Bangladesh: 54 workers killed in textile factory fire

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At least 54 workers were killed and over 100 seriously injured when a textile factory burned down in the Bangladeshi port city of Chittagong on February 23. Many of those killed or badly injured were prevented from escaping because factory guards had locked the main entrance and other gates to prevent theft and monitor the 600, mainly young women, working the night shift.

The four-storey factory was a death trap, like many garment and textile factories in Bangladesh. The fire began around 7 p.m. when a first floor boiler exploded, probably due to the explosion of a generator. Large quantities of chemicals and stacks of yarn on the floor fuelled the fire.

With many of the gates locked and the tiny stairwell jammed with people and factory goods, some workers were jumping out of windows in an attempt to escape the fumes and fire—in some cases to their deaths. Farzana, a survivor who obtained treatment at the Chittagong Medical College Hospital told the *Daily Star*, of her ordeal.

"When the fire erupted, I was working on the second floor. One of the two collapsible gates on the floor was padlocked. Finding it impossible to come out through the milling crowd at the other gate, I jumped out through a window on the roof of a nearby two-storey building," she said. "Some local people standing on the rooftop of that building broke open the window and helped us out".

A.K. Azad, a fire fighter who was part of the rescue, confirmed that the owners of the now gutted KTS Composite Textile Mill, which was set up in a government-sponsored industrial area, had not implemented even basic safety procedures. "We had to break open the locks on every floor of the factory during the rescue operation. The death toll would have been much lower had all the gates been open," he told the *New Age* newspaper.

Hampered by limited resources, fire fighters and locals took eleven hours to contain the fire with the use of twelve fire fighting vehicles. Fire fighters were forced to set up six pumps on adjacent factories because they could not obtain water near the premises. At 3 a.m. the army was called in to help find bodies.

Over 70 of the injured were sent to the Chittagong Medical College Hospital. Others were taken to the Contonment Hospital and other local clinics. Most of the deceased that have been identified are teenage girls, some as young as 12, 13 and 14.

A day after the tragedy, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) Tipu Munshi reacted with callous disregard for the dead workers. "An accident is always an accident," he told the *Daily Star*. "Still, we try to compensate the workers and their families for injuries and losses of life. In every case of accidental death, we give the victim's family 100,000 tika [$US1,500]".

These remarks highlight the fact that extreme exploitation of workers, to the point of death and injury, are an acceptable part of the textile industry in Bangladesh. Far from being "accidental", the deaths in this fire, and many other tragedies in the textile industry over the last 15 years, were completely preventable.

Locals revealed that the KTS factory had previously caught alight on February 4. In that case, all workers were able to escape. However, it appears that authorities were not notified of the fire nor were extra precautions taken to prevent another fire. In fact, management ordered one of two collapsible gates on each floor locked after the incident.

The estimated 3,600 garment factories in Bangladesh

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have appalling safety conditions. Officials told the *New Age* and *Daily Star* that most factories are overcrowded and do not have functioning fire extinguishers and fire blankets. Factory owners commonly lock fire exits and use them for storage, practices that are illegal under Bangladesh's labour regulations. Factories rarely train staff in fire safety, do not have heat and smoke detectors and lack emergency lights and public announcement systems. They are also notorious for faulty electrical wires and switchboards and often do not have enough water to douse fires.

According to fire service officials, there have been 62 known fire incidents in garment and textile factories since 1990, costing over 350 lives. Hundreds more lives have been lost in textile factory building collapses. Only two days after the KTS Mill fire, the Phoenix Textile Mill in Dhaka collapsed killing at least 21 people, with many more thought to be trapped under the rubble.

On February 9, the Jamuna Spinning Mill in Gazipur was gutted, killing 6 people. One of the main exit gates was locked when the fire broke out. A similar incident on 7 January 2005, at Godnail in the Narayanganj district, caused 22 deaths. In what was, until last week, the worst factory fire in Bangladesh's history, more than 48 workers were killed and 150 injured at Shibpur, near Dhaka, on 25 November 2000.

In April 2005, more than 70 garment workers died in the collapse of the nine-storey Spectrum factory in Palashbari, near Dhaka. In May 2004, seven female workers were killed in a stampede at a garment factory in Mirpir after a transformer blast nearby.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia visited the KTS Mill site the day after the tragedy and announced a three-member probe into the disaster headed by the joint secretary of the commerce ministry and two high-ranking Chittagong police officials. Zia also made a perfunctory order that all industrial units comply with safety standards.

The government has no intention of seriously enforcing safety rules in the textile industry. The Bangladeshi government has formed similar inquiries and promised changes after past tragedies but industry standards have only worsened. Zia is determined above all to ensure the financial well-being of factory owners, not the physical well-being of their employees.

Textile exports make up three quarters of all of Bangladesh's exports. The industry exports, mainly to North America, Europe and Japan, approximately $US8 billion worth of textiles every year and employs around 2 million workers. The industry is particularly vulnerable to competition from China and India after the Multi-Fibre Agreement, which guaranteed a quota of garment exports for Bangladesh and other countries, was abolished in January 2005.

Last Friday and Saturday, a thousand textile workers and their families held rallies to protest over the latest tragedy and the lack of safety standards. Responding to the public outrage, the media has criticised government and textile business owners. The *Bangladeshi Observer* complained that manufacturers and government are in the habit of being knocked out of their "stupor" after a series of factory disasters only to fall back "into hibernation".

"What is clear is that safety of the garments' workers is not high on the agenda either of the two apparel associations and the government—let alone the factory owners. The exploitative system is so endemic with all three parties' interests meeting at a point that even pressures from buyers abroad have not been enough to improve the factory condition at a desirable level."

It warned that factory fires will dent international confidence in the Bangladesh garment industry. The editorial concluded that the public "need to know if the government and the two garments' associations will now go for strictly implementing the safety rules and monitoring mechanism agreed between them earlier."

There is every reason to expect they will not. Factories in Bangladesh have maintained their competitiveness by the most ruthless exploitation—no only extremely low wages and appalling conditions, but by using shoddy, low-cost facilities without elementary safety provisions. Neither the government, nor for that matter the media, are willing to in any way jeopardise textile exports by insisting on decent pay and conditions and proper safety standards.

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