

Why has it been difficult to extinguish fire at the Basundhara City Mall ?

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An obvious trauma gripped the businesses and people around Basundhara City Mall after a devastating fire on the 17th floor, at 1-40 PM in the afternoon on Friday 13th March,. The blaze burnt many offices into ashes inside the country's biggest and iconic shopping centre. Six top floors were gutted, 7 killed and 20 injured. The fire is suspected to originate from electric short-circuit on the day of weekly holiday (Friday).

It took several hours to extinguish fire and by 9 PM .Military, police and RAB personnel joined the firefighting team to control it.

The Basundhara City Mall, is a 20-storey building, opened in August 2004, is claimed to be the largest shopping mall in South Asia and the 12th largest in the world. The 400-crore building complex houses around 2,500 retail stores and food courts are on the first eight floors of the mall. The upper floors house a multiplex movie theatre, a gymnasium, and offices including the corporate headquarters of the Bashundhara Group.

The Mall has become a tourist spot and thousands of young people from Dhaka city and around come to visit the shopping complex with their relatives and friends. It has become a “must-see” place for visitors to Dhaka

Many shop- owners were not even in a position to make any comment on their fate as they were traumatised by the raging blazes. Some of them however told newsmen that they were not allowed to salvage their merchandise for security and safety reasons.

.Why has it been difficult to extinguish fire?

There are several reasons and some of them deserve mention:

First, automated fire systems in the Basundhara Mall miserably failed and the hydrants were useless because there was no water in the reservoir (tank) within the building. If the hydrants worked with water, the fire might not have spread so fast.

Second, there appeared to be fire no coordinator within the complex and the Basundhara's own fire fighters had reportedly very little training and they could not control fire. Furthermore the modern fire-safety equipment installed in the complex did not work. Obviously it demonstrated that there had been no regular routine fire drill within the complex. Ordinarily there should have been a fire drill at every two to three months in which each and every individual present at the building participates.

Third, the Fire Service has logistics and equipment to extinguish fire at 13th floor and not beyond that. The fire broke out on the 17th floor and the Fire Service was helpless.

Fourth, the relaxed attitude of authorities to allow construction of high rise buildings in Dhaka without rigorous compliance with fire fighting gadgets and trained fire fighters within the

building is being cited as another reason because no government agencies monitor if the rules are violated by builders.

Fifth, all the canals and waterways within and around the Dhaka metropolitan city (population about 15 million) have either been blocked or dry and on many of them buildings were constructed through political influence. Urbanization in Dhaka and elsewhere has not been planned and there are not enough open space, fields and water resources within Dhaka city for natural or man-made emergency.

Sixth, the biggest stumbling block appears to be the unnecessary crowd- gatherers at the fire place. Within minutes hundreds of thousands curious onlookers gather on the main avenues to watch fire, impeding the smooth and easy ride of the fire fighters and law enforcing agencies to the place of occurrences. Crowd-control remains one of the biggest hazards of any fire disasters in the city. At the Basundhara city mall, military was summoned to control and disperse the crowd.

A probe body headed by a joint secretary of the home ministry will be investigating the cause of the fire and the reasons for not working the automated fire equipments inside the complex. Furthermore the State Minister of Home Affairs announced that a thorough investigation would be made to ascertain whether any rules regarding construction and safety had been violated by the builders and engineers.

The fire at the Mall should be perceived as an eye opener by every one. It is a warning to builders, engineers and the regulating bodies (Rajuk and the City Corporation) to be vigilant and alert to monitor the compliance of rules and regulations by the constructing authorities. Private sectors must not cut corners to minimize costs, violating the basic safety standards. Fire safety standards and regular fire drill must be made compulsory for any high rise buildings in the country.

When the AL-led government started to govern the country with the manifesto of “Charter of Change”, it has been facing testing times within such a short time of little over two months. Ordinarily performance of any government is measured by the 100 days but this elected government confronts one unforeseen challenge after another before its 100 days.

Furthermore, the global economic meltdown has already adversely impacted on Bangladesh’s economy including the return of migrant workers, slowing the foreign private investment, decreasing the remittances from abroad and lessening exports to overseas. As a result the budget is being cut. The Finance Minister said that he would announce some stimulus packages for revitalizing the economy.

Let us hope for the best and prepare for the worst with the knowledge that the richer countries have gone to recession and no one can tell when they would come out of it. The G-20 Summit is expected to meet in London on 2nd April to discuss plans to tackle the current global economic crisis. (*From Asia*, G-20 includes China, Japan, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Turkey, *from Africa* South Africa, *from Latin America*, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, and Russia, US, UK, France, Italy, Germany, Canada , Australia and European Union).

Let us hope that a comprehensive universal plan that covers poorer countries would be chalked out and provides a clear path in rescuing the global economic contraction.