# Office workers killed in building fires in Bangladesh

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Major fires continue to hit Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital, one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Late last week 26 office workers were killed and at least 70 others were injured in a fire at FR Tower, a 23-storey building in an upmarket commercial district of the city. Two days later another fire razed to the ground about 300 small shops in a market district in the city's north.

This week three more fires were reported in Dhaka. On Wednesday night blazes occurred at the Salauddin Specialised Hospital at Wari and the Tropical Tower at Paltan, both in the city's south, and early on Thursday morning a fire gutted 25 small shops in a row of 1,300. Although no casualties were reported, poor building standards and fire safety, along with inadequate emergency services, have made the city a death trap for its residents.

Successive Bangladeshi governments have claimed they will crack down on safety and building-code violations, without any real changes being implemented because planning, construction and safety regulations are all subordinated to the drive for profit.

The FR Tower blaze occurred on March 28. Nineteen bodies were found inside the building and several other people died attempting to escape from the multi-storey building using computer leads and other cables as ropes.

The fire was only brought under control after four hours by 22 firefighting units, backed by army, navy and air force personnel and equipment. Air force helicopters were used to drop water on the building. As is common in most Dhaka buildings, there were no water sprinklers installed in the multi-storey building.

Dhaka Fire Department spokesperson Shajahan Sikder told the BBC that there was a lack of fire safety equipment inside the building and that fire escapes on a number of floors were locked. With no proper exits, victims were seen shouting for help from windows.

The FR Tower, which was built before 2006, did not have a single fire-protected staircase and the main staircase was filled with choking smoke. Office workers able to reach the top of the building were rescued by air force helicopters. According to news reports, the Bangladesh fire department had sent two letters in the last two years highlighting the dangerous lack of safety in the building.

S.M.H.I. Faruque, who owned the land on which the FR Tower was located, and Tasvir Ul Islam, one of the owners of the illegally constructed top floors of the building, were arrested on March 30 and were to be held for seven days for questioning.

Abdul Beaten, a police official, accused the two men of being responsible for "deaths of many through negligence and indifference." He said that they treated the FR Tower as a "money-making factory." Such statements are designed to stem public outrage over disasters, but invariably no action is taken to prevent them in the future.

Authorities knew the multi-storey block was unsafe. The tower building, in fact, was supposed to be just 18-storeys high but was illegally extended to 23 floors.

FR Tower's faulty construction, illegal extension, lack of emergency exits, insufficient smoke detectors and absence of firefighting equipment are typical of most buildings in Dhaka.

The Awami League-led government's response to the FR Tower blaze was completely cynical. As with previous tragedies, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced various cosmetic measures, including increased building inspections by fire-fighting services.

Two days after the FR Tower blaze, on March 30, fire gutted hundreds of small shops at the Gulshan DNCC

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Market. Two years ago, in 2017, another fire destroyed the busy market place, forcing traders to take out expensive loans to rebuild their shops. Yet, no serious safety measures were implemented.

One fire victim, Jahirul Islam, told media: “I recently took out a loan of 500,000 taka (about $US6,000) and stocked new products in the shop. Everything I worked for was turned into ashes today.

The government has offered a pittance of 10,000 taka to each affected trader and 20 kilograms of rice to impacted market labourers.

Hundreds of residents have been killed in Dhaka and other Bangladesh cities by building fires in recent years. So frequent are these disasters that the *Daily Star* anxiously headlined its lead story on March 29 as “The City That Burns.”

Earlier this year, on February 21, 78 people were killed by a massive chemical fire and explosion in the city, and nine others died in a fire in a slum in the coastal city Chittagong.

On March 2, a fire broke out in Churihatta in Chowk bazaar at a scrap metal shop. A gas cylinder exploded, leaving three workers with burns to 30 percent of their bodies. On the same day, 50 homes in a slum were incinerated by a fire which began in a pile of rubber.

Three days later, a fire broke out in a tyre warehouse in old Dhaka’s Nawabpur area, followed by a fire in a slum in Nakhaopara which needed eight units to bring it under control.

On March 11, more than 50 shops were destroyed in a fire at a market in Moheshkhali Upazila, Cox’s Bazar.

The worst factory fire in the country’s history occurred in 2012 when the eight-storey Tazreen garment factory on the outskirts of Dhaka was gutted by a devastating blaze. At least 117 workers were confirmed dead and over 200 were injured.

While this list is long, the *Daily Star* noted that only 1 percent of fires are ever reported in the media. In fact, according to Fire Department statistics, an average of 43 fires requiring firefighters has occurred every single day over the last three years.

Dhaka city is sitting on a time bomb. A survey by the Fire Service and Civil Defence headquarters in 2017 revealed how vulnerable the city is to fire.

The survey investigated basic fire-safety measures including: Does the building have firefighting equipment? Is it heavily populated? Does it have emergency exits? Have practice evacuation drills been established? Is there any chance of an electrical fire? Is there an underground water reservoir?

The overwhelming majority of 3,786 establishments surveyed were regarded as highly dangerous. Only 129 buildings were not classified as “Risky” or Extremely Risky.”

Major AKM Shakil Newaz, Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence Headquarters operations director, said that the survey included schools, colleges, universities, hotels, banks, hospitals, media houses and shopping markets in Dhaka city and that the results were “frightening.”

A key factor in the lack of basic building safety is that the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) only came into effect in 2006. All the buildings constructed prior to that year have no real fire protection.

While successive Awami League and Bangladesh National Party (BNP) governments are politically responsible for lack of fire safety, the real cause of these tragedies lies in the capitalist system and the drive for profit by local and foreign investors at the expense of the health and lives of workers.

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