

Dozens dead and hundreds injured after fire and explosion at Bangladesh container depot

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A massive fire and explosion at the BM Inland Container Depot in Bangladesh's Chittagong district killed about 50 people on Saturday and injured hundreds of others, many seriously.

Those who lost their lives at the in port, which is located in the area of Sitakunda, include depot workers, policemen and at least five firefighters. The death toll is expected to rise. Two firefighters have been reported as missing.

An estimated 600 people were reportedly working at the container depot when the fire broke out at around 9 p.m., on Saturday. Hundreds of firefighters, police and volunteers quickly arrived on the scene but as they were attempting to extinguish the blaze, a massive explosion rocked the site, triggering blasts in scores of other containers.

Emergency workers and others were engulfed in flames by the initial explosion which hurled debris and people into the air, polluting the area with toxic fumes.

Over 450 people have been injured, with around 30 of them in a critical condition. Nearby hospitals are reportedly overwhelmed. Tofael Ahmed, a lorry driver, told the AFP news agency: "The explosion just threw me some 10 metres from where I was standing. My hands and legs are burnt."

A duty officer at the Chittagong Fire Service and Civil Defence control room told the *Daily Star* that 25 firefighting units had been rushed to the container terminal to douse the blaze at the massive facility, which is located about 240 kilometres south-east of Dhaka.

At this stage no detailed information has been released about what caused the initial fire. BM Inland Container Depot director Mujibur Rahman has provided no details, apart from contemptuously telling the media that the blaze could have started in a

container. Bangladeshi fire and army officials have reported that large amounts of hydrogen peroxide and other dangerous chemicals were stored at the facility.

According to Akbar Hossain, the BBC's Dhaka correspondent, Bangladeshis are comparing the explosion to the huge August 2020 ammonium nitrate blast in Beirut which killed over 200 people, injured 7,500 and damaged some 300,000 homes.

Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and senior officials feigned concern whilst offering meagre compensation payments. A perfunctory statement by Hasina voiced her "deep shock and sorrow at the loss of lives," offering sympathy for bereaved family members and declaring, according to the *Dhaka Tribune*, that she was praying for the "eternal salvation of the departed souls."

Chattogram Divisional Commissioner Ashraf Uddin said relatives of the dead would be given \$US560 (50,000 taka), while \$224 (20,000 taka) would be provided to the families of the injured. This is a pittance for the victims, who were overwhelming poor.

BM Inland Container Depot director Rahman said the company would pay all treatment costs for injured survivors. "Those who were injured in the accident will be given the maximum compensation... and we will take responsibility for all the families of all the victims," he stated.

Rahman's promises, like those made by Hasina and her Chattogram divisional commissioner, are a desperate attempt to deflect mass anger over the disaster and the ongoing and criminal violations of basic safety by owners and managers across the country, with the sanction of government authorities.

The BM Inland Container Depot fire is not an isolated incident.

There have been a string of industrial disasters, which

have shown how big business—with relevant safety officials turning a blind eye—violates rudimentary safety standards, sacrificing workers' lives to maximise profits. Industrial fires caused by the unsafe storage of chemicals are commonplace in Bangladesh.

The most recent include:

- * A July 2021 fire that killed at least 52 mostly teenage workers. It was caused by unsafe storage of highly flammable chemicals and plastics at a multistorey food and beverage factory just outside Dhaka.

- * A February 2019, chemical blaze and explosion, which claimed 81 lives in Dhaka.

- * A 2010 fire at a house illegally storing chemicals in an over-crowded and poverty-stricken district of Dhaka, which killed more than 123 people.

The BM Inland Container Depot is a private Dutch–Bangladesh joint venture that has operated since 2011, with the capacity to store about 5,000 containers. Many of these are from the garment industry and likely contain various hazardous chemicals including hydrogen peroxide. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said that at least 1,000 containers of ready-made garments were incinerated in the disaster.

The garment industry is notorious for its super-exploitation of mainly women workers and its violation of rudimentary safety standards.

According to the Solidarity Center, a workers' rights organisation, more than 150 fire and other safety episodes connected to the country's garment industry occurred between 2012 and 2019, killing more than 1,300 workers and injuring over 3,800. While the industry gouges lucrative profits from Bangladeshi garment workers, they are only paid between \$94 and \$112 per month.

Bangladesh's worst industrial disaster occurred in 2013 when the eight-floor Rana Plaza garment factory complex outside Dhaka collapsed, killing over 1,200 people. The building, housing five garment factories that employed thousands of workers, was typical of those serving the needs of global corporations, mainly retail giants, ruthlessly pursuing greater profits by maintaining slave labour conditions and violating basic safety needs.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Bangladesh garment industry, with the blessing of the

Hasina government, has continued full operations. The industry contributes over 80 percent of total export earnings, valued at more than \$30 billion.

The *New Age* reported on June 1 that 14.7 million households had at least one person who lost their job as a result of the pandemic crisis. An estimated 2.1 million households, or six percent of the national total, had been directly hit by COVID infections.

The Hasina government says the Bangladeshi economy has begun to recover from the pandemic and has reached 7 percent GDP growth in the 2021–22 fiscal year compared with 6.94 percent the previous year.

According to *statista.com*, last year the garment industry earned \$31.46 billion, up from \$28 billion the previous year. This so-called growth means the further enrichment of the financial and corporate elite at the expense of working people, by subjecting them to superexploitation at poverty-level wages and violating their basic safety.



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