

New details about the horrific working conditions that created Bangladesh fire tragedy

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More information has emerged about the brutal and unsafe conditions at the Shezan Juice factory where a fire on the night of July 8 killed at least 52 young workers in Narayanganj's Bhulta area, just outside Dhaka.

Forty-nine workers died after being trapped on the third floor of the six-storey building with its only exit locked. Three others were killed after jumping from the burning building. The juice factory is a subsidiary of Sajeeb Group and is owned by Hashem Foods Ltd.

Among the dead were 16 or more under the age of 18, some as young as 11, indicating that the company was exploiting child labour, in open violation of Bangladesh's limited industrial laws.

Interviewed by the AFP news agency, Narayanganj District Police Chief Jayedul Alam described the tragedy as "deliberate murder." He detailed numerous breaches of basic safety, including the fact that the factory entrance had been padlocked.

Amid widespread criticism, globally and locally, Bangladeshi authorities arrested eight individuals on murder charges on Saturday morning. They include Sajeeb Group chairman and managing Director Md Abul Hashem, his four sons, and three other senior factory officials. The Rupganj police station has filed a case against the individuals and several unknown people.

Awami League Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina perfunctorily declared her "deep shock and sorrow" and offered condolences, declaring that she "prayed for eternal peace of the departed souls" and extended "deep sympathy to the bereaved families."

The country's media has called on the government to take immediate legal action against those responsible for the tragedy. An editorial in the *New Age* declared, "Negligent factory management must be brought to justice," while the *Daily Star* stated, "Deaths in

Narayanganj fire caused by gross negligence: Owners of the factory must be held liable."

The comments reflect nervousness within the ruling elite that the latest tragedy will produce widespread working-class protests. In fact, the Awami League's consistent defence of factory owners who deliberately disregard basic workplace safety is common knowledge throughout the country and internationally.

The government, in an attempt to deflect mass anger, has quickly established several investigating committees. Bangladesh's Ministry of Labour and Employment has formed a seven-member inquiry, while Home Minister Asaduzzman Khan has established three other separate committees to investigate the disaster.

"It's a murder," Khan told the media, and "no one will be spared if their negligence is found over the incident." Like previous investigations into the country's frequent industrial disasters, the current inquiries will be whitewashes that do nothing to end the horrific conditions in Bangladeshi factories.

The Ministry of Industries' investigation into the massive February 2019 factory blaze that killed at least 80 and injured another 50 in the Chawkbazar area of Dhaka has come to nothing.

The official investigation insisted that the building was not a chemical factory or a warehouse storing chemicals. These findings were explicitly rejected by firefighters who attempted to bring the blaze under control and insisted that it originated in highly flammable substances in the building.

Hasina's Awami League-led government also continues to delay trial hearings related to the country's worst industrial disaster, the Rana Plaza building complex collapse in Dhaka in 2013, which killed over 1,200 people. "The trial proceedings in the murder case filed

[against owner Sohel Rana] in connection with the Rana Plaza collapse in Savar have made no progress in the last five years,” the *Daily Star* reported on April 24.

Well aware of the ongoing legal protection given to factory owners, Sajeeb Group chairman and managing director Abul Hashem has arrogantly attempted to blame workers for last week’s tragedy.

“If there are workers, then there will be work, and if there is work, there can be fire,” he told the *Daily Star*. “Am I responsible for this? It is not like I went and set the fire. Neither did any manager of mine do so,” he continued, insisting that, “the fire may have been a result of workers’ carelessness. Maybe some worker did not put out his cigarette before throwing it.”

According to media reports, many Shezan Juice workers, including some of those who perished in the fire, were not paid last month’s wages. On Tuesday several hundred workers gathered outside the remains of the facility demanding their wages for June and the Eid-ul-Azha religious festival allowance. Underpayments and the withholding of wages have sparked a host of workers’ actions at factories across the country over recent years.

The fact that Shezan Juice used child labor is also not unique. The practice, based on exploiting the desperate situation confronting many poor families throughout the country, is endemic.

According to recent international reports, about 4.7 million children aged between 5 to 14 are working in Bangladesh in open violation of the country’s laws that ban companies from employing children under 14. In 2016, the London-based Overseas Development Institute surveyed nearly 3,000 households in the slums of Dhaka. They discovered children, some just six-years-old, employed full-time and others working up to 110 hours a week.

Laizu Begum, a relative of one of the children employed at the Shezan factory, spoke to the AFP news agency. She was waiting for information about her 11-year-old nephew, who worked on the third floor. “We heard that the door of the floor where my nephew worked was padlocked. Then we realised after seeing how big the fire was that he is probably dead,” she said.

Bilal Hossain visited the Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue to try and find his missing 14-year-old daughter. “I sent my baby girl to die,” the weeping father told the AFP. He said that the company had owed the girl back wages.

AFP reporters spoke to 30 survivors and relatives of the dead who stated that the child workers were paid just 20

taka (\$US24 cents) per hour.

State Minister for Labour Monnujan Sufian shed crocodile tears about Shezan’s use of child labour and said his ministry had begun investigating but callously added that some of the children were allowed to work in non-hazardous jobs. She glibly declared, “If child labour is proved, we will take action against the owner and the inspectors.” Given the government’s past record, this will likely prove to be empty rhetoric, and in any case will not address the rampant exploitation of children still underway at other workplaces.

According to a *Daily Star* report on July 12, the Shezan Juice factory was visited by officials from the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) last month. DIFE representatives, who are “entrusted with the task of checking fire hazards and other workplace safety issues, did not look into any of that,” the newspaper reported.

The six-storey building only had two stairwells instead of the required minimum of five, and highly flammable chemicals and plastics were being stored in the building. A *New Age* editorial on July 13 said that DIFE was “mired in corruption” and that the government agency only had 314 inspectors to cover “about 500,000 factories and establishments across the country.”

Employers have been allowed to exploit workers in slave labour conditions in open violation of the grossly inadequate safety requirements laid down by governments who are fully committed to defending the profit interests of local and foreign investors at the expense of workers’ health and their lives.

Many factory owners, including figures like Abul Hashem, are well connected to Bangladeshi establishment parties. Hashem, in fact, ran as a candidate for the Awami League in Laxmipur District in Chittagong during the 2008 elections. Rana Plaza owner Sohel Rana was also a local politician affiliated with the Awami League. In 2013, Reuters reported that “more than 30 garment industry bosses are members of parliament, accounting for about 10 percent of its lawmakers.”



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