

Death toll rises in Bangladesh factory fire

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In another industrial tragedy in Bangladesh, the Tampaco Foils factory near Dhaka caught fire on Saturday, and then collapsed. The number of workers killed had risen to 34 by yesterday. With around 50 people injured and six still missing, the death toll may further increase.

This disaster highlights the unsafe conditions and shoddy construction for which Bangladesh is now notorious. It is the largest factory fire in the country since the Tazreen Fashions fire in November 2012, in which 112 workers were burnt to death. In another catastrophe, the Rana Plaza building collapsed near Dhaka in April 2013, killing around 1,200 apparel workers.

The blaze engulfed the multi-storey Tampaco Foils factory in the Tongi industrial zone, killing 23 workers immediately. Because inflammable chemicals were stored in the food and cigarette packing factory, the inferno spread quickly. An explosion occurred around 6 a.m., when workers were nearing the end of the overnight shift. A boiler eruption was suspected but investigators said they were also examining whether a gas leakage caused the blast.

The initial rescue operations were difficult because there were “still flames here and there as there are a lot of chemicals in the factory,” senior fire service official Masudur Rahman told Reuters on Sunday. Ajit Kumar Bhoumik, a senior fire department official, added: “We do not know when the search will be completed as it is a huge task.” He said more excavators and trucks were needed to clear debris, as well as “more manpower and other resources.”

In a show of support and force, the army was called into work with civil defence and police personnel, who used cranes and other equipment to pull away rubble and remove slabs of the collapsed building.

Thirteen people were treated at the Dhaka Medical College hospital, including six in critical conditions.

Victims’ families were devastated. Mina Rani Dey, the mother of a missing cleaning worker, Rajesh Babu, told reporters: “He came to work early in the morning on Saturday. He has not returned. His father has become sick because our son has not returned.”

The plant was congested because production had been expanded to meet rising orders. The factory owner, Syed Mokbul Hossain, a former member of parliament, claimed it was “fully compliant” with safety standards. However, police later told Reuters that the factory owner and seven other top managers went into hiding as the death toll rose.

Farid Ahmed, deputy inspector general of the country’s factory inspection department, said police had filed a case by the family of one of the victims, and expected to receive more complaints.

In a display of official concern, Mikail Shipar, secretary of the Ministry of Labour and Employment, said: “We checked the design of this factory and initially it is our understanding that it was a one floor building and later the floor had been raised, similar to [the] case of Rana Plaza.”

Knowing that the disaster will again raise the issue of the lack of industrial safety in Bangladesh, Shipar claimed that the ministry would investigate the safety measures of all factories in the Tongi industrial zone. It would also “formulate a project to inspect all the factories in all four industrial zones in the country.”

Such pledges are made after every tragedy. The obvious question is why the government had not previously scrutinised the safety of the factories.

As with previous disasters, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s Bangladesh Awami League-led government is looking for scapegoats. Industries Minister Amir Hossain Amu told reporters on Sunday: “Stern action will be taken against those responsible for the fire. No one will be spared.”

This is just rhetoric to deflect the mass anger, locally

and internationally, over the government's callous attitude toward those toiling in poor working condition in such factories.

The factory made food and cigarette packaging for local and global brands, including British American Tobacco, Nestlé and Nabisco Biscuit & Bread, a unit of food giant Mondelez International.

In a bid to cover-up its responsibility for the disaster, according to one report, Nestlé said it was “shocked and saddened” by the deaths and the injuries, and its thoughts were with those affected. But such conglomerates make use of such factories, precisely because of the low costs, which necessarily entails, shoddy construction and appalling working conditions, as well as poor wages.

It was likewise with Bangladesh agro-processed food products chain Pran, which conceded that it is a customer of Tampaco, which supplied it with flexible packaging material for snacks and confectioneries. A spokesman said: “After this fire we will meet our other suppliers and review their safety measures as well ... Our supply management team does routine visits to all our suppliers' plants and we will strengthen these more now.”

Government officials said they had mainly focused on safety in garment factories but were now going to consider other industries as well. This is another pretence. The editorial of the Bangladeshi newspaper, *New Age* commented on Tuesday: “[T]here has so far hardly been any example in which errant owners or government officials were punished, although the country witnessed several hundred such disasters in different industrial sectors in the past few decades.”

Referring to the Rana Plaza case, the newspaper noted: “[I]t is also true that as the trial has already taken several years to start for various reasons, none can say for certain the victims will get justice, at least, in near future.”

The Awami League-led government is determined to keep production costs low, particularly via cheap labour conditions, in order to attract foreign investment, regardless of the cost in workers' lives. Whatever cosmetic changes are made in the industrial sector, there will be no genuine improvement of workers' safety conditions and living standard under the corporate profit system.



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