

Bangladesh: Thousands of families homeless after fire destroys Dhaka shanty homes

By Wimal Perera
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Thousands of poor people were rendered homeless after a massive blaze swept through the 20-acre Chalantika shanty town in Mirpur on the northern outskirts of Dhaka on August 16. It took 24 fire-fighting units three hours to bring the inferno under control. Fire service authorities told the media that illegal gas connections in plastic pipes helped the fire spread faster.

While news agencies initially said the fire incinerated 15,000 homes, recent media articles claimed that between 1,500 and 2,000 dwellings were devastated, rendering 10,000 people homeless and destroying most of their belongings.

The area is home to poor and low-income workers and their families, including rickshaw pullers, small vendors and street hawkers, as well as garment workers and day labourers.

Muhammad Siddique, 50, who works as a security guard, told *ucanews.com* on August 19 that he was with his family—four sons and a daughter with her baby girl—inside their home when the disaster started. “The fire destroyed our food, clothes and all our belongings, including some money,” he said.

While no deaths were reported, four people were hospitalised. No-one was killed primarily because most residents were away celebrating the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha. Many garment workers had returned to their home villages for the religious holiday.

No official statement has been released by the government or firefighting agencies about what caused the fire. Arson cannot be ruled out. Some survivors told the media the fire could have been deliberately lit to force residents out of the area. The Bangladesh police and its notorious Rapid Action Battalion forces were deployed to break up possible demonstrations by residents.

An *AsiaNews* report quoted Saidul Islam, a local rickshaw puller, who said: “We could smell kerosene. Fire was lit in the north and south [of the area]. I think somebody set fire intentionally to remove us.”

In a face-saving gesture, the Awami League-led government appointed a three-member committee to investigate the disaster and made empty promises to help victims. The state minister for disaster management and relief, Enamur Rahman, and Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Atiqul Islam visited the site and “assured” survivors they would be temporarily housed in five neighbourhood schools.

Islam claimed that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had ordered “permanent establishments” to be erected at Baunia embankment. Rahman said 500 tonnes of rice would be made available and a pittance of 1.3 million taka (\$US15,476) in total for survivors. If 10,000 people were impacted by the blaze, the government’s so-called financial assistance amounts to about \$1.54 per person.

According to the *Daily Star*, victims of this year’s Chawkbazarfire, which was caused by a chemical store explosion and killed 80 people, “have not received any financial compensation from the State.”

An opinion column this week in the same newspaper referred to the recent Chalantika fire. It noted that landlords gouge massive profits from those forced to live in dangerously unsafe and unhealthy slums. According to a 2017 Bangladesh University study, landlords earn on average 47 taka per square foot each month for accommodation, with additional exorbitant charges for electricity, gas and water.

Frequent fires in Bangladesh also have destroyed factories and high-rise buildings. These disasters are a result of the violation of basic fire safety standards by construction companies and the government’s refusal

to provide adequate resources and manpower to the country's firefighting authority, the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence (BFSCD).

According to a 2017 BFSCD report, 90 percent of buildings in Dhaka and other major cities lack proper fire safety arrangements. One in every five houses in eight city corporation areas in Bangladesh were regarded as "highly risky." The survey reported an average of 17,000 fire incidents annually, with Dhaka and Chittagong experiencing the highest number.

Forty-five people died in fire incidents across Bangladesh in 2017, and over 130 people last year. In the first three months of this year, 96 were killed in Dhaka alone.

Dhaka, which has a population of 14.5 million, has become a megacity. By some estimates, it ranks number five in the world behind Shanghai, Beijing, Karachi and Istanbul.

Nearly one-third—4.8 million—of Dhaka's population live in slums, rising from 3.4 million in 2005. Many of them were forced into the city by rural land erosion. Two-thirds of the slums are located on land privately-owned by wealthy individuals.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reported that the income share held by the richest 5 percent of households rose to 28 percent in the fiscal year of 2016, up from 19 percent in 1992. The income share held by the poorest 5 percent dropped to 0.23 percent from 1.03 percent over the same period.

Around the world, globalisation and financialisation have led to massive social inequality, with luxurious apartments for the rich alongside slums and shanties for the poor. According to one estimate, one in ten people globally live in slums. In the drive for ever-higher profits, international finance capital demands infrastructure developments and tax holidays to benefit investors and manufacturers, and an ongoing supply of cheap labour.

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