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Press Release

Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) mourns the deaths of all those killed in the Chawkbazar fire and demands compensation for all the victims

On Wednesday, 20 February 2019, at about 10:30 pm a fire suddenly broke out and spread across five buildings after a loud explosion was heard in Churihutta, Chawkbazar area of Old Dhaka. According to the source of the Fire Service and Civil Defence, the fire spread so quickly due to various types of chemicals, body sprays, and plastic commodities that were being stored in the buildings. It has been reported in the news that 70 people have been killed and 52 people suffered burn injuries and were admitted in the Dhaka Medical College and Hospital.

The State has the responsibility to ensure safety and security for its citizens. According to Articles 31 and 32 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, people have the inalienable right to enjoy the protection of law and to be treated in accordance with law.

On 3 June 2010, 124 people were killed in an almost identical incident where a massive fire broke out at a chemical warehouse in the overpopulated area of Nobab Katara (Nimtoli). BLAST along with five other human rights organisations and a resident of Old Dhaka filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) (Writ Petition No. 4919/2010), urging the High Court Division to issue directions to the Government so proper and effective steps are taken by concerned authorities so that such fire incidents do not take place in future. After the hearing on 10 June 2010, the Double Bench constituted of Honorable Justice M. Imman Ali and Honorable Justice Obaidul Hassan issued rule upon the respondents (Dhaka City Corporation, Ministry of Housing and Public Works, Ministry of Environment and Forest, Ministry of Industry and others). Additionally, the High Court through an interim order, directed the respondents to:

- 1) Form an inquiry committee to find out the reason behind the Nimtoli fire incident and to provide a report;
- 2) Provide report of the Task Force formed for identification of the unauthorized construction of the buildings and establishments of the godowns of chemicals and explosive elements/materials;
- 3) Provide report on the places identified and needed for constructing water reservoirs to be used for extinguishing fire and the probable time of the construction of such water reservoirs;
- 4) Provide report on the steps taken by the medias to aware people for preventing such fire incidents and for fire extinguishing if such fire incident took place. And also ordered to provide report on ensuring fire extinguisher and emergency exit way in the buildings of Dhaka City within 6 months.

It is indeed a matter of great pity, that no advancement in relation to the directives have been noticed till now. BLAST is deeply concerned with the recurrence of such fire incidents and demands concerned authorities to take appropriate steps for speedy implementation of the directives of the High Court Division, identification of the causes behind such fire incidents and reasons for the failure of the responsible authorities and holding them to account; and also for providing compensation and rehabilitation to all the victims affected by the devastating fire.

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