

Charging into the Firestorm with Empowered Volunteers and Life-Saving Skills



Urban community volunteers undergo a simulation exercise during a refresher training organized under the Strengthening Earthquake Resilience in Bangladesh (SERB) program.
Source: SERB Program

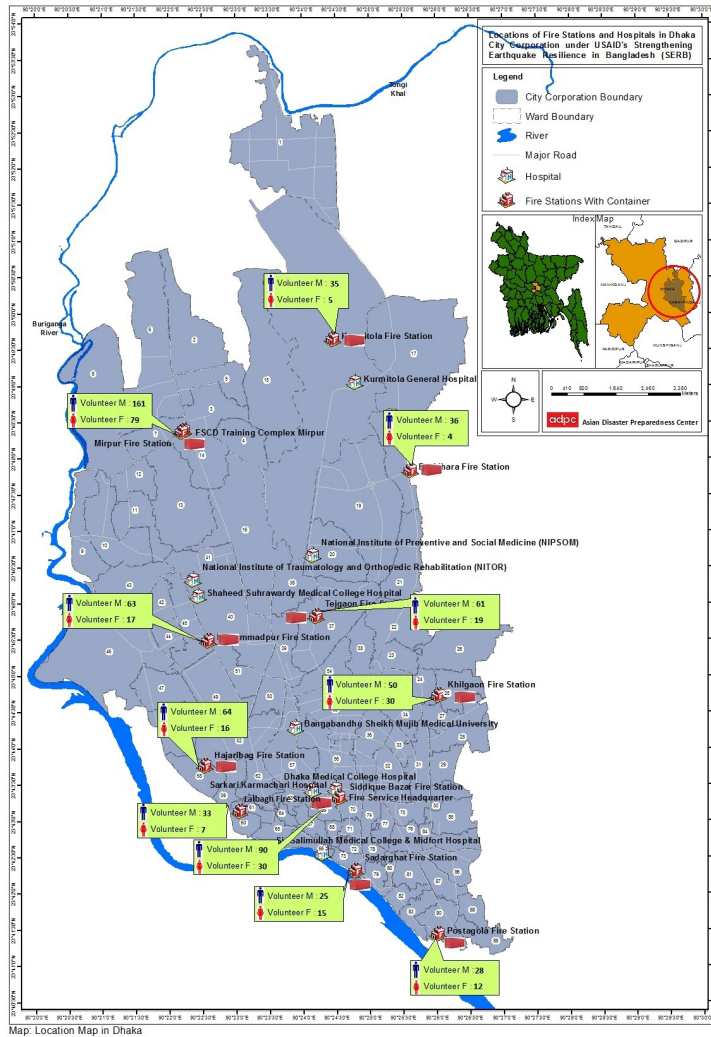
Dhaka, Bangladesh—Thousands of people living in the old town center of Dhaka are under constant threat from structural fires due to unsafe warehouses used for storing hazardous materials and chemicals. Ground floors of such warehouses are often turned into residences and retail shops. Many traders in Old Dhaka have inherited their business. These owners do not have a proper place to run their business in the city. Thus, those living and working among these unmarked warehouses may not realize it, but fire outbreaks are bound to occur if precautions are not adopted.

Old Dhaka is a densely populated neighborhood in the center of Bangladesh's capital. The area is dense with narrow and winding alleyways. Cramped, multi-purpose buildings line the streets and are often used for a mix of purposes, from residences, to manufacturing, to storage of hazardous raw materials. The confined layout of the area is an ideal breeding ground for a quick spreading fire, and the lack of proper escape routes in the area

of densely populated lanes make an escape especially challenging during an emergency.

On the night of February 20, 2019, a rapidly spreading fire broke out in Old Dhaka's Chawk Bazar, a centuries-old district dating back nearly 400 years to the Mughal era. The fire erupted in Wahed Mansion and rapidly engulfed adjacent buildings, killing over 71 people and reducing the mansion to ashes.

Mr. Abdus Sahid was the duty officer on call that night at the Siddique Bazar Fire Station. *"We reached the scene as quickly as possible, but the fire had already engulfed most of the structure. We could hear blasts from multiple chemical-filled containers exploding inside. The ground floor of the affected building was home to nearly a dozen shops, but the first floor was being used as a warehouse for stocking high-pressure deodorant canisters and raw plastic granules"* explained Sahid. Given the complexity of extinguishing a chemical fire, a joint and strategic



Map of fire stations and volunteers in Dhaka City covered by SERB program

effort was going to be required to put out the fire as quickly and safely as possible.

Soon, another 13 fire stations joined the effort to extinguish the fire, and the local urban community volunteers supported firefighters during the operation by managing the crowds and helping with transporting victims to hospitals. The urban community volunteers have been trained by the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defense (FSCD) and Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) to serve as front line first responders during an emergency until the appropriate government response agencies arrive. In total, it took FSCD teams and volunteers 10 hours to get the fire under control.

This event was the second-worst fire outbreak in Dhaka's history terms of casualties. Tragically, the only worse event in history occurred in the Nimtoli area of Dhaka on the night of June 3, 2010, which killed 123 people. The Nimtoli fire was triggered by an electrical transformer

explosion that ignited chemicals stored on the ground floor of a residential building in old Dhaka.

Learning from the Nimtoli tragedy and similar previous incidents, ADPC partnered with the FDCD to train urban community volunteers under the Strengthening Earthquake Resilience in Bangladesh (SERB) program with support from USAID. Forty-one Advanced Refresher Courses on Collapsed Structure, Search and Rescue, Fire Fighting, First Aid, and Landslides for volunteers have been conducted in twelve cities between 2013 to 2019.

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, 1212 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.