

Another devastating fire kills at least 80 in Bangladesh capital

By Sujeewa Amaranath
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At least 80 people have been killed and another 50 injured by a fire that erupted in a four-storey building and raced through three other buildings on Wednesday night in the Chawkbazar area of Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. It took more than 12 hours for the police and fire services to get the fire under control.

The media reported that most of the victims' bodies were charred beyond recognition. A search for more bodies was discontinued after 14 hours. The death toll could rise because some of the injured are in a critical condition and are being treated in several hospitals, including the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Doubt surrounds the number of casualties. The *New York Times* reported that the firestorm claimed at least 110 lives. Samanta Lal Sen, the head of a burns' unit in the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, told the Associated Press at least nine of the critically-injured people were being treated in his unit.

The cause of the fire is yet to be officially determined, but the resulting inferno was obviously fuelled by chemicals allowed to be stored in the area, despite repeated government promises of crackdowns on building code violations after similar disasters.

Shamsul Alam, an officer at the department of explosives, told Al Jazeera that an "initial investigation found that the fire started when a gas cylinder burst. Our team is still investigating. Nothing conclusive can be said now."

Like many buildings in Chawkbazar, the ground floors were being used as warehouses and shops, while the upper floors contained residential apartments. According to media reports, highly combustible chemicals and plastic goods were stored in one warehouse on the ground floor and caught fire immediately. Eyewitnesses and the police said gas cylinder explosions in the residential apartments helped fuel the blaze.

The Chawkbazar district, which is said to be about 400

years old, has narrow streets and buildings erected very close to each other. When the fire erupted at about 11:00 p.m., many residents were sleeping. According to eyewitnesses, the sudden fire and explosions halted traffic, including vehicles and rickshaws, killing occupants and night shoppers.

Haji Abdul Kader told the AFP: "I heard a big bang. I turned back and saw the whole street in flames. Flames were everywhere."

Mohammad Rakib, a restaurant manager, told the *New York Times* that he watched a rickshaw driver try to outrace the flames and then get burned alive. "So many people were trying to escape," he said. "I was so terrified, I ran out of the restaurant and left behind all the money."

The incident created a horrible and tragic scene with people anxiously looking for information about missing relatives and incinerated vehicles scattered across the street.

Some victims were having dinner at a nearby restaurant and others were said to be in a bridal party. A Dhaka Fire Service official said many of the victims were trapped inside the buildings. One woman was holding her small daughter in her arms when the rickshaw in which she was travelling caught on fire.

Officials told the media that fire-fighting trucks were unable to reach the site because the nearby roads were closed for a national holiday on Thursday and traffic filled the street.

In a typical face-saving ritual conducted after every such disaster, Bangladesh President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed expressed shock at the incident and sympathy for the families of those killed.

To deflect popular anger over the tragedy, the Ministry of Labour and Employment announced a meagre 100,000 taka (\$US1,191) payment for the families of those killed and 50,000 taka for those injured.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, who visited

the area, announced the formation of a committee to investigate the fire and report within seven days. The Ministry of Industries and the Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD) also announced investigations.

Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Sayeed Khokon declared that no more chemical warehouses would be allowed inside Dhaka. Such official responses, and empty promises of action, have been made repeatedly in the past.

Bangladeshi authorities moved to ban the storage of chemical goods in residential areas after a deadly fire in 2010, but little has changed. That fire, which occurred in Nimtoli district and killed 124 people, was also made worse by the presence of an illegal warehouse.

As the BBC reported: “After that incident, a committee suggested the removal of all chemical warehouses from residential areas, but critics say no significant steps have been taken in the years since.”

Even the government’s limited building zoning rules are often ignored because of lax enforcement or corruption. Wealthy business owners routinely pay off officials or the authorities who simply turn a blind eye in order to not interfere with profitable enterprises.

A taskforce comprised of FSCD and police officials was established after the 2010 fire but no warehouse was removed, an FSCD official told Al Jazeera.

Data collated by the Department of Explosives said that in Chawkbazar alone, 46 companies have licences to import and export combustible chemicals, while 70 other units have licences to use these chemicals to produce goods like perfumes. But an official from the department, who wished to remain anonymous, told Al Jazeera that beside these 116 companies, more than 2,000 illegal chemical warehouses were being run in the area.

Building fires and collapses have killed hundreds of people in Bangladesh in recent years. In 2012, more than 112 garment workers were burned to death when a fire burnt through the multi-floor Tazreen Fashion factory in the Ashulia district on Dhaka’s outskirts.

In 2013, the eight-storey Rana Plaza building, which contained five garment factories, collapsed. More than 1,200 people were killed, mainly garment workers, and thousands more were injured, in one of the world’s worst industrial disasters.

At that time, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned:

“In the wake of the tragedy, governments, the media, trade unions and various NGOs declare, in one way or another, that something must be done and promote the illusion that the global corporations and Bangladeshi

government can be pressured to improve safety and living standards for garment workers. The reality is that the government will do nothing to jeopardise exports or profits. Amid the deepening breakdown of global capitalism, safety standards will worsen, not improve.”

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina’s Awami League-led government took office for the third time this January, boasting about high economic growth. The reality is that Bangladesh, like other impoverished countries, has been turned into a cheap labour platform for global corporations to exploit workers in sweatshop conditions. Hasina’s administration and the capitalist class are unable to address any of the population’s pressing social questions.

Just last month, the Awami League government backed large garment companies in sacking more than 7,000 workers after they returned to work, ending an eight-day struggle for wage increases amid police intimidation and threats of mass lock-outs.

In its efforts to attract international investment from other low-wage countries, Hasina’s government is desperately serving the interests of local big business, as well the global investors and retail giants that thrive on the ruthless exploitation of the country’s working class.

As the WSWs insisted in 2013: “These tragedies are crimes that are ultimately rooted in the profit system itself. Globalised production, which has the potential to provide everyone on the planet with a decent standard of living, is leading under capitalism to enormous profits for the wealthy few and the deepening immiseration of working people around the world.

“The only solution lies in a unified struggle of the international working class to abolish this outmoded and reactionary social order and establish a rationally planned world socialist economy to meet the pressing social needs of humanity as a whole.”

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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