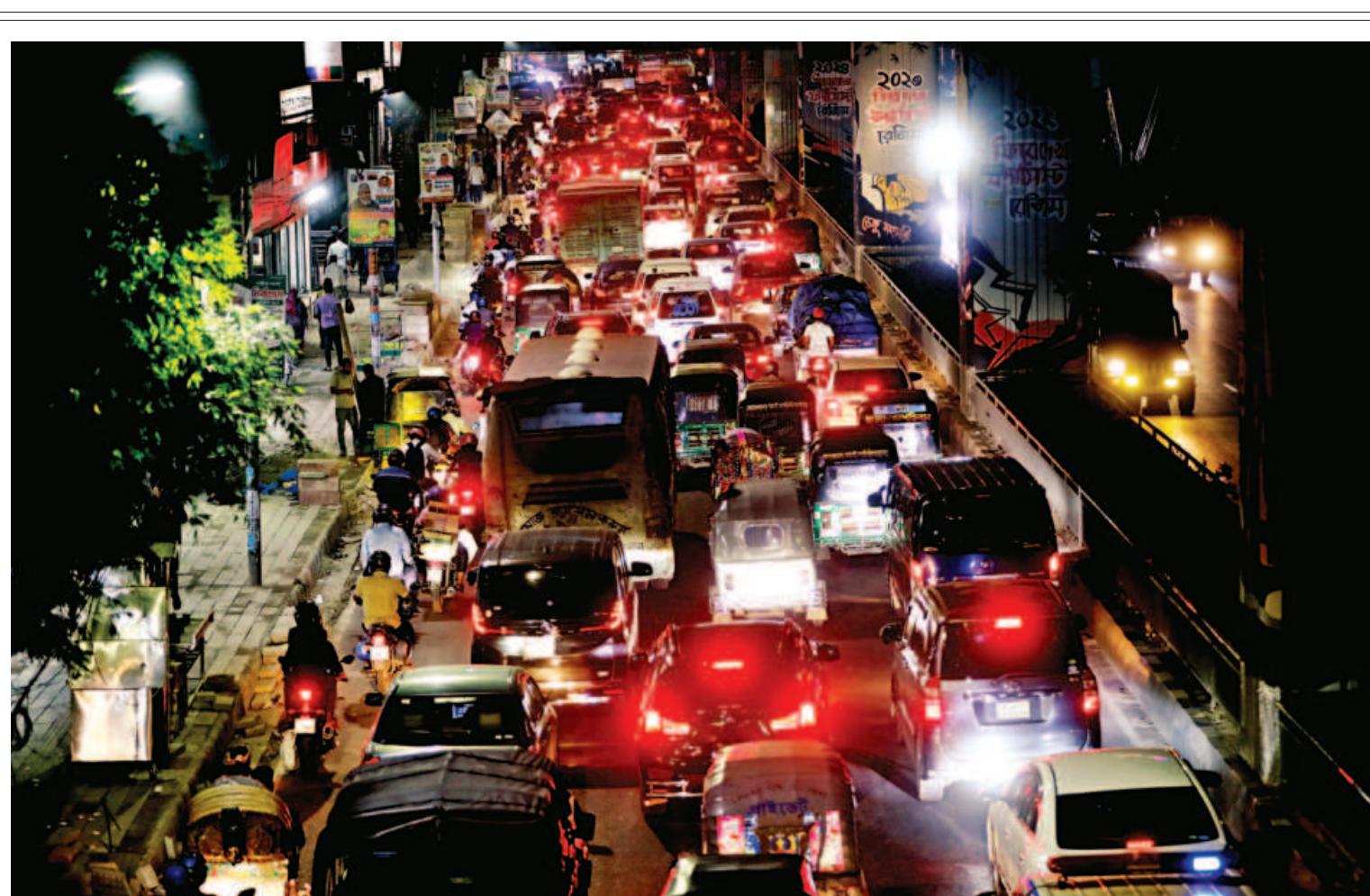
Before proceedings began, many of the accused – once powerful figures in government – chatted among themselves. Some smiled; others

appeared thoughtful or tense.

Former ministers Shajahan Khan, Abdur Razzaque, Dipu Moni, and Hasanul Haq Inu were seen talking to each other.

Shajahan also spoke with Salman F Rahman, while Inu chatted with former MP Solaiman Selim. Across the dock, Amir Hossain Amu conversed with Anisul Huq, and Qamrul Islam spoke with Razzaque and Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury.

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A long tailback clogs Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue in the capital, leaving commuters stuck for hours as traffic came to a near standstill. The congestion was largely caused by the closure of Shahbagh following the MPO teachers' protest earlier in the day. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS