

Bangladesh building disaster death toll nears 700

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Two weeks after the collapse of the multi-story Rana Plaza building in Savar, near Dhaka, the official death toll yesterday reached 677, mainly young garment workers. Despite this unprecedented tragedy, one of the worst industrial accidents in the world, the main concern of the Bangladesh government and international retailers is how to continue business as usual.

The number of deaths will undoubtedly rise further because debris is still being cleared from the collapsed building that housed five garment factories. Thousands of workers were also injured in the disaster, many critically. Hundreds will suffer permanent disability. The Rana Plaza owner had claimed the building was safe, and the factory owners had ordered workers into the building despite their objections after serious cracks were found in the structure on April 23, the day before the disaster.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the government are intent on obscuring the total number of deaths. The BGMEA has not published a list of the names of the several thousand workers employed in the destroyed factories. The *Daily Star* reported that BGMEA secretary Rafiqul Islam had the workers' March salary sheets, but refused to disclose the number of employees. The Awami League-led government has also failed to prepare a list of workers or deaths.

International garment industry companies like Walt Disney are reportedly threatening to withdraw from Bangladesh. The European Union warned it could suspend trade concessions to Bangladesh unless safety conditions were improved. The only concern of retailers and governments is to try to refurbish their tarnished image and wash their hands of the terrible loss of life.

Global companies, including some of the world's best-known brands, extract 60 to 80 percent profit margins from merchandise made in Bangladesh, by pressing contractors to deliver the lowest possible costs. Their threats to pull out of Bangladesh have nothing to do with improving workers' rights. The corporate giants would just seek another cheap labour platform to ensure continued super profits.

The Bangladeshi ruling elite operates as a junior partner of international big business. Last week, 40 buyer companies, including H&M, JC Penney, C&A, Levi's, Marks and Spencer, Tesco and Nike, met with the BGMEA to discuss the crisis.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government is desperate to demonstrate to Western countries and companies that it can continue to deliver the sweatshop regime they demand. In a revealing CNN interview, Hasina insisted that Bangladesh had "good conditions for investments." She insisted that no company would withdraw because "they get cheap labour. That is why they come here."

Hasina sought to minimise the disaster, declaring that an "accident can take place" anywhere in the world, and no business should be blamed "just for one incident." These comments display the real contempt of the ruling elite for the lives and safety of workers. Rana Plaza was not just "one incident" but one of the world's worst industrial disasters, in a long series of similar tragedies in Bangladesh and other countries.

The prime minister has also made thinly-veiled threats against the clothing workers who have held days of large protests since the catastrophe. Her government is determined to ensure the resumption of garment factory operations. Urging workers last week to stop "violence" and return to work, Hasina warned that if the unrest continued they "would become

unemployed.” She directed the home ministry to crack down by identifying the “culprits” who were engaged in attacks on factories.

The government is still seeking scapegoats to cover up its own responsibility for the disaster. After arresting building and factory owners and some of their relatives, police detained an engineer who worked as a consultant for Rana Plaza. Savar municipality mayor Mohammad Refatullah was charged with negligence and failure to take action after the building’s cracks appeared.

International Labour Organisation (ILO) representatives rushed to Dhaka on May 1 to discuss ways to pacify workers and enable Bangladesh to keep operating as a cheap labour country. Its response illustrated how the UN-affiliated ILO acts as an advisory body on manipulating labour relations to meet corporate needs.

According to a statement issued last Sunday, ILO officials held discussions with employers, the government and NGOs and trade unions to identify “what needs to be done to prevent such future tragedies.” The ILO said the government had promised to introduce a “labour law reform package” during the next session of parliament to improve safety and collective bargaining.

Such cosmetic declarations are needed by the international companies and local employers to deflect worldwide attention, and the anger among workers. Similar promises have been made in the past by successive governments and the BGMEA, solely in order to buy time. In her CNN interview, Hasina admitted that the government had only 18 inspectors, responsible for overseeing safety conditions in more than 100,000 factories in and around the capital city.

Speaking to the media, one garment worker, Manara, described the plight of the workers, mostly young girls from the rural areas. She shared a single windowless room in an unclean back street with her husband and daughter, having to use a common toilet and share the kitchen with neighbours. Her 15-year-old daughter also worked in a factory and, even with overtime, they jointly earned just \$US90 a month.

The BBC reported that many factories offer sub-contracts to back-street companies that had few fire or other safety precautions and had workers “who were clearly children” in their sweatshops.

Such brutal conditions are not accidental, given the

close nexus between big business and the political establishment. About 30 parliamentarians—from both government and opposition parties—are apparel factory owners. Transparency International’s director in Bangladesh, Iftekharuzzaman, noted: “Politics and business is so enmeshed that one is kin to the other.”

The result, for which the Bangladesh government, manufacturers and global retailers are all responsible, is the worst industrial disaster in recent history, surpassing the Ali Enterprises garment factory tragedy in Pakistan, in which 289 people died in a fire last year.



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