

Bangladesh factory fire report blames “sabotage”

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According to officials quoted in the media, a Bangladesh government inquiry into the Tazreen garment factory fire last month has identified “sabotage,” combined with negligence by the factory owner, as the causes of the tragedy, which claimed 112 lives and injured another 150 workers. The report was handed to the home secretary on Monday, but has not been publicly released.

The disaster, which occurred on the night of November 24, was the worst in the long history of factory fires in Bangladesh and provoked angry demonstrations by thousands of sweatshop factory workers. It again highlighted the role of the major international clothing corporations, which exploit Bangladesh’s cheap labour, and the government itself, which permits the factory operators to flout safety standards.

Main Uddin Khandaker, who headed the committee conducting the inquiry, told reporters: “We’re sure it was an act of sabotage, but it needs further investigation by an intelligence or police agency to ascertain who was behind this act of sabotage.” Khandaker rejected the initial suggestion of fire department officials that the blaze had been caused by an electrical short-circuit.

The claim of “sabotage” is an attempt to cover up the responsibility of the government and the transnational corporations. In the days following the fire, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed claimed that the disaster had been “pre-planned” by “vested interests.” Her unsubstantiated allegations were an apparent allusion to opposition parties, implying they were seeking to destabilise the government, in order to justify deploying police and troops against distraught and angry relatives at the scene and subsequent protests by workers.

Khandaker stated that “unpardonable negligence of the owner is responsible for the death of workers,” and said nine mid-level managers and supervisors had prevented employees from leaving their sewing machines even after

a fire alarm sounded.

Khandaker listed a host of safety violations that contributed to the severity of the disaster. These included managers closing collapsible gates to prevent workers using stairways to escape, the absence of a required closed-circuit camera system, and an “illegal” ground-floor warehouse. In addition, fire extinguishers were not used once the blaze broke out. Moreover, Khandaker said, the factory lacked a required fire safety certificate. It had applied for an annual renewal, but a certificate had not yet been issued.

The factory did not have a sprinkler system or a fire escape, forcing workers to descend an internal staircase after the blaze began, or jump out of windows. Such conditions, however, are the norm in Bangladesh, not the exception. Since 2006, at least 500 Bangladeshi workers have died in factory fires.

None of the officials involved in the investigation referred to Wal-Mart, Sears and the other transnational corporations that used the Tazreen factory, or the government’s role in overseeing and enforcing the super-exploitation of workers. Garments account for around 80 percent of Bangladesh’s manufacturing exports, and brought in \$19 billion in earnings last year.

The industry is crucial for the government and the Bangladesh capitalist class as a source of foreign currency and profit, all resting on the four million workers, many of them young women, who toil in about 4,500 garment factories for around \$US37 a month.

A *Wall Street Journal* investigation has shed further light on the relationship between the Tazreen factory and Wal-Mart, one of the corporations that did business there. Shorts from the Wal-Mart’s “Faded Glory” line were found in the burnt-out remains of the factory.

A Wal-Mart spokesman claimed the factory had been removed from its list of authorised factories months before the disaster, but a production report for September

13 indicated that 60 percent of the Tazreen plant's work on that day was for Wal-Mart. The company claimed that the continuing use of the factory resulted from a mistake by one supplier, yet documents obtained by the *Journal* indicated that at least four Wal-Mart suppliers made orders at the Tazreen factory this year, two of them within months of the fire.

These suppliers included New York-based International Intimates, Success Apparel and Topson Downs of California. Success Apparel said the use of the Tazreen factory was an error by a sub-contractor, but an order placed directly by Success Apparel for "Faded Glory" appeared to have been made on November 22—two days before the fire.

According to the *Journal*, documents indicated that Canada's NTD Apparel, a Wal-Mart supplier, conducted a safety audit of the factory in May 2011, which reported blocked exits, missing fire equipment and a lack of understanding about evacuation routes among workers.

Earlier this month, the *New York Times* reported that Wal-Mart representatives, in a meeting with Bangladeshi officials, rejected a plan for global companies and their suppliers to invest in improving fire safety.

The minutes of the meeting indicated that Sridevi Kalavakolanu, a Wal-Mart director of "ethical sourcing," and an official from another major clothing retailer, opposed proposals to rectify electrical and fire safety defects in garment factories, saying that "in most cases" it would involve a "very extensive and costly modification." The minutes stated: "It is not financially feasible for the brands to make such investments."

The major corporations that source their merchandise in Bangladesh are preoccupied with ensuring that their costs are kept to an absolute minimum. This concern, not ignorance about the conditions facing Bangladeshi workers, determines their indifference to the safety standards in the factories that make their clothes.



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