

Bangladesh: Death toll nears 400 in building collapse

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The number of deaths in the Bangladesh building collapse had risen to 381 by Sunday evening, with many more bodies, and possibly survivors, still trapped in the debris. According to the police, as many as 900 people remain missing. While the final death toll may never be known, it is one of the world's worst industrial disasters.

The eight-storey Rana Plaza in Savar near Dhaka housed five garment factories, employing a total of more than 3,000 women workers. They produced apparel for major American and European brands. Like many buildings in the country's booming garment industry, Rana Plaza was built illegally. Last Tuesday, the building was temporarily closed after large cracks appeared in the walls, but the owner declared it safe and factory managers ordered employees back to work. On Wednesday morning, the structure collapsed.

Hundreds of local people joined the effort to find survivors, using their bare hands and limited masonry tools. The coordinator of the rescue operation, Major General Chowdhury Hassan, said on Sunday: "The chances of finding people alive are dimming." Heavy equipment will now be used to move huge concrete blocks.

For days, desperate appeals for help have been heard from the building. People dropped off food, parcels and water bottles, hoping they would reach survivors. On Saturday evening, 30 survivors were rescued and on Sunday another person was pulled from the rubble.

Marina Begum, 22, who was rescued after three days, told reporters: "It felt like I was in hell. It was so hot, I could hardly breathe, and there was no food and water. When I regained my senses, I found myself in this hospital bed." Nasima Banu, 25, from Phantom Apparel, who worked on the fourth floor, said: "I was buried alive. I thought I would never see my husband

and children again."

A fire broke out in the wreckage yesterday as rescuers were attempting to reach a female garment worker, Shahnaz, who had survived for four days. Firefighters extinguished the blaze, but the woman had died.

Protests by garment workers have continued since Thursday, demanding safe working conditions and punishment for those responsible. Police used tear gas, rubber bullets and water cannon to break up demonstrations on Friday and Saturday in Savar, Dhaka, Gazipur and Chittagong. Hundreds of workers blockaded a road in Mirpur, Dhaka disrupting traffic. In Chittagong, workers blocked the highway to the port and the airport in an attempt to prevent garment exports.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government is desperate to find scapegoats to deflect public anger over the tragedy and limit the impact on the country's garment industry, which provides 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports. Security forces detained the building's owner, Sohel Rana, who had been in hiding, yesterday afternoon. Police claimed that he had been attempting to flee to India. He was paraded before the media and will appear in court today.

The police also arrested Anisur Rahman, owner of the Ether Tex garment factory. He is the fourth factory proprietor in the Rana Plaza complex to be detained. The factory owners face charges of "causing death due to negligence," which carries a maximum jail term of five years. Police are also holding two engineers who allegedly declared the building safe on Tuesday.

Prosecuting a handful of owners will do nothing to halt the unsafe and unhealthy conditions in Bangladesh's garment factories. Just last November, 112 workers died in the Tazreen Garment factory fire, which began on the ground floor, trapping workers in

the upper storeys. The managers had told workers to continue production after the fire alarm went off. More than 700 workers have died in factory fires since 2005, but no owner has been found guilty.

The garment industry has expanded rapidly in Bangladesh over the past decade to become the world's second largest, after China's. Building and safety regulations are routinely flouted. The planning permission for the Rana Plaza specified a five-storey building, but an additional three floors were added illegally.

An article in today's Bangladesh-based *Daily Star* entitled, "Factory watch just farcical," reports that there are just 51 inspectors throughout the country monitoring about 200,000 factories, including some 5,000 garment factories. They are meant to enforce 46 labour laws, rules and regulations related to safety, wages and welfare. "It is just eyewash what we do in the name of inspection," a senior official told the newspaper.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) claims that it will employ engineers to carry out building inspections of all garment factories, but that is unlikely to occur. The main concern of employers is not to protect the safety of workers but to ensure that export markets are not affected.

International media outlets have issued various appeals to the transnational corporations to exert pressure to improve safety standards in Bangladesh. The Rana Plaza factories supplied goods to major European and American retailers, including Walmart, Ireland's Premark, Spain's Mango, Belgium's C&A and JC Penney.

An editorial in the British-based *Financial Times* last week declared that "retailers have a duty to promote change in supplier countries." It said the Bangladesh political establishment was "hostage to the garment industry ... Many politicians are themselves clothes factory bosses." It continued: "Big western retailers have a moral obligation, and the clout, to lead the change."

In reality, the only concern of the major corporations is to preserve their image and continue to make huge profits, via the exploitation of cheap labour platforms such as Bangladesh. Their various schemes for auditing their suppliers are purely cosmetic and designed to

divest themselves of any responsibility for the sweatshop conditions in which their apparel is manufactured.

The constant drive to cut costs and boost profits ensures that suppliers are under constant pressure to meet prices and deadlines. Former BGMEA president Shafiqul Mohiudeen Islam told the media: "Here everything is cost. You don't have a choice. It is a buyers' market. At the end of the day, all the superstores and retail chains are dominating the price. Price is not dominated by manufacturers."

The global corporate giants are responsible for enforcing a system that ensures that the safety, well-being and living standards of workers are constantly sacrificed to the demands for profit.



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