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## Press Release

### **BELA, BLAST, BRAC, ASK and Institute of Architects Bangladesh mourns the dead and injured in Chowkbazar Fire and demands accountability and compensation for all 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, Chowkbazar area of Old Dhaka. According to the Fire Service and Civil Defence, the fire spread quickly due to various chemicals, body sprays, and plastics stored in the buildings. To date the death toll stands at 70 people with at least 52 people suffering burn injuries and 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, all people have a right to the protection of law and to be treated in accordance with law and the right to life.

Eight years ago, 3 June 2010, 124 people were killed in another fire in Old Dhaka, at a chemical warehouse. BLAST and five other human rights organisations (BELA, ASK, BRAC, Institute of Architects) and a resident of Old Dhaka filed a public interest litigation (PIL) (Writ Petition No. 4919/2010), seeking court directions on the concerned authorities to prevent such fire incidents and to ensure redevelopment of Old Dhaka according to the Dhaka Metropolitan Plan. On 10 June 2010, a Division Bench (Justice M. Imman Ali and Justice Obaidul Hassan) issued show cause to the respondents (including the City Corporation, Home, Environment and Industries Ministries, the Fire Service and the Police Commissioner) as to why they should not be directed to take action and adequate measures for preventing and fighting against fire break outs in the City, ensure safe and planned development of Old Dhaka and prevent unauthorized setting up of or use of buildings as godowns/ware houses/factories/industries, use of flammable or petroleum products or any hazardous substances.

The High Court also gave interim orders to 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 Forces for identification of unauthorized construction of the buildings and establishments of chemicals and explosive go-downs;
- 3) Provide a report on the places identified and needed for constructing water hydrants and the time frame for this;
- 4) Provide report on the steps taken by the media to create public awareness for preventing such fire incidents and to report within six months on action taken to ensure fire extinguisher and emergency exits are set up in Dhaka City.

It is indeed a matter of great pity that the directions were not complied with and no response was filed to the Court. BELA, BLAST, BRAC, ASK and Institute of Architects Bangladesh are 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.

Today 24.02.2019 the petitioners filed an application before the High Court Division to issue show cause to the respondents as to why their failure to implement the 17 point recommendations made by the probe



committee to inquire into the Nimtoli Fire incident and the following interim orders have been sought. (1) not to provide any licenses or no objection certificates for establishing chemical godowns or factories in the Old City and to ensure no sale, stocking or marketing chemicals which is not permitted under the existing law. (2) to establish a high powered committee to follow-up on the 17 point recommendations made in the report of the Ministry of Home Affairs after the Nimtoli disaster particularly (a) identify the persons responsible for non-implementation of the said recommendations along with the house owners and business entities who continue with the wrong doing. (b) to submit report about the status of the Chemical Polli in Keranigonj with all required safety measure (c) compensation and rehabilitation criteria of the victims of the Chawkbazar fire incident including the families of the deceased and also the injured and to grant interim compensation of Tk 5 lakhs to each family (d) to provide report before the court on compensation given to the victims of the Nimtoli fire incident. (3) to direct the respondents to publish the report of the four investigation committees on Chawkbazar fire incident on 20.02.2019 (4) to direct the Fire Service and Civil Defense to take measure against the all unauthorized and identified 360 factories which have stored hazardous chemicals (5) to direct the DSCC, Ministry of Home Affairs, Deputy Commissioner Dhaka and the Police Commissioner Dhaka to initiate immediate coordination against all unauthorized godowns, ware houses, factories storing flammable and chemicals.

Possibly this application will be heard soon.

**For more information, please contact:**

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