Bangladeshi factory collapse kills more than 70 workers

Vilani Peiris
19 April 2005

More than 70 Bangladeshi garment workers died in the collapse of a nine-storey factory at Palashbari, 32 km northwest of the capital Dhaka on April 11. Rescue workers are continuing to comb through the rubble but believe there is little chance of finding any further survivors. About 100 people were injured in the collapse.

The exact number of people missing is disputed. According to government officials and company management, 250 employees were working on the night shift at the Spectrum Garments factory. Workers and relatives of the victims insist that the figure was closer to 400. Police have indicated that a boiler explosion may have caused the collapse.

Many of the survivors had to be hospitalised. One told a television channel on April 11: “I heard a loud sound and saw something coming towards me at a high speed... I and several of my other colleagues managed to get out of the factory, but many could not make it to safety before the building partly caved in and then the rest just came crumbling down.”

Immediately after the collapse, hundreds of anxious relatives, friends and neighbours rushed to the site and searched for survivors using their bare hands and crowbars. A small crowd of relatives and friends is maintaining a round-the-clock vigil. Many of the bodies were so mutilated that identification was difficult.

Monira was one of a number of people who raised concerns about the inadequacy of the rescue services. “I am unhappy with the progress of the rescue operation. What would happen if a calamity like a massive earthquake strikes our country?”

Fire brigade official Salim Bhuiyan acknowledged the limitations. “We are not equipped for such a huge operation of this nature; this is the worst such accident ever,” he said.

Authorities complained that narrow roads hampered efforts to bring in cranes and other rescue equipment to remove large concrete slabs. But the relatives of victims pointed out that only one heavy crane owned by a private company had been used to shift debris.

While a boiler explosion may have triggered the collapse, faulty construction may have played a significant role. At a press conference on Sunday, the leaders of several non-government organisations (NGOs) called for the building plans and approvals to be made public. The nine-storey building was constructed on marshland and the access road was narrow. According to Reuters, a Dhaka Development Authority official said on Monday that the building had been erected without planning permission.

Shireen Akhter, a leader of women’s rights organisation Karmojibi Nari, said on Sunday: “It is not merely an accident, it’s a serious crime.” She demanded the immediate arrest of factory owner Shahrier Rahman on charges of criminal negligence. Rahman, who is related to an influential politician in the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has gone into hiding.

Garment Association president Annisul Haq was quick to deny that his organisation had any responsibility for checking building designs and approvals. “We only look at compliance of safety regulations and use of safety provisions and tools,” he said. Haq stated that the families of each victim would be paid up to 100,000 taka ($US1,576). NGO leaders demanded that compensation of 700,000 taka be paid in accordance with the country’s labour laws.

Relatives have expressed scepticism about a proposed government inquiry. Speaking to the media, Saleha Banu said: “What will we do with an inquiry report?

My son is gone forever, leaving behind his wife and children. They will starve. I will starve as he was the only earning member of the family." Marjina Begum told Reuters: "I am afraid everyone will forget the Palashbari tragedy—like those that happened before—just after the cries of the victims stop, and the tears will dry."

While the factory collapse is one of Bangladesh's worst industrial accidents in recent years, it is by no means isolated. Over the past decade and a half, the economic restructuring policies of successive governments have transformed Bangladesh into a major base for garment manufacturing. In the Ghazipur and Savar districts surrounding Palashbari, numerous sweatshops have sprung up using cheap labour to manufacture for the US, European and Japanese markets.

The garment industry is by far the country's most important manufacturer, earning around $5 billion annually and accounting for about two thirds of all exports. Bangladesh has about 2,500 garment factories employing about 1.8 million workers, about 90 percent of them women. The collapsed Spectrum Garments factory produced nearly 80,000 items of clothing annually for export, mainly to the US, Belgium and Germany.

Working conditions, including safety standards, in garment factories are notoriously bad. According to official figures, nearly 300 garment workers have been killed and more than 2,500 injured in 22 factory fires since 1990. The toll, however, is likely to be higher as authorities turn a blind eye to building and safety regulations and thus have a vested interest in playing down industrial accidents.

Recent tragedies include a fire in garment factory near Dhaka in January that killed at least 22 workers. Last May, seven people died in a stampede following a false fire alarm. In November 2000, at least 48 workers died and more than 150 were injured when they were trapped inside a burning factory near Dhaka by a locked fire exit. Locked exits and a lack of basic, properly functioning fire safety equipment, including alarms, extinguishers and sprinkler systems, are common.

Working conditions and pay are poor. A recent Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) study of 143 garment factories in Bangladesh found that salaries ranged from 300 to 500 taka a month ($7.69 to $12.82), except for sewing machine operators and ironers who received up to 1,800 taka a month. Working hours were commonly 14 to 16 hours a day. A *News Asia* website article reported cases of workers not being paid on time. Child labour is common.

The ending of the Multi-Fibre Agreement this January will only lead to a further deterioration of conditions in Bangladesh's garment sweatshops. Under the agreement, Bangladesh, along with other countries, was guaranteed a quota of garment exports. With the abolition of the quota system, Bangladeshi producers will be forced to compete with countries like China and India for export markets.

While wages in Bangladesh are about half those of China, infrastructure, transport and the cost of raw materials are also major factors in determining orders. Government ministers warned last year that up to 40 percent of the country's factories could go out of business with the phasing out of the quota system.

It is not clear if the added pressure of competition directly contributed to the Palashbari factory collapse. But there is no doubt that Bangladeshi employers will be trying to cut costs to survive. Those who will inevitably bear the brunt will be workers who will be forced to accept lower pay and conditions or face the loss of their jobs. The already poor safety standards will also suffer.

Last week Prime Minister Khalida Zia visited Palashbari and called for an intensification of rescue efforts. She declared that the government would do "everything possible to help survivors and families of the dead." Her state minister for home affairs accepted that the factory had been built without authorisation and ordered an inquiry.

These comments, however, are nothing more than hot air. Confronting the potential collapse of the country's main export industry, Zia and her ministers have no intention of changing the system of sweatshop production that creates such tragedies.