

# At least 52 young workers perish in Bangladesh factory fire

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In yet another shocking inferno, at least 52 mostly teenage workers died in a sweatshop factory, when a blaze engulfed a multi-storey food and beverage factory, just outside Bangladesh's capital of Dhaka, on Thursday night. The factory was exploiting cheap labour to export products to Western markets.

Fire officials said 49 of the victims' bodies were burned beyond recognition, after they were trapped behind a locked door, a supposedly illegal practice, which is commonly used by employers in the country to prevent workers from leaving their workplace without permission or being searched. Three workers died after jumping off the building's roof. About another 50 were injured.

There may be more victims, because yesterday, the factory's top two floors had yet to be searched. Debasish Bardhan, deputy director of the Fire Service and Civil Defence, told reporters: "After searching the top floors we will be able to get a complete picture."

The blaze broke out on Thursday night at the Hashem Foods Ltd. factory, in Rupganj, an industrial town 25 kilometres east of Dhaka. It was so intense that it sent huge clouds of black smoke billowing into the sky, and was still burning 24 hours later. Police initially put the death toll at three, but then discovered piles of bodies on Friday afternoon, after the fire was extinguished.

Hundreds of distraught relatives and other workers waited anxiously on Friday, as victims in white body bags were piled in a fleet of ambulances. Angry demonstrations developed outside and around the factory. Earlier, family members had clashed with police, as they waited overnight without any word of the fate of their loved ones.

Mohammad Saiful, a factory worker who escaped the fire, told reporters: "On the third floor, gates on both stairwells were closed." Mamun, another worker, said

he and a dozen other workers ran to the roof after the fire broke out on the ground floor, and black smoke covered the whole factory. "Firefighters brought us down by using rope."

Dinu Moni Sharma, head of the Dhaka fire department, said the fire took place because highly flammable chemicals and plastics had been stockpiled inside. Substances like polythene and clarified butter made it more difficult to bring the blaze under control, the state-run Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) news agency reported.

Almost none of the bodies recovered on Friday could be recognised, BSS reported, citing Fire Service and Civil Defence director Lieutenant Colonel Zillur Rahman.

Abdul Al Arifin, the Narayanganj district deputy director of the Fire Service and Civil Defence, said each of the building's floors was about 3,250 square metres, but were only accessible by two stairways. Many workers could not get out, as the fire spread to the stairs. One of the doors leading from the stairs to the roof was also locked, Reuters reported.

According to officials, most of the victims were juveniles. And the toll could have been much worse. Some of the factory's units were closed, due to the COVID-19 pandemic devastating the country.

The factory was a subsidiary of Sajeeb Group, a Bangladeshi company that produces juice, under Pakistan's Lahore-based Shezan International Ltd., according to Kazi Abdur Rahman, the group's senior general manager for export.

Rahman told the Associated Press by phone that the company was fully compliant with international standards, but he was not certain whether the factory's exit door was locked.

The group's website states that the company exports

its products to numerous countries, including Australia, the United States, Malaysia, Singapore, India, Bhutan, Nepal, and nations in the Middle East and Africa.

In a bid to head off working class anger over the fire, the State Minister for Labor and Employment, Begum Monnujan Sufian pledged to take legal action against the factory owner if evidence of negligence emerged. The government promised pitiful payments of 25,000 taka (\$US295) for families of dead workers and 10,000 taka (\$118) for families of the injured, while speaking of providing further compensation on behalf of the factory owner.

The Narayanganj district administration has formed a five-member probe committee to examine the incident, Reuters reported. Such official investigations, following the country's frequent factory disasters, have proven to be whitewashes of the companies and the Awami League government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has been in office since January 2009. This has allowed the tragedies to continue.

Both the Awami League government and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which have alternated in office since 1990, have been intent on maintaining exploitative conditions and low-paid workforces, in order to satisfy the profit requirements of the national capitalist class and international investors.

In 2012, about 117 workers died in a fire when they were trapped behind locked exits in the Tazreen garment plant, in Dhaka's Ashulia industrial zone. Supervisors ordered employees back to work, after the fire alarm sounded, leaving workers trapped on the upper floors.

The country's worst industrial disaster came the following year, when the eight-storey Rana Plaza garment factory complex outside Dhaka collapsed, killing more than 1,100 people. The building, housing five garment factories, employing thousands of workers, was typical of those serving the needs of global corporations, ruthlessly pursuing greater profits through the employment of sweated labour.

In response to the resulting outrage in Bangladesh and worldwide, nearly 200 global brands and some 1,600 employers signed an agreement, purporting to promote safe working environments for workers. However, the latest inferno confirms that nothing has improved.

According to Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defence statistics, 383 industrial fires occurred in 2020, 273 of them in apparel factories. Between 2012 and 2019, disasters in the apparel industry killed more than 1,300 workers and injured another 3,800.

Working class homes have also suffered in industrial infernos. In February 2019, a blaze ripped through a 400-year-old area crammed with apartments, shops and warehouses in the oldest part of Dhaka, killing 70 people. Nine years earlier, a fire in Old Dhaka, in a house illegally storing chemicals, killed at least 123 people.

As the latest fire demonstrates, many workers have been forced to stay on the job, despite the Awami League government now implementing a so-called strict national lockdown, because of record numbers of COVID-19 deaths and infections.

The government reported 201 coronavirus deaths on Wednesday, due to the surge of the highly infectious Delta variant, taking the total count to 15,593. Nearly one million infections have now been recorded in the population of some 165 million.

As has happened around the world, the government has permitted factories to continue operations during the pandemic, placing workers on the frontline of infection, and allowing mutant strains like Delta to proliferate.



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