

The Daily Star

Published: Monday, May 13, 2013

Building collapse: Accountability in question

Niger Dil Nahar and Mohammad Simon Rahman



Photo: ANIS

We, who are involved in the disaster management programme, often feel proud to be a global leader in disaster preparedness. However, when incidents like Rana Plaza take place, we ask how ready is our country to face natural and manmade disasters?

Savar has again reminded us that we are not learning from our mistakes. And also that we are not safe anymore because it is too late to right the wrongs we have already done. The same could happen any time, anywhere, causing hundreds of casualties and enormous economic loss in a matter of minutes. Rana Plaza is just one building that took hundreds of innocent lives; but it might not be the only one, because there are thousands of buildings, and more are under construction, forcing people to live in such unsafe conditions waiting for another disaster to happen.

As long as the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) is not complied with, and until there is a strict monitoring mechanism of the implementation process, we are inviting further catastrophic incidents. The guidelines of the BNBC were not followed during construction of Rana Plaza.

Nowadays, building collapse seems to have become a common phenomenon in Bangladesh. We do not seem to be surprised when we come across news of such incidents. This may be because we know that a large number of multi-storied buildings are being constructed defying the rules for safe construction.

The purpose of the BNBC guideline is to establish minimum standards for site selection, design, construction process, quality of materials used, and occupancy and maintenance of buildings in order to safeguard, within achievable limits, life, limb, health, property and public welfare. But it is unfortunate that we are far behind as far as effective implementation of BNBC is concerned.

Dhaka is recognised as the most unplanned city in the world, but what makes it more vulnerable is that it is located in a high-risk zone for earthquake, and a massive disaster might hit this city anytime even if there is a moderate earthquake. A study shows that about 78,323 buildings will be completely destroyed if an earthquake of 6 magnitude shakes Dhaka.

Returning to the case of Rana Plaza, there have been some drawbacks in the entire system. The owner of the building did not follow the Rajuk approved guideline while constructing the building. But the most alarming thing is, Rajuk was aware of the matter but did not take the issue seriously.

As far as commercial placement is concerned, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) also has an important role in the planning and designing of garment factories; for instance, it reviews the plan and gives approval for the site of garment factories. BGMEA did not play its part as reviewer. This particular building was constructed in a filled up marshy land. The building collapsed due to structural failure rather than foundation failure, which means that quality materials were not used in the construction of the building. So a garments factory should never have been permitted in such a risky building where thousands of lives could be at stake.

There was glaring negligence in this case as cracks had been seen in the columns of the building prior to the occurrence. This issue was brought to the notice of the

management and the local government. The UNO also visited the site but did not take any initiative to stop work at the factory.

As far as emergency response is concerned, we do not have sufficient facilities in the hospitals to provide services to the affected people. We have seen that a coordinated search and rescue operation by the armed forces, Fire Service & Civil Defence Department and local volunteers was seriously hampered by lack of equipments. The government has promised to provide the affected people with food, shelter, relief and necessary rehabilitation facilities. According to the Disaster Management Act, the government should ensure compensation to all the victims and their families for such human induced disaster.

We have been seeing the same thing for many years. In 2005, the collapse of the Spectrum sweater factory in Dhaka killed 64 people and injured 80. In November 2012, more than 100 workers died in a fire at the Tazreen Fashions Ltd. factory near Dhaka. Therefore, the question is, how long can we allow such incidents to happen?

The accountability of the government to ensure justice is also included in the Disaster Management Act 2012. Thus, proper investigation for each and every incident is needed and the people responsible for the accident must be brought to justice under the Act. The government needs to make sure that the individual or organisation does not go unpunished for violating the rule in the DM Act as clearly mentioned in Chapter Five (Offence and Punishment) of the Act.

The writers work with Islamic Relief Bangladesh on Climate and Disaster Resilience. They can be reached at niger.dilnaha@islamicrelief-bd.org, and simon.rahman@islamicrelief-nd.org