

## *Editorial*

# **Tragedy in Savar – Humanity in Debris and Unique Role of Enam Medical College**

On 24 April 2013, a tragic disaster happened very proximate to Enam Medical College. Rana Plaza, a nine-storey building on Dhaka-Aricha highway, just two kilometers away from the college completely collapsed costing around 1200 lives, severely injuring thousands and missing an uncertain number of garments workers of different factories located in that plaza. In South Asia, this tragedy is just next to Bhupal disaster in India in 1984 in which 3787 persons succumbed to death because of tremendous gas explosion in Union Carbide India Limited.<sup>1</sup> This tragedy is the world's deadliest garment industry disaster.<sup>2</sup>

### **How Savar tragedy happened?**

Around 9 AM in the morning of April 24, 2013 the whole building collapsed. There were no signs of pillars and walls. The roofs fell one above the other. Thousands of workers became sandwiched between the roofs in different layers. Within minutes the whole environment became completely different with loud cries of the workers. Hundreds of common people and then in thousands rushed to the spot to rescue the entrapped workers. These rescuers had no professional experience, no technology, no shovel, no instruments to cut and pierce the roofs and walls—they had only great power of humanity and boundless love for the others. They rescued many entrapped workers endangering their own lives. They continued the rescue operation with their utmost efforts only depending on the power of The Almighty. Later on armed forces, RAB, police and firefighters joined the rescue operation. But the courageous civilians were the true first responders and they also continued.

It will be worthwhile to mention that the rescue operation was severely constrained due to insufficiency of appropriate equipments. Rescuers were racing against time to save as many as those trapped victims as feasible with their limited capacity. We know that Bangladesh is a earthquake-prone region. There are thousands of defective

buildings in and around the capital city. It is dreadful to think what havoc might happen! May Allah forgive the nation! Rana Plaza disaster is a wake-up call for the authorities concerned to have adequate measures to improve the existing infrastructure of the agencies entrusted with the responsibilities for meeting such tragedies.

### **Role of Enam Medical College & Hospital**

In this devastating and terrific situation, the nation as well as the whole world was overwhelmed by the exceptional unique service rendered by Enam Medical College & Hospital. The authority of this institution declared the treatment free. The doctors, nurses, students and other staffs rose to the demand of the time and did everything one can do. They worked round the clock for almost a week without getting tired for a second. They created an incomparable example of humanitarian service.

Accident and Emergency department of the hospital was strengthened with extra manpower. Operation theaters were equipped with appropriate manpower and required equipments. All the wards of the hospital were made ready to receive the injured patients. Classes of the students were suspended. Students helped the care-providing doctors, assisted the nursing staffs, pushed the trolleys and did whatever was needed. Male students were posted in queues from the entry point of the college with sufficient number of trolleys for carrying the disaster victims. After arrival in the college gate, the injured persons were immediately taken to the different service stations without any official formalities. It was the demand of the situation. Emergency department, operation theaters, wards, corridors, open spaces and all other places were either treatment or service stations. Corpses were taken and kept in rows in a large open space behind the college building under a shed. Four spacious lifts were insufficient to carry the victims to the top floors of the 10-storey hospital building. Male students on their own bodies carried the victims to top floors.

Every step was closely supervised by senior teachers and doctors. The whole scenario was incomparable, unparalleled, unique and unseen before. Everything was done with unbelievable speed.

The honorable President of Bangladesh Abdul Hamid, the honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the honorable leader of opposition in the parliament Begum Khaleda Zia, political leaders from ruling and opposition alliances and other social dignitaries highly appreciated the role Enam Medical College & Hospital played in handling the huge number of disaster victims.

Enam Medical College Hospital treated 1676 rescued injured victims. Around 1000 persons were given primary treatment and the rest were admitted. Admitted patients were given treatment for days, weeks and even months. Assistance in the forms of food, clothes, medicine, cash money also came from many national and international organizations.

Here, it will not be irrelevant to mention that on 15 April 2013, just nine days before the Rana Plaza tragedy, two blasts ripped through the crowd at Boston Marathon, USA killing 3 people and injuring more than 260.<sup>3,4</sup> Boston city is home to seven trauma centers and multiple world-class hospitals. Boston emergency medical services personnel distributed casualties among the area's trauma centers, so each one received a manageable number.<sup>3</sup> But Enam Medical College Hospital alone had to bear the load of huge number of casualties as there is no such institution nearby and this institution did the job excellently. However, some factors favored to perform this huge task.

The disaster occurred at a moment of the day when all doctors, teachers and students were in the campus.

Because of strike called by opposition political parties, traffics were very thin on high way passing by Rana Plaza which facilitated quick arrival of victims to hospital after rescue.

Enam Medical College Hospital was running at less than full capacity and the hospital building is spacious.

Politics in this campus is strictly prohibited. Students are always motivated for patriotism and humanitarian services.

Almost all sorts of medical services are available here. Full-fledged ICU and CCU, well-equipped operation theaters, investigation facilities (automated laboratory investigations, digital X-ray, CT, MRI and others)—all these facilities are present here.

Rana Plaza incident has created tremendous pressure on our national economy as more than 70% of our foreign currency earning is by export of garments products. Political Undersecretary of United States foreign affairs Wendy Sherman has said that American buyers can play important role to ensure safe working environment in the ready made garments industries in Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup> American buyers are under constant pressure of US media not to purchase garments from Bangladesh. United States Senate Committee recommended suspending generalized system of preference (GSP) benefits for priority in export of Bangladeshi commodities there. One hundred twenty five countries of the world enjoy this GSP benefits. Earlier, Foreign Affairs Committee of Senate strongly recommended to Obama administration to suspend GSP benefits for export of Bangladeshi garments. United States have ultimately suspended GSP benefits on June 27, 2013 with effect from September 1, 2013.<sup>7</sup> European Union which comprises of 27 countries is also becoming reluctant to import garments from Bangladesh and may follow United States.<sup>2,6</sup> These are likely to create heavy pressure on export of Bangladeshi ready made garments there.

Next to China, Bangladesh is the second largest garments exporter in the world. But the average salary of a worker in Bangladesh is about one-fifth than that in China.<sup>8</sup>

Rana Plaza tragedy is not the first in the country. Many other garments factories accidents occurred due to negligence or noncompliance of basic safety rules. Investigation of the fire incidents mostly found factory gates locked and inadequate fire exits. In the cases of building collapses, faulty design and unauthorized extension of construction were the main causes. The owners in most of the instances were well-aware of the irregularities. Some other garment factory incidents from the year 2000 are mentioned below.<sup>9</sup>

November 25, 2000–Chowdhury Knitwear Garments fire in Shibpur, Narshingdi killed at least 45 workers.

August 8, 2001–Stampede caused by fire alarm in Micro Garments, Mirpur, Dhaka killed 24 workers.

January 6, 2005–Shaan Knitting and Processing Limited fire in Siddhirganj, Narayanganj killed 22 workers.

April 11, 2005–Nine-storey Spectrum Sweater Industries Ltd in Palashbari, Ashulia collapsed killing 75 workers.

February 23, 2006–KTS Textile and Garments fire in Chittagong killed 54 workers.

February 25, 2006–Five-storey Phoenix Garments in Tejgaon, Dhaka collapsed killing at least 25 workers.

February 25, 2010–Garib and Garib Sweater Factory, Bhogra, Gazipur fire killed at least 25 workers.

December 14, 2010–Ha-Meem Group's Sportswear Factory fire in Ashulia killed at least 31 workers.

November 24, 2012–Tazreen Fashion fire in Ashulia killed at least 112 workers

January 27, 2013–Smart Export Garment fire in Mirpur, Dhaka killed at least seven workers.

Let Rana Plaza incident be the last tragic incident in the garments sector in Bangladesh. We hope that the responsible persons will be duly punished after thorough and impartial investigations to prevent this type of tragedy from happening in any other garment factory as well as in any other establishment of the country. We also hope that the criminals will not be able to escape through the loopholes of law. We pray

to Allah for the eternal peace of the deceased victims in the hereafter life and early recovery of the injured persons. We also express our heart-felt deep sympathy for the members of the bereaved families.

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