

Huge death toll in Bangladesh factory collapse

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In one of the worst industrial disasters in Bangladesh's history, at least 149 workers were confirmed dead as of Thursday morning, and about 1,000 injured, after the collapse of an eight-storey building that housed garment factories in Savar, a suburb of Dhaka. As many as 1,600 more were thought to be trapped in the rubble.

Fearing social outrage over this workplace slaughter, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ordered that the rescue operation be put on a "war footing," mobilising the country's military and its notorious rapid action battalion.

The final death toll from Wednesday's building collapse could rise much higher, as more bodies are recovered. Many of those being treated in hospitals are also in critical condition. At least 3,000 workers were employed in the garment factories that took up six floors of the building, known as Rana Plaza. The exact number of people who were inside when the disaster occurred is unknown.

Thousands were in the building when the upper floors pancaked on top of each other at around 9 a.m. Within a short time, nothing was left standing but the main pillar and parts of the front wall. The structure was reduced to a two-storey pile of broken rubble and concrete blocks. Victims "pinned under debris and choked with cement dust" were shouting for help and water, the *Daily Star* reported.

One person told *Reuters*: "It looks like an earthquake has struck here." A garment worker, Sohra Begum, said: "I was at work on the third floor, and then suddenly I heard a deafening sound, but couldn't understand what was happening. I ran and was hit by something on my head."

Masuda Begum, a 22-year-old, who survived by crawling under a sewing machine, said: "The whole building was shaking just half an hour after we started work. There were hundreds of workers on our floor.

Suddenly it became dark. A few of us managed to crawl out but I don't know what happened to the others."

Workers had found large cracks in the building late on Tuesday, but were ordered back to work after an evacuation. "Industrial police told the factory owners not to open their plants. The owners ignored our call and opened their factories anyway," Mustafizur Rahman, head of the industrial police unit, told the media.

While the inspectors "told" them to suspend operations, the owners ignored the requests, as is the norm in Bangladesh, knowing that government authorities would do nothing by way of enforcement.

Press reports highlighted the army's rescue operation. However, thousands of volunteers threw themselves into the fight to save the workers trapped in the wreckage. Local residents and victims' relatives used their bare hands to shift rubble.

The government, employers and major international clothing firms have swung into action to try to limit the economic and political fallout from the disaster.

Prime Minister Hasina issued a perfunctory statement expressing "shock" at the loss of life and declared Thursday a day of national mourning. Home Minister Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir visited the site and told reporters the building was "illegal." He promised "tough action" against those responsible.

According to the Bangladesh-based *Independent*, Rana Plaza's owner had permission to construct six storeys, then illegally added two additional floors. The labour ministry has established a committee to investigate the collapse. But as in previous industrial disasters, the investigation will be narrowly focussed on finding scapegoats, rather than ending the widespread flouting of safety and building regulations.

The opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP) sought to exploit the tragedy for its own political

purposes, calling off a scheduled protest. Opposition leader Khaleda Zia declared her “shock” at the tragedy. Like the ruling Awami League, however, when in office the BNP presided over the rampant development of unsafe factories and buildings.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturing and Exporting Association (BGMEA), the main employer organisation, sought to deflect any responsibility. BGMEA President Atiqul Islam told the *New Age* that his association had asked factory owners to close their operation after cracks were discovered. “But after the inspection by some engineers, the building owner assured the factory owners that there would be no problem,” he said.

Like the government, the BGMEA’s main concern is to minimise the impact of the disaster on the garment industry, which makes up 80 percent of the country’s exports. Some 3.6 million garment workers toil for long hours in more than 5,400 factories, often in unsafe and unhealthy conditions.

The major international corporations that make huge profits exploiting Bangladeshi workers—the lowest paid in the world—rushed to distance themselves from the latest disaster.

Five garment factories—Ether Tex, New Wave Bottoms, New Wave Style, Phantom Apparels and Phantom Tac—operated in the Rana Plaza complex. Ether Tex Chairman Muhammad Anisur Rahman told the *Independent* that his firm was sub-contracted to supply Walmart and the European chain C&A. The New Wave group produced apparel for major European brands, including Primark in Ireland.

Primark acknowledged that “one of its suppliers occupied the second floor” of the collapsed building, declaring it was “shocked and deeply saddened.” Benetton issued a statement denying that any of the companies in the Rana Plaza were its suppliers. Walmart said it was “sorry to learn of this tragic event” and was investigating to see if any of its suppliers were involved.

All this follows a well-established pattern, aimed at deflecting public attention and minimising responsibility, accompanied by minimal aid to the victims and their families and empty promises to improve conditions in the future. Production is simply shifted to other unsafe low-wage sweatshops in Bangladesh or other countries.

The latest tragedy comes just five months after Bangladesh’s worst factory fire, which killed at least 112 people. The fire in the eight-storey Tazreen Fashions building in the Ashulia industrial zone began on the ground floor, trapping hundreds of workers in the upper storeys. Workers died either through suffocation and burns or by jumping out of the building in a desperate attempt to escape.

Two investigations found evidence of gross negligence. Managers had forced workers to go back to work after the fire alarm started. The only exit was blocked by fire; the others were locked. The investigators recommended that the owner be charged with “criminal negligence,” but he was arrested only in February after workers staged angry demonstrations. And the hundreds of other unsafe sweatshops throughout the country continued as before.

More than 300 workers have died in garment factory fires in Bangladesh since 2006. Building collapses also occur regularly. In April 2005, the Spectrum Sweater factory near Savar collapsed, killing 64 workers and injuring another 80.

The responsibility for these tragedies rests not only with the garment companies, state authorities and government in Bangladesh, but with the global corporations that create the sweatshop conditions through their relentless drive to cut costs and boost profits at the expense of the working class.



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