

Death toll in Bangladesh factory collapse reaches 950

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The death toll of the Savar building collapse reached 950 by Thursday evening, refuting earlier claims of the Bangladesh government and business organisations, which put the number of deaths at a lower figure.

Press reports indicated 121 decomposed bodies were retrieved from the wreck of the Savar building by noon on the 16th day after the disaster. It is feared that the death toll will increase further as the debris continues to be cleared.

Previous official estimates held that as there were fewer than 3,200 workers in the building at the time of the collapse on April 24, with 2,437 rescued, the death toll would be less than 763. This underscores that the figures published by the authorities after the disaster were unreliable.

The collapsed eight-story Rana Plaza building in Savar near Dhaka had housed five garment factories. The factory owners ordered workers into the building, despite their objections due to serious, visible cracks noted in the building on April 23. Thousands of workers were injured in the disaster, many critically, and hundreds will suffer permanent disability.

As body parts are retrieved from the collapsed multi-story building, mass anger with the political establishment has deepened. The fact that no survivors have been found since heavy cranes began clearing debris have heightened relatives' concerns that these operations will end the chances of rescuing remaining survivors.

Hundreds of surviving workers and their relatives staged a protest on Tuesday near Savar bus terminal and blocked the Dhaka-Aricha highway for two hours, demanding wages and other benefits.

Workers from the Rana Plaza building are charging that, after the collapse of their plant, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association

(BGMEA) is now also violating compensation agreements. The BGMEA is only ready to give a pittance to the survivors: one month's salary.

The *Daily Star* cited a worker who said, "We heard they [BGMEA] were going to pay only one month's salary. But we want four months' pay and other perks, as per the rules."

Another worker, Shipu Begum, explained: "We lost many colleagues, while most of the injured will not be able to bear their treatment expenditure with a month's salary."

In another devastating example of the deadly conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories, a factory fire at Tung Hai Sweater killed eight on Wednesday night—including Managing Director Mahbubur Rahman, Deputy Inspector General of Police Z.M. Monzur Morshed, and Sohel Mostafa Swapan, a regional leader of the Jubo League, the ruling Awami League's youth movement.

It is not clear what these officials were doing at the factory, though Reuters wrote that their presence highlighted the "entanglement" between higher officials and big business in Bangladesh.

Because the factory was closed at 11 p.m. when the blaze took place, workers were not on the premises. Reuters reported that this company is a large one, running two factories employing 7,000 workers.

Workers at the Rana Plaza building who survived after being trapped in the rubble have been traumatized, with some rescued only after spending four days under the debris. Describing her experience, Laboni, rescued after 36 hours, said: "A pillar had fallen on my left arm. Blood was coming out of my head, eyes and nose." One of her friends, Dipa Patra, died after a big piece of concrete fell on her chest.

Laboni, 22, who lost her left hand, still screams, "Get

me out of the building. It terrifies me,” when someone tries to wake her. She told the *Daily Star*: “My life is ruined ... I don’t want to see the life of any other man or woman ruined like mine.”

“Whenever we need to wake her up ... she springs out of her bed, scared and stupefied,” said her father.

There is no rehabilitation program for the partially disabled, however. What the government and business organizations are interested in is to re-start the garment factories, which account for 80 percent of the country’s exports.

In an interview with the *Huffington Post*, Italian retailer Benetton’s CEO Biagio Chiarolanza admitted on Wednesday that his firm had had shirts made for it at the Rana Plaza building, something Benetton initially denied. In a devastating indictment of the conditions his firm and other major international clothing retailers impose on garment workers, Chiarolanza admitted: “The wages in Bangladesh are an act of cruelty. Women cannot support their families on \$40 a month.”

He cynically added, “I can assure everyone that Benetton has always paid special attention to the workers condition, and the environment in which they operate. I believe our long-standing commitment to social issues speaks for itself.”

With several Western retailers threatening to withdraw their operations from the country to prevent the exposure of their connections with sweatshops, the Bangladeshi government is desperate. On Wednesday it temporarily shut down 18 garment factories—16 in Dhaka and two in Chittagong.

Textiles and Jute Minister Abdul Latif Siddiqui tried to portray the action as part of cleaning up of operations “deemed to be dangerous.” However, with more than 5,400 factories in this sector in Bangladesh, in which unsafe and unhealthy conditions are common, this measure is for show.

In Dhaka, the 16 factories ordered to close were part of a group of 32 that Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) ordered shut because of faults that pose dangers to the workers. But DIFE officials could not confirm what happened with the remaining factories, the *Daily Star* reported on Thursday.

Business groups protested even these cosmetic gestures. The BGMEA and the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry

(FBCCI) expressed concern over the shutdown in a meeting with the prime minister on Wednesday. Former FBCCI president A.K. Azad said: “Firstly, we went to the PM’s residence, and being instructed, we met Textiles and Jute Minister Abdul Latif Siddiqui at his residence and expressed our concern.”



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