



KEY PRIORITIES

UP TO

145,000

AFFECTED PEOPLE BY
THE FUMES

High risk

ECONOMIC LOSS FOR
THE EXPORT SECTOR
AND LIVELIHOOD OF
THE WORKERS IN THE
AFFECTED AREA

6,000

ACRES OF ARABLE
LAND MIGHT GET
CONTAMINATED;
LOCAL WATER
SOURCES HAVE BEEN
CONTAMINATED



Source: Barrons (05/06/2022)

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

- Fire broke out at a container facility on the night of 4 June 2022 at Sonaichari union, Sitakunda upazila, 40km from the port city of Chattogram (formerly Chittagong). The fire triggered multiple explosions, killing at least 41 people, including 12 firefighters, and injuring at least 300 others (DT 06/06/2022 a; Prothom Alo 05/06/2022 a and 06/06/2022 a; Al Jazeera 05/06/2022 a; NDTV 05/06/2022).
- Explosions shattered window glasses in nearby buildings (Reuters 05/06/2022; Al Jazeera 05/06/2022 b). Tremors from the explosion reached people living within a 4–5km radius of the accident site. As per reports, toxic fumes covered the accident site and made several firefighters ill. Villagers living in the neighbourhood of the depot reported burning eyes (The Daily Star 05/06/2022 a).
- As at 7 June morning, the fire was still burning intermittently in 28 containers. Some containers were known to contain chemicals, but it remained unclear which of the containers these were, making operations dangerous (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 b).
- The fire department confirmed the presence of a large volume of hydrogen peroxide at the depot (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 c and 06/06/2022 d; TBS 05/06/2022 a; The Daily Star 05/06/2022 a). As per media reports, the hydrogen peroxide was stored under a tin shed (TBS 05/06/2022 a). Hydrogen peroxide is not combustible but can trigger or support combustion. It can also cause spontaneous combustion when it comes in contact with organic material (NLM accessed 06/06/2022). Authorities have confirmed the presence of more chemicals close to the fire site (Container News 07/06/2022).
- No rapid needs assessment has yet been published, and the number of people in need remains unclear. There are reports of people leaving neighbouring villages (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 e).

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

- On 6 June 2022, Bangladeshi authorities stated that the fires were under control but not completely extinguished (TWP 06/06/2022). Based on satellite images and wind direction reports from the previous afternoon, the fire was spreading north/northwest (towards Kumira union), putting the people residing in Kumira union and biodiversity in the nearby forest at high risk of being affected by the toxic fumes (The Daily Star 05/06/2022 a).
- Based on the location of the accident and the potential spread of fumes up to a radius of 10km, the fire likely affected Bhatiari, Kumira, and Sonaichari unions, with the latter being the most affected. The number of affected people could reach 145,000 (BBS 06/2017).
- The fire destroyed around a hundred containers out of 4,313, with some holding chemicals (AP News 06/06/2022). Preliminary estimates suggest that the fire has led to a financial loss of around USD 110 million. The purpose of the depot is to hold imports and exports; based on reports, some containers that got destroyed held apparel ready for export (TBS 05/06/2022 b). Apparel accounts for more than 80% of Bangladesh's exports, meaning the fire may severely affect apparel exporters and the livelihoods of people in the area (UN 08/2021).
- Sitakunda upazila has been established as an economic zone, with a large part of the country's industries and emerging sectors, such as shipbuilding and tourism, concentrated in the region (The Daily Star 21/09/2015). The reduction of economic activity in such an industrially important area is bound to cause significant financial losses.
- The accident site is near the Dhaka-Chatto gram highway, which is also a key economic driver of the country as it links the capital Dhaka to the port city Chattogram. The fumes are likely to constrain traffic on the road, limiting people from getting health assistance in Dhaka.

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

As at 6 June, 50 hours since the first explosion, at least 15 containers in the depot were still on fire (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 c). Toxic fumes were still affecting search and rescue operations, with fire still burning in some containers (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 d). Water shortages had also disrupted the firefighting work (The Daily Star 05/06/2022 b).

At least 12 firefighters lost their lives while trying to douse the fire, hampering rescue operations (DT 06/06/2022 a). The Bangladesh Army has been deployed to assist in rescue operations (TBS 05/06/2022 c).

Hospitals in Chattogram have limited capacities. There is a lack of medicine and medical personnel to respond to the crisis (DT 05/06/2022).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

NATIONAL RESPONSE CAPACITY

- Bangladesh Fire Service & Civil Defence
- Bangladesh Army
- Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief of Bangladesh
- Local NGOs
- Volunteers

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE CAPACITY

- UNICEF

SECTORAL NEEDS

Livelihood

The company operating the facility where the explosion occurred employed approximately 600 workers (The Hindu 05/05/2022; Asharq Al-Awsat 06/06/2022). The poverty rate in Sitakunda upazila is 24%, close to the national poverty rate (BBS 12/2020). Most people living within a 2km radius around the accident site are workers living in low-cost tin shed houses (Prothom Alo 05/06/2022 b). The recent rise in inflation, especially in food items, and the loss of livelihood opportunities resulting from subdued economic activities in the area could push these people towards poverty or worsen existing poverty (The Business Standard 05/06/2022 d).

Toxic fumes detrimental to flora and fauna can contaminate the soil in the accident area. The fumes could affect 6,000 acres of arable land in Sonaichari union, leading to the loss of livelihood for the farmers in Sonaichari union (Bangladesh National Information Window accessed 06/06/2022). Contamination can also affect the canals some farmers might be using for irrigation and hamper agricultural activities.

The immediate vicinity of the accident site has a lot of shops and offices (Google Maps accessed 06/06/2022). The exodus of people leading to a decrease in demand for products and services and the shutting down of such premises are likely to result in income and employment loss.

No assessments have been undertaken to determine the level of impact of the fire, but several communities are reporting that residual chemicals from the explosions are polluting the waters of the Bay of Bengal (The Daily Star 05/06/2022 c). Such pollution, together with the resultant environmental damage and potential loss of marine life, may put the livelihoods of the local fishing population at risk. Marine fisheries (the main type of fishing in this bay) in Bangladesh account for about 20–24% of total fisheries. 500,000 people across the country depend on fishing, and most of them live in poverty (Billah et al. 27/11/2018; Mahmudul Islam et al. 24/09/2021).

Health

Reported numbers of injured people vary, with some at over 400. 350 people were being treated in Chattogram as at 5 June (The Wire 05/06/2022). The people burned by the accident require highly complex operations, given the burns and tracheal damage resulting from the fire and fumes (The Daily Star 05/06/2022 a; Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 f). During the first two days since the blast, Chattogram hospitals reported not having enough beds to care for the injured (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 g; BD Journal 06/06/2022).

The fumes have caused eye burns to people in the areas closest to the accident (Prothom Alo 05/06/2022 c). There is still a need for protection from the fumes, as fires continue in nearby areas despite being under control (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 h and 05/06/2022 d; BBC 05/06/2022).

Shelter, food, and NFIs

The effect of fumes and ensuing panic from the fire still burning containers in the depot have caused people in multiple villages of the Sonaichari union to leave. As per reports, a lot of these people planned to travel to their relatives' places (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 e). They will likely return as soon as it is safe to do so.

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Monsoon season

Bangladesh is highly exposed to extreme weather events, including cyclones and flooding. The monsoon season brings heavy rainfall between June–October every year (OCHA 2020). Cyclone season in the Bay of Bengal happens pre and post monsoon (in April–May and October–November) (Start Fund 08/04/2018). Chattogram is one of the most vulnerable districts to weather disturbances. In June 2021, rainfall and floods severely affected the city (DT 06/06/2021 b). The 2022 rainfall season has already affected one million people and marooned two million people in the country (Aljazeera 21/05/2022). During monsoon season, the main needs are short-term food security, access to drinking water, shelter, and health services (IFRC 05/05/2021).

Economy

Bangladesh is currently experiencing increasing inflation. In April 2022, inflation hit an 18-month high of 6.3%. Rising prices have led one in five urban slum households to skip at least one meal in May from a lack of money. The official inflation figures do not reflect the reality, and the number of people in need of support is increasing (The Daily Star 06/06/2022).

Water scarcity

Water shortages have disrupted firefighting operations in Sitakunda (The Daily Star 05/06/2022 b). The issue is also likely affecting people in the area. Groundwater levels in Chattogram and its coastal areas with many industrial factories have dropped by as much as two and a half metres a year. The main reasons are the installation of private deep tube wells for agricultural and industrial use and plastic pollution preventing water from entering the ground (The Financial Express 22/03/2022).

Limited government response and capacity

The institutional capacities and preparedness for industrial safety in Bangladesh are precarious (MBT 06/06/2022, ABC News 06/06/2022). Industrial accidents, including explosions, have happened before in the country. In 2021, a fire at a food and beverage factory in Dhaka killed at least 52 people when an illegally locked door trapped them inside (NPR 05/06/2022). Currently, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief of Bangladesh, which is responsible for coordinating national disasters, is present in the explosion site. Members of the Bangladesh Army have also been called in to assist the firefighters (Arab News 05/06/2022). The ILO has stated that the Bangladesh Government should improve safe working conditions (UN 06/06/2022).

The Government is leading an investigation into the cause of the fire. Local leaders have reported that the owner of the containers illegally imported and stored chemicals, violating international and national rules and regulations (Prothom Alo 06/06/2022 i).