

Rana Plaza disaster case postponed in Bangladesh

Sarath Kumara
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More than three years after Bangladesh's worst-ever industrial disaster, which killed hundreds of apparel workers, a Dhaka court has postponed by two months the trial of 18 people facing charges over the catastrophe. The delay further underscores the indifference of all sections of the Bangladeshi ruling elite towards the plight of garment workers who continue to toil under unsafe and slave labour conditions.

More than 1,135 workers were killed in Dhaka on April 24, 2013, when the Rana Plaza building, which housed five apparel factories, collapsed. Despite cracks being discovered in the building the previous day, building owner Sohel Rana ordered reluctant workers to return to their jobs. Three extra storeys had been added to the structure, making it more vulnerable.

The judge last month adjourned until October 26 the trial of Rana and 17 others for allegedly violating building construction codes, after the defendants filed a petition to the high court challenging the charges. Some 130 witnesses were due to testify in the case, which was to focus on design flaws, unapproved extensions and use of substandard building materials.

Government prosecutors also failed to present the plaintiff, Helal Uddin, an official of RAJUK, the capital development agency, which filed the case. This points to a move by the Awami League government to delay the hearing.

The legal cases are in order to quell widespread anger among workers in Bangladesh and internationally. The government, however, is also anxious to assure foreign and local investors that they will be protected against being held legally responsible for unsafe working conditions.

In another case, scheduled for September, 41 defendants, including Rana Plaza factory owners, the local mayor and 14 government officials, will face murder charges.

From the beginning, the government tried to cover up the tragedy. It took three years to file charges. Rana was an Awami League regional leader and there are close connections between the entire political establishment and the apparel industry. Around 30 past and present members of parliament from both main parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), are apparel factory owners.

The Rana Plaza disaster highlighted the deadly conditions facing approximately 4.5 million workers in nearly 7,000 garment factories in Bangladesh. Other workers face similar situations. A gas leak in a fertiliser factory last month left at least 25 workers ill, with one suffering respiratory problems.

The government, its local officials and the ruling establishment as a whole are fully complicit in policing these conditions in order to attract foreign investment. Global retail giants that reap super-profits from workers in countries like Bangladesh are equally responsible, but they too are being legally protected.

In May, a US judge in Delaware dismissed a law suit filed by a garment factory worker injured in the Rana Plaza disaster, and the husband of another worker who was killed, accusing three garment retailers, Wal-Mart, JC Penney and Children's Place, of being responsible for the unsafe conditions in the Bangladeshi garment factories making clothing for them. The judge ruled that the companies had "no duty of care" to the workers, not being their employers.

As a public relations exercise, 30 major European retailers, including H & M, Marks & Spencer, Carrefour, Inditex, Tesco and Premark, signed an "Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh" with two global trade union federations in May 2013. This accord was actually about shielding the retailers and their contractors from any legal liability for similar disasters, and ensuring the continuation of the low-wage regime.

Promises by the retailers and the government to remedy the situation have not been carried out. According to a report last May by the Wage Alliance, a research group, “78,842 garment workers in Bangladesh continue to produce garments for H&M in buildings without fire exits.”

There is concern in Western capitals about growing militancy among Bangladeshi garment workers. Five ambassadors, from the European Union, US, UK, Canada and the Netherlands recently urged the government to allow more trade unions, and safety and participatory committees in the garment sector. The unions are regarded in these circles as a valuable means of containing workers’ struggles and ensuring the continuous extraction of profits.

Highlighting the importance of the Bangladeshi garment sector for global retailers, Hasnain Malik, regional head of frontier markets equity strategy at Exotix Partners, an investment bank, recently pointed to the country’s low tariffs, experienced supply chain and low costs, with factory wages well below those in other South and South East Asian countries.

In fact, the country’s garment sector wages are the lowest in the world. The average wage in India’s apparel sector is \$US112 per month, and in China \$280, compared to just \$68 in Bangladesh. As a result, the country’s garment companies generated its highest-ever export earnings in 2015, accounting for 80 percent of Bangladesh’s exports. Some \$5.4 billion worth of exports went to the US, an increase from \$3.9 billion in 2010.

China remains the world’s leading apparel exporter, with \$186.61 billion worth of exports in 2014, but it is shifting away from the industry due to its higher production costs. Bangladesh is competing with its rivals in the region to gain the bulk of the market and seeks to maintain its competitive cutting edge through poor wages, oppressive working conditions and cheaply-erected factories.



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