

Bangladeshi government ends rescue operations in collapsed building

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1 May 2013

On Monday, the Awami League-led government in Bangladesh has wound up rescue operations at the site of last week's building collapse that killed at least 380 people and left many others trapped in the rubble. Rescue workers, who had previously been carefully picking through the wreckage to find survivors, have begun using heavy equipment, including hydraulic cranes, heightening the risk of crushing anyone who remains alive.

The government has ignored pleas from the relatives of victims who are still hoping that survivors will be found. According to a *Daily Star* report, authorities moved everybody away from the site even though some people said that they had heard voices from the debris. Head of the Inter Services Public Relations Directorate, Shahinul Islam, insisted that probes using special sensors and a camera found no survivors. It will take 10 to 15 days to clear the 6,500 tonnes of debris from the collapsed eight-storey Rana Plaza that housed five garment factories and many small shops.

Above all, the government is determined to take the country's worst industrial disaster out of the public spotlight as soon as possible and to minimise its impact on the garment industry, which contributes 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports. It is also concerned the collapsed building has become a focal point for the relatives of victims and other garment workers to gather and to protest over unsafe working conditions.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina attempted to pacify relatives when she visited Savar on Monday. But local residents joined with family members of the victims in protests against her and her government. Monowara Begum, the mother of a missing worker, complained to the BBC, Hasina "could have listened to us" and not halted rescue work.

The Rana Plaza building collapse has continued to

provoke angry protests by workers over the lack of safety in the country's 5,000 garment factories. Employers shut their factories last weekend to keep the workforce dispersed and prevent strikes and demonstrations. When factories were reopened on Monday, however, tens of thousands of workers took to streets in the industrial districts of Gazipur, Savar, Narayanganj and Ashulia, blocking traffic and attacking vehicles. Police responded with baton charges and tear gas. Border guard troops were mobilised in some areas.

In Savar, workers barricaded the Dhaka-Tangail highway and attacked several factories. In Gazipur, employees from 80 percent of the apparel factories stopped work.

Two factories were closed in Rupganj and Siddhirganj, after cracks in the building were detected. Last Tuesday, cracks were found in the Rana Plaza complex, but workers were sent back to work after the owner assured people that the building was safe. The following morning the building suddenly collapsed.

Yesterday, around 100 relatives of the missing protested outside the national press club. At least 100 people were injured when clashes broke out between thousands of garment workers and police in Savar.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) held an emergency meeting on Saturday, where concerns were raised about the prospect of strikes and protests this week. Former BGMEA president Abdus Salam Murshedy told the *Financial Express* that employers had informed the prime minister of their fears and "sought her assistance for ensuring security by deploying more forces."

International retailers have attempted to wash their hands of any responsibility for the appalling conditions in their Bangladeshi suppliers' factories. Some have

denied any involvement with factories in Rana Plaza—at the time of the disaster—despite mounting evidence to the contrary. Others have offered a pittance in compensation. Roger Hubert, a vice-president of the Hong Kong-based trading group Li & Fung, blamed the government, saying it was its duty “to make the buildings safer.”

The Hasina government and the BGMEA are desperate to ensure that major corporations do not turn to other countries for sweatshop labour. The owner of the collapsed building, Sohel Rana, is being made a convenient scapegoat. He was arrested on Sunday and is under a 15-day remand to enable further police interrogation. A court has ordered the confiscation of his property and the bank accounts of the factory owners operating in Rana Plaza.

Several inquiries have been launched into the building collapse, including by the BGMEA, but no one believes that anything but a whitewash will take place. The *Daily Star* headlined its comment “Owners probe owners fault.” In the past the employers’ body has formed similar investigative committees which never made any concrete recommendations to improve the safety of workers in factories.

The government has also established its own inquiry, but the outcome will be similar. In last November, the country’s worst industrial fire broke out at the Tazreen garment factory, killing 112 workers. The blaze began on the ground floor trapping hundreds of workers in upper floors which had no fire escapes. Without a shred of evidence, Prime Minister Hasina immediately declared that it was a case of “sabotage” and pointed the finger at her political opponents. An official inquiry dutifully reached the same conclusion.

The Bangladeshi media have also chimed in with comments and editorials critical of the government, garment employers and the close ties between them. The *Daily Star* wrote on Monday: “We would hope that the RMG [ready-made garment] factory owners would understand that producing competitive goods does not mean sacrificing the interest and the safety of the workers.”

Such expressions of concern are completely empty, however. Amid a deepening crisis of global capitalism, major corporate retailers are engaged in a cut-throat struggle to reduce costs and undermine their competitors. This ensures the same ruthless rivalry

among their suppliers in Bangladesh and other countries at the expense of the safety, living conditions and lives of garment workers. The Bangladeshi government turns a blind eye to the atrocious conditions to ensure that its manufacturers remain competitive with their rivals in other cheap labour platforms.

In the final analysis, it is the factory owners, trade unions, government and global retailers that are all responsible for the continuing carnage in the sweatshops of Bangladesh and throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America.



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