

An aerial photograph of a large container depot in Sitakunda, Bangladesh. The depot is filled with numerous stacks of colorful shipping containers in shades of blue, red, and white. A large, dense plume of white smoke rises from a central area of the depot, indicating a recent fire. The surrounding area includes a paved road, some greenery, and a building with a red roof on the left. The overall scene depicts a major industrial site affected by a significant fire incident.

WORLD

Smoke rising from the spot yesterday after a massive fire broke out in an inland container depot in Sitakunda, near Chittagong, Bangladesh.

AGENCY PIX

'FIREBALLS WERE FALLING LIKE RAIN'

49 KILLED, 300 HURT IN BANGLADESH BLAZE

Huge explosion after fire razes chemicals at container depot

SITAKUNDA (Bangladesh)

At least 49 people died and hundreds were injured after a fire sparked a huge chemical explosion at a shipping container depot in Bangladesh, officials said yesterday.

The toll was expected to rise, with some of the more than 300 people injured in serious condition, officials said, while volunteers reported that there were more bodies inside the smouldering, wreckage-strewn facility.

The fire started on Saturday at the depot here, which stores around 4,000 containers, many of them filled with garments destined for Western retailers. The facility is about 40km from the southern port of Chittagong.

Following the fire, containers holding chemicals exploded, engulfing firefighters, volunteers and journalists in an inferno, hurtling people and debris through the air, and turning the night sky a blazing orange. Buildings located kilometres away rattled with the force of the blast.

Dr Elias Chowdhury, regional chief doctor, said the number of dead was 49, but would increase.

"The death toll will rise as the rescue work has not been completed yet," Dr Chowdhury said.

"These people — including several journalists who were doing Facebook lives — are still not accounted for."



Firefighters carrying the body of a victim from the site of a fire at a container depot in Sitakunda, near Chittagong, yesterday.

Reazul Karim, operations director of the fire department, said that at least seven firefighters died and that at least four others were missing.

"Never in our fire department history have we lost so many firefighters in a single incident," Bharat Chandra, a former senior firefighter, said.

"There are still bodies inside the fire-affected places. I saw eight or 10," one volunteer said.

Mujibur Rahman, the director of B.M. Container Depot, the firm operating the facility with around 600 workers, said that the cause of the fire was unknown.

The container depot held hydrogen peroxide, said fire service chief Brigadier General Main Uddin.

"We still could not control the fire because of the existence of this chemical," he said.

Mohammad Ali, 60, who runs a nearby grocery store, said the blast was deafening.

"A cylinder flew around half a kilometre from the fire spot to

our small pond when the explosion occurred," he said.

"The explosion sent fireballs into the sky. Fireballs were falling like rain. We were so afraid we immediately left our home to find refuge... We thought the fire would spread to our locality as it is very densely populated," he added.

Lorry driver Tofael Ahmed was standing inside the depot when the explosion occurred.

"The explosion just threw me some 10 metres from where I was standing," he said. "My hands and legs are burned."

Dr Chowdhury, the chief doctor in Chittagong, said the injured had been rushed to different hospitals as doctors were brought back from holiday to help. Requests for blood donations for the injured flooded social media.

Mominur Rahman, chief administrator of Chittagong district, said that while the fire was largely under control, there were "still several pockets" that were active. **AFP**