Fire-safety audit focus shifts to hospitals

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Calcutta: The state fire and emergency services department has expanded its ongoing fire-safety audit drive to hospitals.

Teams from the department inspected several private healthcare establishments across south Calcutta on Friday to assess their fire preparedness.

The exercise, so far, focused mainly on shopping malls and the restaurants and food courts inside these facilities.

From Friday, the inspections started at hospitals. Both private and government healthcare institutes would be audited, said officers of the fire and emergency services department.

Fire and emergency services teams visited Manipal Hospital, Dhakuria, Ruby General Hospital, Belle Vue Clinic and Woodland Hospitals, among several other healthcare establishments, on Friday, said an official of the department.

"They are examining whether the basic fire-safety systems are functional and whether hospitals have adequate arrangements to respond to an emergency," said the official.

The inspection includes checks on entry and exit routes, emergency exits, smoke detectors, hydrants and the availability of water in the firefighting system, as well as sprinklers. Officials are also examining whether hospitals have dedicated firefighting teams capable of responding to an emergency.

The focus on hospitals assumes particular significance because, unlike occupants of most commercial establishments, a large section of hospital patients may not be physically capable of evacuating themselves.



The 2011 fire at AMRI Hospital, Dhakuria, that claimed 91 lives. File picture

Patients in ICUs, critical-care units, operation wards and those dependent on life-support systems require assistance even under normal circumstances, making evacuation during a fire particularly challenging.

"The fire and emergency department team visited our hospital around 11am. It was a surprise inspection of the entire premises. They went around the buildings and inspected the functioning of smoke detectors, sprinklers and the hydrant system. They verified whether the fire doors are in place and that the exhaust systems are functioning properly," said Pradip Tondon, CEO of Belle Vue Clinic.

"They also inquired about additional water supply in case of an emergency. Then they visited the adjacent Minto Park premises. They also inquired about our preparations for the Durga Puja and were satisfied with our response and replies," said Tondon.

In December 2011, a fire broke out at AMRI Hospital, Dhakuria, now taken over by the Manipal Hospitals group, in which 91 people died. Most of the victims were patients who were unable to escape the smoke-filled building and died of asphyxia.

A senior officer of the fire and emergency services department said after the inspection that the hospitals visited so far "appeared to be well prepared."

He said the department was satisfied with the arrangements observed during the checks and expressed confidence that the hospitals would be able to respond should an emergency occur.

Hospital sources said the 2011 fire tragedy had prompted private hospitals to become considerably conscious about fire preparedness. Regular fire audits, drills and mock drills have become part of the preparedness exercise in several hospitals, they said.

The objective of these drills is not merely to test equipment but also to ensure that hospital staff know the first response during a fire, whom to alert, how to initiate evacuation and how to move patients who cannot leave their beds independently.

The fire and emergency services department officials said the audit would continue, with teams visiting hospitals across the state.

After the inspections, the department will prepare reports based on the observations at individual establishments and communicate any requirements or deficiencies directly to the respective hospital authorities.

Earlier, this week, the fire department had carried out fire audits in almost all the big shopping malls ahead the festive season.