

An exchange with the Bangladeshi ambassador to the US

K. Ratnayake
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The following is an exchange between Bangladesh's ambassador to the US, Akramul Qader, and World Socialist Web Site editorial board member K. Ratnayake on the WSWs article on January 3, 2014, "Victims of Bangladesh building collapse neglected."

To the Editor:

We take issue with the statement made, inter-alia, in the online article, published on the WSWs web site 'Victims of Bangladesh building collapse neglected' (January 3) that the Rana Plaza victims received 'little assistance and a pittance in financial compensation'. The article also gave an impression that the victims were not compensated sincerely by the Bangladesh Government and other stakeholders. These do not reflect the correct picture of the situation, especially in consideration of the sincere efforts taken by the government to give each victim as much compensation as possible, despite serious resource constraints of a country like Bangladesh.

When the Rana Plaza disaster unfolded the Government made best possible efforts for rescue, treatment of the injured, burial of the corpses and DNA testing for identification of the victims and their family members. Financial assistance was given at various stages—for funeral expenses, bearing the cost of treatment and interim compensation to the family members of the victims. So far the government has arranged payment of about Taka 18 crore (about \$US2.32 million) to over 700 victims or their families identified (per head about \$3,317 on average). Out of those, about Taka 2 lakh (\$2,580) to 15 lakh (\$19,350) was paid to the each victim/their families, depending on the severity of the conditions, from the Prime Minister's special fund. The government is also fully committed to paying the family members of those victims who are yet to be identified accurately, through the ongoing efforts of matching the DNA test results.

Aside from the above, the families of the dead would

receive on average more than \$25,000 each while hundreds of workers, injured or maimed, would also receive compensation out of the \$40 million compensation fund created to aid the victims' families.

We think that criticism of any lapses on the part of Bangladesh Government in addressing compliance issues in workplace safety or compensation of workers could possibly be justified when it maintains the right balance and rationale. We request you to publish the rejoinder in the next issues of your publication.

Akramul Qader
Bangladesh Ambassador to the U.S.
Washington DC

To Akramul Qader,

Your letter to the *World Socialist Web Site* only confirms what we have insisted all along: following the April 24 collapse of Rana Plaza building, the Bangladesh government is engaged in a cynical exercise in damage control aimed at protecting the profits of the country's burgeoning garment export industry and covering up the root causes of such repeated tragedies.

Far from refuting the content of the WSWs article, the figures provided in the letter—even if they are accepted as accurate—confirm that the victims and their families have been neglected by the government as well as local manufacturers and the major transnational corporations that exploit Bangladeshi garment workers.

According to a report last October by the British-based NGO ActionAid, more than 3,500 people were in the Rana Plaza complex when it collapsed. The official death toll was 1,133, of which 836 bodies were identified and handed to relatives, while the remaining unidentified bodies were buried in the Jurain graveyard. An ActionAid survey of 1,509 survivors found that 611 reported various types of severe injuries.

According to your letter, the government has provided

180 million taka (about \$2.32 million) to over 700 victims or their families. In other words, even using the incomplete ActionAid figures, nine months after the disaster, less than half of the victims—the severely injured and families of the dead—had received compensation from the government.

A host of media reports, including those cited in the WSWs article, point to the desperate situation confronting the victims of the disaster. ActionAid found that of the 1,509 survivors surveyed, 92 percent were not currently working and had no regular income. Some 63 percent cited physical injury as the reason for not going back to work. When 788 families of the deceased were included, 57 percent of respondents said they were having severe difficulties meeting their daily needs and 80 percent reported that they were short of food.

Your letter holds out the chimera of long-term compensation from a \$40 million fund recently agreed by the government, local manufacturers and trade unions. Speaking to AFP in December, labour ministry secretary Mikail Shipar declared, however, that the government would not contribute to the fund as it had already provided compensation. As the WSWs article explained, only four of the 25 global retailers connected to the Rana Plaza garment factories have agreed to support the fund. Details are yet to be finalised and no money has been paid to any of the victims.

Your letter focuses exclusively on the issue of compensation—that is, on what happened to the victims after the disaster—not on what caused the tragedy, let alone the broader issues raised by the low wages and poor conditions in the country's 5,000 garment factories.

The Bangladeshi government presides over a garment industry that is notorious for its sweatshop conditions. More than four million workers, mostly women, work long hours in often unsafe and unhealthy circumstances for a monthly wage of \$68—the lowest in the world. The Rana Plaza collapse is just the worst of a string of tragedies that include the Tazreen factory fire in November 2012, which claimed the lives of 112 workers.

The response of the Bangladeshi government, as well as manufacturers and global retailers, to such disasters has become a well-worn exercise in hypocrisy. Ritual expressions of horror and concern, media exposures and a few crocodile tears are followed by official inquiries, limited compensation and empty promises to tighten factory supervision. Once the public outrage has died down, the inquiries are wound down and the promises shelved.

At the time of the Rana Plaza disaster, the government had just 51 inspectors to monitor the operation of the country's 200,000 factories, with 18 of these devoted to the garment industry. Facing a public outcry over the gross inadequacy of factory safety, it promised to increase the number of inspectors to 854.

As reported by Reuters, however, in presenting the budget in June last year, Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith rejected calls for an increased allocation of funds for factory safety, including inspectors. At the same time, Muhith made the government's priority abundantly clear by announcing a 20 percent cut in import duties on woven fabrics—a direct boost to the garment industry.

Your letter concludes with the rather extraordinary admission that “criticism of lapses on the part of Bangladesh government in addressing compliance issues in workplace safety or compensation of workers could possibly be justified when it maintains the right balance and rationale.”

What is meant by the “right balance and rationale” is clear from the government's actions since the Rana Plaza disaster. In collaboration with local and international trade unions, garment manufacturers and global retailers, the government has proposed various cosmetic measures to disguise the ongoing unsafe and exploitative conditions endured by garment workers. The bottom line, however, is that nothing must damage the “international competitiveness” of the highly profitable garment industry that brings in \$20 billion a year in foreign exchange.

The WSWs refuses to give any credibility to this charade. The real attitude of the Bangladeshi government towards garment workers is demonstrated most starkly in its establishment of a special industrial police force and its ruthless use of police and security personnel to violently crush the protests and strikes for better wages and conditions. The only means for ending disasters such as Rana Plaza in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world, including advanced capitalist countries, is to put an end to the bankrupt capitalist system that is responsible.

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