

Death toll in HK fire rises to 83

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Hong Kong firefighters yesterday brought under control a huge blaze in an apartment complex that killed at least 83 and left nearly 300 missing, while police said its cause could have been a "grossly negligent" construction firm using unsafe materials.

Rescuers battled intense heat and thick smoke for more than a day after the blaze erupted as they fought to reach residents feared trapped on the upper floors of the Wang Fuk Court housing complex in the northern district of Tai Po.

A firefighter was among the dead, while dozens in hospital were in critical condition, authorities said. About 279 people have yet to be traced.

The eight blocks of the tightly packed complex have 2,000 apartments home to more than 4,600 people in the financial hub struggling to overcome chronic shortages of affordable housing.

Yesterday, police officers searched the building maintenance company responsible for the housing estate, seizing documents that mentioned it, media said. The company did not immediately respond to requests for comment.



Rescuers wade through floodwaters with a rope to evacuate residents trapped in their homes in Padang, West Sumatra province, Indonesia, yesterday. The nationwide flood death toll has risen to 61.

PHOTO: AFP

Brazil approves world's first single-dose dengue vaccine

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Brazilian authorities on Wednesday approved the world's first single-dose dengue vaccine, which they hailed as a "historic" achievement as cases of the mosquito-borne disease soar globally due to rising temperatures.

Dengue, known for intense flu-like symptoms, crushing fatigue and body aches, reached record global levels in 2024 and researchers have attributed its spread to climate change.

Brazil's health regulatory agency ANVISA authorised the use of Butantan-DV, developed by the Butantan Institute in São Paulo, for people aged 12 to 59.

Currently, the only dengue vaccine available worldwide is TAK-003, which requires two doses administered three months apart, according to the WHO.

5 quakes in a week worry Dhaka

FROM PAGE 1

near Dhaka within such a short span of time," said Rubayet Kabir, in-charge of the Earthquake Monitoring Centre at the Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD).

He said yesterday's 3.6-magnitude tremor occurred at 4:15pm. Its epicentre was in Ghorashal, Narshingdi, about 28km northeast of the BMD Seismic Centre in Dhaka's Agargaon.

Earlier yesterday morning, people in Sylhet also felt a jolt, which Kabir said originated in Manipur, around 300km outside Bangladesh territory.

On November 22, a light quake measuring 4.3 on the Richter scale was felt seven and a half hours after a 3.3-magnitude tremor recorded that afternoon. A third tremor, measuring 3.7 and centred in Palash upazila of Narshingdi, followed at 6:06pm, according to a Met office bulletin.

"We now think all these are aftershocks of the first earthquake," Kabir said, adding that such sequences are not unusual and that other countries experiencing major quakes have also recorded similar aftershocks.

Asked about the situation, Prof Dr Badruddoza Mia, chairman of the geology department at Dhaka University, said, "It seems these are aftershocks. So people need not panic. But they should take precautions."

However, some experts note that Dhaka lies close to the Indo-Burma subduction zone, where the Indian plate dives beneath the Burma plate along Bangladesh's eastern margin. For nearly two decades, experts have warned that living near such a zone means sitting atop a seismic time bomb.

The real concern is whether the energy accumulating in a subduction zone can trigger a major quake," said Prof Akhter Humayun, a former Dhaka University faculty member who has studied earthquakes for 40 years.

After the three consecutive quakes on November 22, Dhaka University authorities decided to close the university for two weeks to assess tremor risks and carry out necessary renovations of residential halls.

The government has also decided to review safety in other vulnerable structures in Dhaka. The Chief Adviser's Office has formed a task force and directed it to submit recommendations.

On November 24, Rajuk Chairman Riazul Islam said approximately 300 buildings – both large and small – in Dhaka have been identified as vulnerable following the recent quakes.

"Both Rajuk and building owners share responsibility for constructions that violate rules and approved designs. However, the main responsibility lies with the building owners," he added.

Hasina gets 21 yrs in 3 graft cases

FROM PAGE 1

In addition to yesterday's jail terms, the Awami League chief was also fined Tk 3 lakh in three cases, in default of which she will have to serve an additional 18 months in jail.

The court also fined Joy and Putul Tk 1 lakh each in their respective cases.

The trials of the three cases concluded after 13 hearings, according to the prosecution.

There are 20 other accused in the cases, including a former minister, two former secretaries, and the former Rajuk chairman and officials. Nineteen of them were sentenced to jail terms ranging from one to 18 years, while one was acquitted.

The ACC lodged six separate cases between January 12 and 14 with its Dhaka Integrated District Office-1 on charges of irregularities in the allocation of plots under the Purbachal New Town project.

The anti-graft body alleged that Hasina, in collusion with senior Rajuk officials, unlawfully secured six plots – each measuring 10 kathas – in the diplomatic zone of Sector 27 of the project for herself, Joy, Putul, her sister Sheikh Rehana, nephew Radwan Mujib Siddiqi Bobby, and niece Azmina Siddiqi, despite their ineligibility under existing regulations.

"The allotments were processed and approved in a manner inconsistent with lawful administrative practices, thereby conferring undue benefits upon her relatives," said the judgment.

The conduct of a premier, who used her long-held political authority to obtain 60 kathas of Rajuk land for herself, her son, daughter, sister, and her sister's children, demonstrates a persistent corrupt mindset rooted in entitlement, unchecked power, and a greedy eye for public property."

In the verdicts, Judge Mamun also said that despite serving four terms as a prime minister, she disregarded the allotment rules meant to ensure fairness and prevent the concentration of state resources within one family.

He added that she treated public land as if it were her private asset, exploiting state resources and manipulating official procedures to benefit herself and her close relatives.

"Such conduct reflects a deliberate abuse of public office and reveals a

belief that high political power places one above the law. These actions erode public trust and undermine the principles of integrity and accountability,"

Accordingly, the judge said, exemplary punishment is warranted, and justice will be served by imposing seven years' imprisonment on Hasina, the maximum penalty under section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947.

After the verdict, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, on his verified Facebook page, wrote, "My family and I each purchased 1/6 of an acre of land, in an undeveloped area on the outskirts of Dhaka, for 30 lakh Taka each. We paid for it with our own money. None of us has ever purchased property in Bangladesh before. The only property we have is inherited."

"... We received no communications, were not allowed to hire lawyers and there was absolutely no due process. The aim of this verdict was to prevent any of us from running for elections."

Hasina was ousted on August 5 last year in the face of student-led mass uprising. Currently, she is accused in over 550 cases filed with different police stations and courts across the country.

OTHER CONVICTS

The court sentenced former housing and public works state minister Sharif Ahmed and former secretaries Shahid Ullah Khandaker and Kazi Washi Uddin to 18 years' rigorous imprisonment and fined Tk 3 lakh each in three cases.

The ministry's former senior assistant secretary Purabi Goldar was sentenced to three years' simple imprisonment and fined Tk 20,000 in the same cases.

Rajuk's former chairman Anisur Rahman Miah was handed down 15 years in jail and a fine of Tk 1.5 lakh, while its former members Mohammad Nasir Uddin and Shamsuddin Ahmed Chowdhury were each given a nine years' imprisonment and a fine of Tk 60,000. Former member Mohammad Khurshid Alami was sentenced to three years in jail. All of them were convicted in all three cases.

Prime Minister's Office's former secretary Mohammad Salahuddin was handed a jail sentence of 12 years and a fine of Tk 2 lakh, while Rajuk's former members Tanmoy Das and Nurul Islam were handed down six years in jail and

a fine of Tk 40,000 each in two cases. Nayeb Ali Sharif, a former deputy director of Rajuk, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and fined Tk 10,000 in two cases.

Rajuk's former members Shafiul Haque and Kabir Al Asad, and its former director Sheikh Shahinul Islam and incumbent Kamrul Islam were sentenced to three years in jail and a fine of Tk 20,000 each in one case. Its former deputy directors Hafizur Rahman and Habibur Rahman Sobuj, and former assistant director Mazharul Islam were sentenced to one year imprisonment and a fine of Tk 5,000 each in one case.

The court acquitted the housing and public works ministry's former administrative officer Saiful Islam Sarkar of the three cases as the prosecution failed to prove the charges against him.

During the verdict, only former Rajuk member Khurshid was present in the courtroom.

Speaking to reporters on the court premises, ACC Public Prosecutor Khan Md Moinul Hasan Lipon said the commission was not satisfied with the verdicts.

"After talking to the ACC, further steps will be taken challenging the verdicts," he told The Daily Star.

The Special Judge's Court-4 of Dhaka is scheduled to announce the verdict in a separate corruption case, filed against 17 people including Hasina, her sister Rehana and niece Tulip Siddiqi, on December 1.

The trial of two other graft cases filed against 21 people, including Hasina, her nieces Azmina and Tulip, and nephew Radwan, is now pending at the same court, said the prosecution.

According to ACC officials, Tulip, who stands accused in the three cases, used her power as a British MP to get plots for Rehana, Bobby and Azmina.

On March 25, the ACC filed six charge sheets with the Metropolitan Senior Special Judge's Court in Dhaka, in which Hasina was named as a common accused in all six cases, including the three in which the verdict was announced yesterday.

On July 31, charges were framed against 29 people, including Hasina, Rehana, Joy, Putul, Bobby, Tulip and Azmina, in their respective cases.

The amendment strengthens the NHRC's role in preventing torture and inhuman treatment.

The NHRC will serve as the National Preventive Mechanism under the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and this will allow the commission to conduct independent inspections of detention centres and other facilities.

The ordinance also gives the NHRC authority to monitor detention places and ensure human rights standards are maintained, Shafiqul said, adding that the commission will receive the financial and institutional support it needs to perform its duties.

On the Rohingya crisis, Shafiqul said the issue had lost global attention during the previous government.

Deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina focused more on promoting her image as the Mother of Humanity instead of addressing the real causes of the crisis.

The current administration has brought the issue back into international discussions through active diplomacy and engagement.

In response to a question, Shafiqul said Yunus had earlier expressed hope that Rohingyas might return home around Eid. However, diplomatic efforts take time and results may not appear immediately.

He also confirmed that the meeting did not include any discussion about elections or any advisers planning to take part in future polls.

Trump tells Japan PM not to aggravate China dispute: sources

REUTERS, Tokyo

US President Donald Trump asked Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi not to further escalate a dispute with China during talks this week, sources with knowledge of the matter said, as he tries to preserve a fragile trade war truce with Beijing.

Takaichi touched off the biggest diplomatic dispute with Beijing in years when she told parliament this month that a hypothetical Chinese attack on Taiwan that threatened Japan could justify a military response.

Her remark enraged Beijing, prompting it to warn its citizens against travel to its East Asian neighbour.

In Tuesday's telephone call with Takaichi, Trump said he did not want to see further escalation, said the two Japanese government sources, who sought anonymity as the matter is a sensitive one.

Trump made no specific demands of Takaichi, however, one of the sources said, suggesting that he did not echo Beijing's call for a retraction. Japan has said her remarks reflect longstanding government policy.

At a regular press briefing on Thursday, its Chief Cabinet Secretary Minoru Kiuchi declined to comment on the details of the "diplomatic exchange".

That telephone conversation came after Trump spoke to Chinese President Xi Jinping, who told the US leader Taiwan's return to China was central to Beijing's vision for the world order, the official Xinhua news agency said.

Democratically governed Taiwan rejects Beijing's sovereignty claim.

Trump, who plans to travel to

Japan hosts the largest overseas concentration of US military, including an aircraft carrier strike group and a US Marine amphibious force that hem in China's military ambitions.

During earlier meetings with the chief adviser, BNP delegations stressed that officials responsible for election duties must remain neutral.

Changing officers who directly handle poll responsibilities just before the schedule is announced is "not only unusual but has created new questions" about the election environment, they said. Another Standing Committee member

cautioned that politically motivated appointments could make the administration biased "even before voting begins".

Three Standing Committee members also said officers with questionable past actions or political leanings have been posted in many districts, further deepening doubts about election time neutrality.

BNP believes the government is reorganising field administration in favour of a party as part of that party's election preparations.

They added that election security, administration, polling centre management, and enforcement of the code of conduct all depend on SPs, DCs, and UNOs. "If questionable appointments are made, political controversy over the election results may increase," said a senior BNP leader.

Two Standing Committee members demanded that the government clearly explain these transfers and appointments. They said the government must publish the reasons, standards, and procedures behind the reshuffle to ensure genuine transparency. Otherwise, public distrust in the Election Commission will grow.

"We will raise this issue at our party meeting to take an initiative on this matter," said a Standing Committee member.

LIFE-TERM FOR HASINA, KAMAL ICT prosecution to seek death penalty

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The prosecution is preparing to appeal to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court seeking to upgrade the International Crimes Tribunal's life sentences for deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina and former home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal to death in a crimes against humanity case linked to the July uprising.

On November 17, the ICT-1 sentenced the two to death on one charge and to imprisonment until natural death on another.

"We have been reviewing the judgement and primarily decided to seek enhancement of the life terms to death penalty," Prosecutor Gazi Monawar Hossain Tamim told reporters yesterday.

Meanwhile, the ICT-2 yesterday heard a review petition filed by Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal leader Hasanul Haq Inu challenging the charge-framing order against him without any defence lawyer present.

During the hearing, Chief Prosecutor Tajul Islam requested the court to dismiss the petition.

Contacted, Inu's lawyer Md Munsurul Hoque Chowdhury told The Daily Star that such matters are usually heard on scheduled dates and that neither he nor his juniors were informed of the early hearing.

Tajul later told reporters that the application not only questioned the legality of the July uprising

SEE PAGE 8 COL 4