

“Forced to die”: Garment workers in Rana Plaza

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Rana Plaza, the eight-story building housing at least four garment factories in the building's third to eighth floors, collapsed on the morning of April 24, 2013. It was not just an accident. The day before, the inhabitants of the buildings saw large cracks developing in the building and local engineers advised evacuation. Accordingly, the shops on the first floor and a private bank took measures for evacuation. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers Association (BGMEA) warned the garment factory owners of the building and asked them not to open the factory until they gave clearance. The workers were asked to leave in the afternoon of 23rd April.

But next day, April 24th, the factory management (from third to eighth floor) asked the workers to return to work and threatened to sack or not pay the salary to those workers who would not come to work. The garment workers did not want to come. They were afraid that the building might collapse anytime. Fearing the threat of being fired or losing salary, in the morning, around 8:30 am, more than 70% of the workers (roughly 3,500), were inside the building. The majority of them were young girls. There was a power cut (which is quite normal every day), so the generators were on. The building trembled and within two minutes it had collapsed, leaving no way to get out.

Sohel Rana, the owner of Rana Plaza, is a close affiliate of a Member of Parliament Talukdar Murad Jong of the ruling party Bangladesh Awami League. He built the eight story building obtaining the approval for only 5 storys from the municipal authorities in 2008. He built the building without following any building code, flouting rules and abusing his political clout. There was no one to monitor or see to the safety of the thousands of workers working in this building.

Aoshi, a female worker rescued after 36 hours of the collapse said, “Work at the (garment) factory was stopped following discovery of a crack in the building. We were not supposed to come (to work) following day. But we were asked to come and told that there will be no problem.”

So it was not an accident, it was simply an organised killing. It can be termed a “Rana-made” killing of the readymade garment workers. As the factory is located in Savar, the suburb of Dhaka, the incident is called Savar Tragedy. As of today (April 28th afternoon) the death toll is 354, with 1050 recorded as missing and 2507 rescued live victims. Many are still trapped inside the rubble. Many are in hospitals. Some had amputated hands and legs. Traumatized and saddened by the death of their colleagues, those who are alive are not able to talk normally. The dead bodies are collected in the Odhor Chandra school building, the injured are receiving treatment in Enam Medical Hospital in Savar and in Dhaka hospitals.

The list of the missing is growing longer. The relatives of the victims are carrying photo identities or holding a paper with information of the workers while they are waiting to see those rescued, alive or dead. They have come from outside Dhaka only to find their sons, daughters, husband, wife, mother etc. They are demanding at least the “dead body” of their dear ones and run from hospital to hospitals. “Give us at least the dead body, please so that we will have a grave” – demanded those who give up hopes of getting their relatives alive.

The victims are mostly young women 18 to 25 years old, most unmarried, newly married or with one or two children up to 5 years old. Mothers of the victims were there to look for their daughters; some of them were looking after the children of these working women.

The dead body of a young garment worker was found with a small piece of paper in her hand. She wrote, “Mama and papa, please forgive me. I will not be able to buy medicine for you anymore. Brother, can you look after mama and papa”?

Another woman was crying for help from inside, “I have an infant baby, I have to breastfeed him. Please get me out for the child!”

These young women and men were all taking responsibility for their families, so their deaths are a disaster for their families, leading the family to poverty.

The rescue operation

The Army, Fire Brigade, Red Crescent Volunteers and the local people have been conducting the rescue operation. In fact, the local people comprising of garment workers from other factories, students including students of madrasas, shop owners, day laborers, masons, health workers, bricklayers, women and many others joined hands to rescue the workers by risking their own lives. These ordinary people and firefighters played an extraordinary role by using shovels, handsaws, hammers and other hand tools. They were cutting the walls, grills and floor to pull the victims out of the debris. They did not have any protective gear, and wore slippers, T-shirts, pajamas, jeans or trousers. A few had plastic helmets, but no protective tools. These volunteers, mostly young people (25 to 30 years), had to rescue both the dead bodies as well as live victims. Those who were alive could not breathe properly because the air was stinking with the stench from dead bodies around that had started decomposing. Every minute, the volunteers heard cries for help coming from inside the debris. With time running out to save those still trapped inside, rescuers dug through mangled metal and concrete to find more corpses.

The survivors were badly dehydrated in the stifling humidity and temperatures reaching 35 C (95 F) in the daytime and about 24 C (75 F) at night. Rescuers tried hard to make holes in the rubbles to pass in some dry food and water. No one knows whether they could get them. The ordinary people were coming to help with money, donations of blood, food, water, torches for volunteers etc.

Once the victims were rescued, members of other agencies, such as the army, took them to hospitals in ambulances. There are, however, complaints from the families of the victims that the authorities did not make their maximum efforts, using equipment needed for such a rescue operation.

Garment factories in Rana Plaza

The building housed five garment factories: Ether Tex Limited, New Wave Bottoms Limited, New Wave Style Limited, Phantom Apparels Limited, and Phantom Tac Limited, employing together about 5000 workers. Several million shirts, pants and other garments were produced by the Apparel factories in the building each year. The New Wave companies, according to their website, make clothing for major brands including North American retailers The Children's Place and Dress Barn, Britain's Primark, Spain's Mango and Italy's Benetton. According to Ether Tex, "Wal-Mart, the world's biggest retailer, was one of its customers."

The Canadian clothing line Joe Fresh, parent company Loblaw and other Western brands had some products made in the building. Loblaw promptly acknowledged its involvement in the plant, and said in the statement that it has vendor standards aimed at ensuring its products are made in a "socially responsible" way, but the company noted there are some gaps when it comes to building safety.

Primark, a major British clothing chain responded promptly in acknowledging that it produced garments in the collapsed factory.

Lack of safety standards

The Savar Tragedy is the worst ever for the country's booming and powerful garment industry, surpassing a fire five months ago that killed 112 and injured hundreds of workers and brought widespread pledges to improve worker-safety standards. Since then, very little has changed in Bangladesh, where low wages; \$ 38.50 a month, have made it a magnet for numerous global brands and propelled the country to no. 2 in the ranks of apparel exporters.

The export-oriented readymade garment (RMG) factories have been receiving cash incentives from the successive governments at least 1 billion Taka (\$133 million) but have failed to make many of the industries comply with the industry safety standards resulting in frequent fire accidents and losses of lives. Besides the cash incentives, the RMG sector is provided with easy loans and waiving their bank interests etc. Due to failure of the safety standards, there have been deaths of 730 workers (excluding that in Rana plaza) in the past 11 years in building collapses, fires and stampedes. None of the RMG owners were seen to be punished for their irresponsible acts, resulting in the tragic deaths of the poor women of Bangladesh. After every incident, the owners declare compensation to the families of the dead workers but the funding is seldom implemented properly. The injured workers have to live a handicapped life, and are not looked after by the factory management any more. They are just "disposable workers".

Thousands of readymade garment workers from the hundreds of garment factories across the Savar industrial zone and other nearby areas took to the street on 25th April

in different parts of Dhaka city to protest the poor safety standards in the workplaces. They demanded arrest of the building owner Sohel Rana and the factory owners who forced the workers to go into the building knowing about the threat of collapse. Workers blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway, Dhaka-Tangail highway and Dhaka-Gazipur Road. Another group of thousands of workers gathered in front of the Garment manufacturer's Association (BGMEA) building seeking the arrest and punishment of those responsible for the workers' death in Rana Plaza. They said "It's a pre-planned killing. Workers were forced to go and work in the building. We demand punishment for the garments and building owners."

The latest news is that the police have arrested eight people in connection with the Rana Plaza collapse in Savar. They have arrested the three owners, including the Chairman of Phantom Apparel Limited and Phantom Tac Limited, the director of New Wave Bottom Limited and the chairman of New Wave Bottom Limited; two engineers of Savar Municipality on charges of playing down the danger from cracks that developed in the building on behalf of the owners. However, Sohel Rana, the owner of the building who is also the local leader of Jubo League, could not be traced.

Last words.....

It is difficult to end the story of Savar tragedy. The garment workers are now scared of the buildings. Earlier, they were scared of the gates being locked as they could not get out in time of fire accidents. But they have to work. They have to earn their living by working and look after their families. Can't the workplaces be made safe for them? How much does it cost? How much do the owners have to reduce their margin of profit to ensure safety of the workplaces? On the other hand, the international buyers talk about compliances but do not want to pay for ensuring the safety standards. It is not enough to campaign as "blood stained" Bangladeshi garments. We have to hold corporations responsible both at national and international level to ensure safety. Consumers in the western world can come forward to demand that safety standards be met, but please do not campaign to "stop buying" Bangladeshi clothes. The garment workers need the industry to earn their livelihood. This is the fundamental premise that should not be weakened or shattered. Such campaigns actually encourage the multinational corporations to move from Bangladesh to other countries to repeat the same exploitation of the workers. Earlier campaigns of activists to promote products from least developed countries such as Bangladesh were not wrong, and we should continue the campaign despite this situation. However, we must now move away from the role of creating 'consumers' in the west to more politically engaged campaigns such as forcing the corporate world to be responsible for what happened in Bangladesh. The hands of everyone are stained with the blood of the workers. So every stakeholder must take responsibility.

[The information used in this article is from daily [NewAGE](#), The Financial Express and few Bengali dailies. The interpretations are of the author. Farida Akhter, 28 April 2013] *Farida Akhter is a founder and Director of the NGO [UBINIG](#) (Policy Research for Development Alternatives) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and a longtime spokeswoman for global justice and solidarity.*