

PRE-POLLS ARSON ATTACKS

Burnt schools await repair

Thousands of students take classes in the open or in damaged classrooms as first month of academic year passes

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The air is still filled with the acrid smell of charred doors, windows and furniture. Plasters on the warped walls are falling off at places.

It is in this ghostly atmosphere that some 55 children sitting on mats take classes at Mamunshia Government Primary School in Kotchandpur upazila of Jhenidah.

The school was torched on the eve of the January 5 polls. No repair work has begun yet.

"After coming to school in the morning chill we don't feel good to take our lessons sitting on the cold floor. We feel awful in this burnt room," Shakil Ahmed, a class-V student of the school, told The Daily Star on Wednesday.

Abdur Rahim, the headmaster, said, "The situation is difficult even for teachers."

All the four rooms and most of the furniture, including 40 pairs of benches, 16 chairs, eight tables and three almirahs, were completely burnt, he added.

This school has around 300 students.

In sunny days, classes are held on the school premises under the open sky.

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to rid the students of low temperature in the rooms.

More than 80,000 students of 568 educational institutions, which were burnt or vandalised allegedly by BNP-Jamaat activists the day before the election, are attending classes with debris around.

Of the total, 443 are primary schools, 113 secondary institutions including some madrasas and the rest are colleges, according to government data.

Almost all these institutions, in more than 20 districts, were designated as polling centres.

As of now, the government has assessed the extent of damage and probable repair cost based on reports from the grassroots and it hopes to start the repairs this month.

But students as well as teachers have had enough.

"I cannot pay attention during classes for lack of sitting arrangement," said class-V student Sebag Das of Garabaria Government Primary School in Mahespur upazila of Jhenidah.

Sukumar Das, headmaster of the school, said apart from the structures and furniture, valuable documents were burnt to ashes. "The students are suffering, yet no step to repair the school has been taken."

The education officers in Kotchandpur and Mahespur upazilas of Jhenidah, said some 22 educational institutions were damaged. They have already sent an assessment of repair cost to the primary and mass education ministry.

The situation at Satjan High School in

Nilphamari is the worst among the 21 damaged institutions in the district. The attackers set alight all five classrooms, science laboratory and the library on January 4 night.

The school, established in 1968, is one of the institutions to have a multimedia classroom. Two computers, one laptop, one projector and a digital screen were burned while almost all the apparatus of the laboratory and 1,200 books in the library were gutted along with important documents and furniture.

Now the students are attending classes sitting on the floors in four classrooms.

"Two of our classmates fell ill. It's difficult to keep sitting on the thin mat in this cold weather," said Kajali Rani, a student of class-X at the school in Dimra upazila.

Another class-X student, Mushfiqur Rahman, said practical classes are not being held. "We'll sit for the SSC exams in 2015 and we will be in trouble if we cannot do lab work."

Azizul Islam, the headmaster, said, "Our school incurred a loss of Tk 10 lakh. We have already informed it to the district education office, but no help has come yet."

In Rajshahi, Sardah Pilot School students are attending schools with burned tins overhead and many of them sitting on burnt benches.

Kids at Shyampur Government Primary School in Poba upazila said they get frightened while entering the classrooms through charred doors.

In Dinajpur, Paschim Saitara High School of Chirirbandar upazila bears the scars of arson with

the office, storeroom and two classrooms gutted.

"All essential documents, including certificates, were burnt down along with furniture. We repaired the benches out of our own pockets to run the classes anyhow," said headmaster Dhananjoy Chandra Roy.

Similar stories came from Rangpur, Sylhet and Comilla. Education officers in these districts said they have not received anything from the ministry despite sending the list of damaged schools several days ago.

At least 44 institutions were attacked in Rangpur division alone.

Shahjahan Siddique, assistant district primary education officer in Rangpur, said a team from the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) visited schools in Pargachha upazila on January 29. There is no other development.

Contacted, Shyamal Kanti Ghosh, director general (DG) of the DPE, said they had brought funds from the repair and maintenance sector. "It will take around Tk 7 crore for repairing primary schools. We will start it as soon as possible."

Prof Fahima Khatun, DG of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, said they have sent the list of schools to the education ministry, which forwarded it to the finance ministry.

"The repairs of secondary schools will cost around Tk 3 crore. We hope to start the work by the next week," she said on Friday.

[Our district correspondents Azibor Rahman, EAM Asaduzzaman Tipu, Anwar Ali, Kongkon Karmaker, Iqbal Siddiquee and Yasmin Reema contributed to the story]