



Soon, new fire norms for high rises over 20 floors

Shalini Nair Posted online: Mon Apr 04 2011, 02:45 hrs

Mumbai : The new set of fire safety norms for high rises has been finally put together after the fire department submitted its guidelines for all structures over 20 floors.

A couple of weeks ago, the high rise panel had issued draft guidelines for towers covering aspects such as disaster management, environment plan, parking, road width, open space and structural specifications. The fire department chief was expected to submit the safety norms after which the committee was to send the draft to the civic chief for approval.

The fire department has now framed a set of stringent norms to ensure quicker evacuation and fewer casualties during fires or blasts. Once the norms are approved, all high rises will be required to provide for not only refuge areas but also refuge floor for residents to assemble for evacuation. Such floors are to be provided after every seven floors (24 metres) and should be easily approachable from the common lobby, fire lift and staircases. The door separating the refuge area from the rest of the building has to have a two-hour fire resistance.

Developers will have to install fire detection system and automatic sprinklers in the entire building, including corridors, lobbies and basement. They will also have to ensure that common areas are painted with non-toxic fire retardant paint ie chemicals that resist the spread of fire. Residents, on their part, will have to apply a coat of fire retardants on their flammable upholstery like curtains. The new norms do not allow residents living in high rises to use LPG cylinders or kerosene stoves. Instead, they will have to get only piped gas supply. Also, the overhead tank of such structures should be able to hold at least 50,000 litres of water which could come handy during fires.

"This is the first time that such rigid guidelines have been spelt out for high rises. The last time such rules were drafted, they could not be implemented as they were awaiting the then civic chief's nod. Until now, high rises had to follow only the general norms mentioned in the Development Control Rules and National Building Code," said Chief Fire Officer Uday Tatkare.

Tatkare added that the new rules specify that no high rise will be allowed on a plot less than 1,000 square metres and the municipal road abutting the plot has to be at least 12 metres wide. "Also, two staircases are mandatory of which one should be two metres wide and the other 1.5 metres wide," he said.

High rises will also have to provide for fire lifts with air-lock lobby and four-hour fire resistance on the external side of the building. **In addition to the fire lifts, high rises should provide for alternative means of evacuation such as chutes.** The regular lifts, on the other hand, should automatically switch over from electric to alternate power supply like diesel generators during fires. Maps showing the exits, staircases, lifts, refuge areas and fire-fighting devices should be plastered at strategic places.

The high rise panel, which hasn't cleared a single proposal for almost a year now after one of its members was accused of graft, will soon start screening the 60 pending proposals as per the new guidelines, once approved.