

Success Story

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The Role of Urban Community Volunteers in Saving Lives during Fire in Bangladesh



*Volunteers working with the Fire Service and Civil Defense at the scene of the fire in F.R. Tower, Banani, Dhaka.
Photo Source: Fire Service and Civil Defense, Bangladesh*

Dhaka, Bangladesh—Dhaka city, one of the most densely populated cities in the world, continues to face rising threats from human-induced hazards. High population density partnered with unplanned urbanization and lack of compliance with safety measures contribute to accelerating threats, especially fire hazards.

On March 28, 2019, a fire broke out on the 8th floor of the 23-story F.R. Tower, a commercial building in the neighborhood of Banani – an upmarket commercial area of Dhaka. The fire killed 25 people and injured more than 70. Erroneous construction practices, lack of compliance with building codes, and the lack of fire safety equipment contributed to the disaster.

Raju Ahmed and Refat Rahman have been working as urban community volunteers for many years, in which they supported the Fire Service and Civil Defense in responding to emergencies in their communities. Immediately upon being informed of the incident, Raju rushed to the scene, and described what he witnessed: *“One of my friends works in the building adjacent to F. R. Tower in Banani. When the fire broke out, my friend called me as he knew I am a volunteer and would respond. I immediately took leave from my office and rushed to the scene of the incident.”* However, due to the congested Dhaka city roads, it took a significant amount of time for Raju to cross the city. Even upon reaching the site, the vehicles and bystanders observing the fire made it challenging for him to reach the site.



A team from the Fire Service and Civil Defense douses the high-rise fire and rescue trapped civilians using cranes.
Photo Source: Fire Service and Civil Defense, Bangladesh

"People were panicking, and all the offices and nearby shops were closed. Many people were trying to escape the area as soon as possible."

Once Raju finally reached the site, his goal was to put his training and experiences as an urban community volunteer to immediate use. *"I saw firemen entering the building and some of them were trying to control the fire from outside. I followed them and went upstairs while the building was still burning. I saw dead bodies, so many people died because of smoke inhalation. I helped to carry out the bodies some other volunteers. In total, 25 people died in the incident."*

Refat Rahman also participated in the rescue operation during the Banani fire incident. During the response, he found 11 dead bodies. He describes the devastation: *"I found a person dead in his office working on his laptop. For many, there was not a single scratch or burn on their bodies. They likely died due to excessive smoke inhalation."*

For others, injuries and deaths occurred while trying to escape. *"Some people jumped to the ground from the seventh or eighth floors and were severely injured. Many died in the hospital. The offices did not have any safe evacuation measures in place and staff were not trained how to respond during a fire emergency."*

The volunteers made their way to the top floor of the building where they found some people still alive. Luckily, a rescue mission was supported by a helicopter and a crane to save lives. However, volunteers do not often have access to advanced equipment to support rescue operations, and thus they had to evacuate some dead bodies using the stairs.

"As urban community volunteers, we work to complement Fire Service and Civil Defense (FSCD) authority" said Refat.

In these kinds of fire incidents, the main responsibilities of the volunteers are to control the crowd. The volunteers help to move onlookers to a safe distance so the fire service officers can perform rescue operations smoothly.

Raju and Refat received Basic and Advanced Refresher Training organized by the FSCD under the Strengthening Earthquake Resilience in Bangladesh (SERB) supported by ADPC and USAID Bangladesh. Both volunteers expressed thanks to the Bangladesh FSCD authority, and to ADPC for initiating the training.

Refat has been working as a volunteer for six years, but explains the value added from the SERB training. *"When I did not have the training, I used to work from an emotional state of mind and sometimes I made mistakes. But after completing the training, I learned how to work effectively which is a great strength of the FSCD and I have a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the role of volunteerism."* During Refat's time as a volunteer, he has tapped into the power of mobile phone and social media communication, which can be used to call volunteers to distant places during severe emergencies.

Moving forward and learning from this fire emergency, there are a number of key steps that can be taken to enhance safety. To help promote a culture of volunteerism, and to enhance the skills and capabilities of involved stakeholders, the Advanced Refresher Training can be incorporated into the national curriculum of the FSCD authority for training all urban community volunteers. To further motivate people to volunteer, formal acknowledgment and recognition of volunteers is needed. To help prevent future fire disasters, close monitoring of safe building designs, enforcement of proper construction practices, and strictly following the Urban Master and Zoning Plans of the city are essential. Training on fire safety and basic lifesaving skills should be made available to urban communities, such as those living in Dhaka city.

To increase awareness on fire safety, educational materials outlining the causes of fire hazards and the "do's and don'ts" during fire emergencies should be disseminated widely. Advocacy campaigns, posters, and harnessing the power of social media can also be used to publicize and disseminate key information to people in every sector.

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The Strengthening Earthquake Resilience in Bangladesh (SERB) is a program funded by USAID Bangladesh Mission implemented by ADPC since 2013. Around 1,640 (428 Female, 1,212 Male) Urban Community Volunteers have been trained in 11 Districts to date, namely Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Tangail, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Manikganj, Rangamati, Bandarban and Cox's Bazar. The SERB Program continues to support the FSCD and contributes to the development of 62,000 community urban volunteers nationwide as mandated by the Government of Bangladesh.



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