

Bangladesh: Factory fire kills 21 garment workers

Wimal Perera**4 March 2010**

At least 21 workers, including 14 women, were killed and about 30 others injured in a fire inside the Garib and Garib Sweater Factory on February 25 at Gazipur, about 30 kilometres north of the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka. An electrical short-circuit is the suspected cause of the fire, but locked exits were the main reason for the high casualties.

The fire broke out on the first floor of the seven-storey factory around 9.30 p.m. and quickly spread to other floors, trapping workers. Most deaths appear to have occurred from smoke inhalation. The fire raged for at least two hours before being brought under control by fire fighters and 11 fire engines.

Abdur Rashid, officer-in-charge of Joydevpur police station, told the *Financial Express*: "Most of the workers died from suffocation in the blaze as they were locked into the factory room on completion of their night duty." Speaking to the *Daily Star*, fire officials said fire prevention equipment at the factory was "virtually useless" and the building was poorly ventilated.

What followed the fire was a well-tested and cynical routine.

The trade unions held several protests in Gazipur and central Dhaka on the day after the fire, demanding the immediate arrest of the factory owner and compensation for the victims. The unions, however, have no intention of launching a sustained campaign against the appalling safety conditions in the country's factories.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters

Association (BGMEA) president Abdus Salam Murshedy announced compensation of 200,000 taka (\$US2,900) for the families of each of the dead workers and help for the injured. The BGMEA also declared three days of mourning and urged its members to hoist black flags at their factories.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed "deep shock" over the deaths, conveyed her sympathy to the bereaved families and prayed for the salvation of the departed souls. She asked the authorities to be careful to ensure that such incidents did not occur in the future.

At least three committees have been established to investigate the fire: a government inquiry, one by the fire brigade and another by the BGMEA. One can predict the results in advance: a few scapegoats will be identified, general statements will be made about the need for better safety standards and the reports will be promptly buried.

A three-member probe formed by Gazipur district authorities submitted its report on Tuesday. It found that the main reason for the deaths was poor ventilation due to illegal structures in the factory, as well as a lack of emergency lighting making it impossible for workers to escape. The workers did not know how to operate fire extinguishers. The report recommended legal action against the management.

The Gazipur factory produced cardigans and jumpers for the Swedish fashion chain H&M, which tried to wash its hands of the matter as quickly as possible. "As far as we know this terrible accident was not caused by poor working conditions or safety measures. When it comes to general working conditions in Bangladesh, we

believe that being present in the country is the way we can make a change long-term," a company statement declared.

Last week's blaze was not the first at the sweater factory. Last August a fire broke out late at night on the second floor, destroying garments, thread and machinery. Six firefighting units were involved in fighting the blaze. One firefighter, Abdul Kalam, was overcome by heat and smoke and died on the way to hospital. Five other firemen were injured.

Factory fires and collapses are common occurrences in Bangladesh. Since 1990, at least 240 people have lost their lives in garment factory fires. A fire in 2006 in a Chittagong factory killed 54 workers and injured more than 100. Yet the widespread violation of safety regulations continues, as does the lack of properly maintained fire equipment, fire exits, emergency lighting and fire drills.

The deplorable lack of safety standards is a direct product of the drive for profit. Bangladesh depends heavily on the garment industry, which accounts for about \$US10 billion in exports annually and employs about two million workers, mostly women. Bangladesh is now the world's second largest apparel producer.

After the end of the Multi-Fiber Agreement in January 2005, which allocated quotas to individual countries, Bangladesh became vulnerable to competition from China and India. Successive governments in Dhaka have been preoccupied with keeping the garment industry competitive by keeping costs low—including wages and conditions.

The *Online Knowledge Centre* last year cited a global survey of the world's garment industries by the US-based consulting house, the Jassin-O'Rourke Group, showing that Bangladesh had the lowest wages. A Bangladeshi garment worker received only 22 US cents per hour, compared to 33 cents in Cambodia, 38 cents in Vietnam, 37 cents in Pakistan, 43 cents in Sri Lanka, 44 cents in Indonesia, 51 cents in India, 86 cents in China, \$1.07 in the Philippines and \$1.18 in Malaysia.

The present Awami League government, like its

predecessors, responds to industrial action over wages and conditions with police repression. Last June, it deployed the security forces to suppress unrest among garment workers. Two workers were killed and about 150 workers injured when police and paramilitary forces shot at protesting workers. In January, the government vehemently opposed a demand by the labour rights organisation, Sramik Karmachari Oikya Parishad, for a minimum monthly wage for workers of 5,000 takas or \$US72.

The government's response on industrial safety is the same. While the prime minister may pray for the salvation of the souls of the victims of the Gazipur fire, she has no intention of driving up costs in the garment industry by insisting on proper safety standards.

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