Bangladesh factory fire kills 48 workers

Locked gates prevented workers escaping death

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At least 48 workers were killed and more than 150 injured, some critically, when fire broke out in the Chowdhury Knitwear and Garment factory at Shibpur, near the Bangladesh capital of Dhaka, on the night of November 25. The blaze was the worst factory fire in Bangladesh history. Survivors, neighbours and fire fighters said workers were prevented from escaping death because the only exit gate was locked.

Victims' relatives and surviving workers held a march on November 27, demanding the arrest of the factory owner and compensation for the victims. They also charged that eight workers were still missing and demanded that the company hand over the daily attendance register to district officials.

It is believed that up to 800 workers were on overtime when the fire broke out at 7pm. The blaze is thought to have originated on the third floor of the four-storey building. Immediately, panic-stricken workers on the second and third floors rushed to exits but the first floor gate on the single staircase had been locked. Screaming survivors were only saved when fire fighters and neighbours broke open the gate.

In the meantime, hundreds of crates full of towels had quickly caught fire and thick smoke engulfed the entire factory, suffocating workers. It took four hours to control the fire and rescue the remaining workers. A shortage of water delayed the dousing of the fire.

Four workers were burnt alive, and others suffocated or were electrocuted or trampled in the scramble to escape. Some bodies were burnt beyond recognition. The stairwell was so tightly packed that workers tried to break windows and throw themselves out. According to witnesses, some were impaled on the pointed tops of the iron railings surrounding the factory.

Of the known victims, most were girls or young women under 25 years of age, mainly from the Kararchar, Gajaria, Patwarpar, Kamargaon and Charnagadi villages. Ten were aged 15 or less. A list posted at a nearby hospital gives the names of five child labourers aged between 10 and 12 and three aged 14. It became clear that the factory was illegally employing children.

“I was working on the second floor,” 22-year-old Aziza told reporters from her hospital bed. “When I heard the others shouting ‘fire' I ran to the stairwell, but everyone was pushing each other. I tripped on the stairs...

“The metal gates at the entrance of each floor of the factory are usually closed during working hours. On Saturday evening, only the second floor gate was open. The others were padlocked but the factory security guard couldn't find the keys during the fire. We had to break the locks.”

Aziza, like many other textile workers in Bangladesh, earns only 500 Takas (US$9) a month, working from 8am to 8pm. Sometimes she has to work overtime until 10pm, such as on Saturday.

Another female survivor told the media she saw one worker climbing down a pipe and she did the same thing but fell when she reached the second floor. She was injured but her sister died on the third floor.

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Injured workers have been sent to hospitals that lack the facilities to treat the critically injured, while some have been sent to Dhaka's medical college hospital.

Media reports said it was common practice for employers to lock factories to prevent workers stealing. In a bid to evade responsibility, the company chairman said the gates were opened but workers caused their own deaths by scrambling to escape.

Police said the fire was caused by an electrical short circuit, while the company claimed it originated from a thinner spray gun. Whatever the precise cause, the fire is but the latest in a terrible pattern. Factory fires have killed 200 workers since 1990.

Last August a fire broke out at Globe Knitting Company, another garment factory, killing 12 workers. The incident took place at about 2.30am after 150 night shift workers, mostly female, had gone to bed. They woke up to suffocating smoke, with the factory doors locked. Though the owners said the supervisor had keys to open the doors, eyewitnesses said most of the trapped workers had to break down a third floor wall or climb down. An electrical short circuit was blamed for this fire as well.

A Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) member admitted to the media last August that there were no minimum safety measures in most garment factories, not even the required number of fire extinguishers. According to the law, 18 percent of garment workers should be trained in fire safety. But in Globe Knitting, only one worker had such training.

The BGMEA also revealed that 227 garment factories in Dhaka alone did not have emergency exits. The *Daily Star* newspaper reported that most factories do not conduct the required monthly evacuation drills. And according to the country's Fire Service and Civil Defence Department, factories do not have wide enough staircases for the number of workers they employ.

Often bundles of garments and fabrics are dumped in staircases as well. “Most of the bodies of the victims at Globe knitting were recovered from the third floor, which was covered with machines, bundles of fabrics and garments. There was hardly any space to move freely,” the *Daily Star* reported.

Investors are concerned only with exploiting the vast pool of cheap labour provided by Bangladesh's 56 million workers. Nearly half the country's people—48 percent—live below the official poverty line. In the Export Processing Zones employers pay only $US22 a month to apprentices and $63 to skilled workers, according to a 1999 report. The textile industry employs 1.5 million workers, 85 percent of them female, mostly girls and young women from poor rural families.

Under the auspices of UNICEF and the International Labor Organization, the BGMEA signed an agreement in 1995 to stop using child labour. But there are an estimated 6.3 million child workers under 14 years of age in Bangladesh, because parents have no means to feed them.

After the Globe Knitting fire, the government and employers issued statements on the need for strict adherence to safety laws. Similar statements have been made in the wake of the latest tragedy. Prime Minister Mrs Sheikh Hasina expressed grief about the deaths and said she prayed for the speedy recovery of the injured. Her government's callous disregard for workers' lives was underscored, however, when it offered just 500 Takas ($9) and 25 kilograms of rice to each victim's family.

The government has appointed a five-member committee to probe the incident. Last August the BGMEA appointed a similar five-member committee to inquire into the Globe Knitting fire. But the reality is that under the protection of Bangladeshi governments, local and foreign investors are scrambling for markets and profits, regardless of workers' safety and living conditions.

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