

Four years since the Rana Plaza disaster

Bangladesh apparel workers still confront appalling conditions

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Four years after the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Savar, Bangladesh in April 2013, none of the fundamental issues that led to the disaster has been resolved. More than 1,135 workers were killed and almost 2,600 injured, many seriously, when the eight-storey building, which housed a number of apparel factories, caved-in, trapping hundreds under tonnes of concrete and rubble.

Rana Plaza survivors face a desperate situation. A recent survey by ActionAid revealed that 42 percent of the survivors remain jobless and 30 percent are “too traumatised to work.” About 48 percent are physically weak and 33 percent are psychologically weak.

Shilpi Begum, who lost an arm in the tragedy, said she and her chronically ill husband had to stop the education of their three daughters because of financial problems. Factories, she said, were reluctant to hire physically disabled workers. Begum, who wants to return to work and send her kids to school, asked: “How can I ensure that?” Most of the compensation the family received for the disaster was eaten up by medical costs.

While the government has feigned concern about the Rana Plaza disaster, its real attitude is indicated by its response to a peaceful protest by about 500 people at the site on the anniversary of the collapse. The government deployed police, armed with a water cannon, to prevent the rally occurring. According to protest organisers, the police prevented those in attendance laying floral wreaths.

Anwara Hossain, the mother of a deceased Rana Plaza worker, said she was forcefully pushed away by the police. She shouted at police: “If you had a son, you would know my misery. On this day when my son was

taken away from me, you keep me away from the one place I can come to remember him ... This day might be just another day of duty for you, but for me this is a day when I cannot bring food to my mouth.”

Savar’s Senior Assistant Superintendent of Police Mahbubur Rahman justified the police operation, declaring that his officers only asked people to “not create any chaos.” He claimed that the presence of the water cannon was part of a “regular deployment.”

The government’s callous indifference to the plight of the Rana Plaza victims is reflected in the long-delayed legal actions against those responsible for the disaster.

Charges were not filed against the building owner, Sonel Rana, and 40 others, including local government officials, for three years. Three of these cases are still pending in court, due to so-called legal errors and a series of reinvestigations.

While Rana, a regional leader of the ruling Awami League, is still in custody, 16 others are on bail and 24 defendants have fled.

There are close connections between the political establishment and the apparel industry. The main concern of the Bangladeshi ruling elite and international retailers is to ensure that the sector continues to expand.

The country’s garment industry produces low-cost items and massive profits for a range of international brands, including Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein and Gap. The industry employs about 4.5 million workers, 80 percent of whom are young girls from rural areas. In fact, one in every eight Bangladeshi directly or indirectly depend on the textile industry.

Bangladesh’s garment workers are the lowest paid in

the world, receiving just 5,300 takas (\$68) per month. While hazardous roads and chronic power shortages are a serious problem for the garment industry, international retailers and investors are attracted by the country's poverty-level wages.

Despite many promises from employers, wages have not improved in the past four years. A recent report from *dw.com* cited the example of a married couple. Ashik and his wife Rahinur, who worked in a factory producing clothes for international retailers such as H&M and Zara, were sacked for joining demonstrations demanding increased wages last December. They worked 14 hours a day but earned only \$193 a month between them. Ashik told *dw.com* their wages were just enough to cover food and rent but not health care. Having lost their jobs, they could now only afford rice and some dried fish.

The Awami League government and garment industry employers are determined to keep the country's cheap labour competitive internationally. In 2014-15, clothing provided almost 82 percent of Bangladesh \$31 billion export earnings.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association president Siddiqur Rahman said the government raised wages in 2013 and another pay increase was not possible for at least five years, if ever.

Promises by the international retail sector to improve safety conditions in Bangladesh's apparel sector are a fraud. Many retailers are unwilling to sign even the limited Apparel and Footwear Supply Chain Transparency Pledge, which was drafted and endorsed last year by a nine-member coalition that included Human Rights Watch (HRW), the International Labor Rights Forum and the International Trade Union Confederation.

The "pledge," which has no enforcement mechanisms, requires its signatories to disclose details twice a year about the manufacture of their products, including addresses, types of products made and number of workers at each site. According to HRW, only 17 of out 72 companies contacted have agreed to implement these toothless demands by the end of this year.

Walmart refused to sign the "pledge," claiming it had its own initiatives to improve transparency in its supply chain.

Health and safety in Bangladeshi workplaces have

not improved, and this is not only in the apparel factories. A comment in Dhaka's *Daily Star* newspaper reported on May 1 that "294 workers were killed while 101 workers were grievously injured" in the first three months of 2017.

The newspaper noted that 1,240 people were killed and 544 injured in workplace accidents in 2016 and 951 died in 2015. It also revealed that the Bangladesh Occupational Safety Health and Environment Foundation discovered that 33 workers from the 101-strong workforce at one shipbuilding company had acute asbestos poisoning.



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