

Bangladesh fire kills more than 120 people

By Sarath Kumara
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At least 120 people were killed in a fire that razed housing apartments in an old section of Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital, on Thursday night. It is the worst fire tragedy in Dhaka since independence in 1971.

With numbers of bodies still to be recovered and scores of people critically injured, the final death toll will be higher. While the blaze was severe, the city's decaying infrastructure and the poor emergency services contributed to the heavy loss of life.

The fire started around 10.30 p.m. and raged for around three hours in the densely populated Kayettuli neighbourhood, in the heart of the city. The immediate area consisted of several multi-storey apartment buildings and tin-roofed dwellings. At least 15 of the victims were attending a wedding on the roof of one of the buildings.

Fire officials indicated that an electrical transformer explosion triggered the fire, but the cause of the fire is yet to be definitely established. Seven buildings were engulfed, including a bakery that had several large gas burners. A line of small shops containing flammable chemicals and plastic goods on the ground floor of an apartment building also caught fire. Dhaka fire department chief Abu Nayeem told the media: "The temperature and fumes became unbearable because of the chemicals".

According to witnesses, flames rose up to 76 metres in the air. One woman, who was looking for her daughter and son, told Reuters: "It seemed like hell broke loose." According to another victim: "Flames leapt up to the sixth floor of buildings. It was a huge inferno."

Many of those who died were trapped by the lack of fire escapes. Regardless of the risk to their own lives, hundreds of local people tried to fight the fire, rescue the wounded and rush the victims to hospitals, many in three-wheeled rickshaws. Later, relatives and friends searched the buildings for survivors. Many bodies were

charred beyond recognition.

Although Bangladesh faces frequent emergencies, including floods, storms and factory fires, the official unpreparedness for emergencies was obvious.

The state-run Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the country's largest, was overwhelmed with burns victims. Burns unit chief Shamanta Lal Sen said his division struggled to care for the casualties, with beds available for only about 25 people. "I never have had such a harrowing experience in my 40 years here," he told Reuters. Patients were crammed in hospital corridors, which were also full of weeping relatives. Nearby Salimullah Medical College Hospital set up a makeshift burns unit to treat victims.

Narrow streets and poorly-constructed buildings hampered the access of fire-fighters. Fire chief Nayeem said: "We struggled to get inside due to the narrow stairways of the very old buildings. It was almost impossible for us to get fire fighting equipment into the area."

Although the Fire Services headquarters is less than a kilometre away, it took an hour for fire-fighters to reach the scene. Al Jazeera's correspondent reported that local people were "very angry" about the delay. Residents also complained of an acute water shortage. Eventually, 18 fire engines were deployed, but these resources were inadequate to control such a large fire. Lacking modern equipment, some fire-fighters had to use torches or mobile phone lights to find bodies.

In an effort to contain popular anger, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government has declared today a day of mourning, and announced plans to pay 20,000 taka (\$US290) for the cost of the each burial. Visiting hospitals on Friday, Hasina said the government would bear the cost of the treatment of the injured. She ordered an investigation to determine the cause of the fire.

However, nothing will be done to improve the living

conditions of the working poor. The causes of the tragedy are rooted in the social hardships that force the poor to live in over-crowded tenements and engage in dangerous small industries. Local government minister Jahangir Kabir Nanak conceded: “We should have better planned homes and wider roads to save lives.”

Large numbers of people are killed or injured every year in Bangladesh in industrial accidents, fires and building collapses. The limited building and safety regulations are rarely enforced and routinely flouted. Fires due to short-circuits, substandard wiring and electrical faults are common, essentially due to building contractors and landlords seeking maximum profits.

This is the second disaster caused by poor construction and lack of safety enforcement in the capital within 72 hours. On June 1, a five-storey building collapsed on tin-shed houses in the Begunbari district, killing 25 and injuring 30 more. Around 200 people were living in the building when it collapsed. The main reason was a shoddy extension of the building. A three-storey building constructed in 2001 was later expanded, with the fifth storey completed only a week before the collapse. Roads to the site were also narrow, preventing ambulances from getting within 200 metres.

On Friday, another six-storey residential building leaned dangerously to one side after heavy rain, though no one was killed. Again, shoddy construction appeared to be the cause. Similar building collapses have occurred in recent days in other older parts of Dhaka.

With 13 million people, Dhaka is one of the most populated cities in the world, but has only rudimentary emergency services. In an editorial on Friday, the *Daily Star*, a Bangladesh daily, commented: “Be it a fire in a shanty or the collapse of a billboard on a busy urban street, the outfits which are expected, indeed trained, to handle such incidents all too often fail to come up to the task. In short, we are all caught unawares when disaster of this magnitude strikes. Civil defence forces and the fire service are quite unable to grapple with the immensity of the disaster. It has been seen that when fires engulf the top floors of a high-rise building, the fire control equipment proves to be inadequate in handling the crisis. Water hoses and ladders are inadequate.”

These obvious inadequacies are, however, a reflection of the indifference and contempt of successive governments, and the entire Bangladesh ruling elite, to the fate of working people. It is the inevitable product of a social order that puts the private profits of the wealthy few, ahead of the pressing social needs of the majority.

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